



THE TALES OF

Book IX

MARIELLE CLARAC

The Festivities
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro



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☼ Julianne Silvestre (née Sorel)

19 years old. Marielle's best friend and an avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content. Engaged to Prince Severin after being adopted into House Silvestre.

☼ Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

☼ Nigel Shannon

The ambassador from the neighboring country of Easdale. The nephew of an important duke. Has honey-colored hair and eyes and golden brown skin, reflecting his heritage from the southern land of Shulk.

☼ Prince Gracius (Lord Lucio)

Orphaned son of the Republic of Orta's former king. Forced into exile by a revolution that occurred shortly after his birth.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

Before I knew it, the final month of the year was upon us. The season always feels so frantic to me, as though there's something urging me onward. There's always work to finish before greeting a new year—and, more importantly, Noël! If there's one thing that defines December, it's Noël!

In Lagrange, preparations for the holiday begin as early as November, and by the time December arrives, everyone is already bustling to get everything ready. Houses and gardens get decorated, presents get bought, and children and adults alike get to daydream about the delicious dinner they'll enjoy on the day. Celebrations are held across the city, and store shelves are lined with special goods exclusively for the holiday season. Most stores close in the afternoon on the day before Noël, so the city streets are teeming prior to that with folks buying what they need while they still can.

Those who live far from their families return home to spend Noël with them. On this special day, blood ties are given priority over any romantic attachments. Then, once Noël is over, we spend the very last week of the year with friends, lovers, and such. On New Year's Eve, it's customary to throw a modest party at home to celebrate with one's closest companions. Who to invite, and who will invite you, can in fact be rather thorny matters.

Matthias the butler brought in a silver tray heaped with envelopes. "These are all of the invitations that have arrived as yet," he announced. "As House Flaubert will be throwing its own New Year's Eve party this year, all of them must be declined."

At a glance, there were at least thirty invitations in the pile. *I suppose our house's esteem means that even those with whom we don't share an especially close relationship still might wish to court our favor.*

I gave each invitation a cursory look. Even though we'd be turning them all down, it was still important to know who'd sent them. "None of these are guests we intend to invite— isn't that correct?" I asked.

“Yes. The lady of the house will be writing those invitations. Note that the guest list will include Baron and Baroness Bidault.”

“My grandfather and grandmother? I could understand inviting them for Noël, but surely there’s no need to include close family for New Year’s Eve. Besides, surely my father-in-law will be ill at ease if his boss is there.”

Both of my paternal grandparents had sadly passed already, but I still had two living grandparents on my mother’s side. Her father was the president of Sans-Terre National University, making him the boss of my father-in-law, Earl Maximilian, who worked at the same institution. The hierarchy of academia was distinct from social rank, so in that context, the power dynamic between them as noblemen was reversed. And the earl was a rather mild-mannered and self-effacing man to begin with. With his boss at the party, I expected he’d be on edge all evening, feeling forced to pay the man due consideration. *It will be a terrible shame if the earl can’t enjoy his own New Year’s celebration.*

However, my concerns prompted a cheerful smile from Matthias. “The master has attended many of the baron’s New Year’s parties. The earliest such occasions were during his student days. After all, before the baron was his boss, he was his respected and adored professor. No need to worry—inviting him was the master’s personal wish,” he informed me.

“Oh, really?”

This was the first I’d heard of them being so close. As a child, I’d never been allowed to attend any adult gatherings; even following my debut, I’d still never encountered the man who was now my father-in-law in high society. We’d apparently missed each other quite spectacularly. I’d known that he, too, worked at the university, but certainly nothing about his personal acquaintanceship with my grandfather.

I added, “My grandfather doesn’t talk about that sort of thing.”

His career had undoubtedly broadened his social circle to include a great many important people beside the earl as well, but he was never one to brag. Nor would he dream of exploiting his connections, so House Bidault continued to live a modest life despite its position.

“Well then,” I said, “I suppose I shall start writing the replies.”

I now had my work cut out for the day—answering this mountain of invitations. I thus sat myself down in front of a stack of reply cards and picked up my favorite pen. Though writing was my specialty, it didn't make the task any less tiring. Shallow pleasantries wouldn't suffice here, so I made sure to include a personalized message with each card. All in all, it took more than three hours. When I'd sealed the last one and was rubbing my aching hand and shoulders, Lord Simeon came into my study.

"You've finished them all? Well done."

He was dressed informally, looking at ease in just a warm indoor robe, but he looked every bit as dashing as usual. *In fact, it's bursting with its own unique appeal! It exudes a different type of sensuality than his typical uniformed guise, so stiff and dignified. The forbidding nature of his work persona makes the imagination run wild for that very reason. Yet here he is with all that melted away—his domestic self revealed! My word, both versions are so unbelievably, unbearably wonderful!*

Lord Simeon walked up to the opposite side of my desk, bent down, and peered at me from across it. "Marielle?"

I was intoxicated by his sheer appeal, which was as strong as ever today. Just below his silky pale blond bangs, his light blue eyes were staring straight into mine. They were said to be like ice, yet also like a blazing inferno. Glasses covered them, giving his profile an air of intelligence. *This truly is the best assemblage of features in the entire world. Any lover of blackhearted men would bow before him! Our god is supreme!*

Realization dawned on his well-formed face. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't assume a praying posture and mutter strange incantations every time you behold my face. Have you had lunch?"

When I glanced at the clock, I saw that the minute hand had already made a full revolution past noon. I stood from my chair, put down the shawl I had around my shoulders, and stretched. My back and hips were stiff from sitting in the same position for so long.

"I asked for a cake salé and wrote the replies while nibbling on it. What about you, Lord Simeon?"

"I did something similar." He smiled, also working to loosen his shoulders. He'd withdrawn to his own study after breakfast, and the papers he was clutching in his hand told me that he wasn't quite finished with his business. When I walked around the desk to meet him, he presented them to me. "My apologies. This may not be the time since you're exhausted already, but I'd like to ask you about something. Would you mind?"

"Not at all. What have we got here?" I took the document and looked down at it. It was a several-page building survey listing problems caused by years of wear and tear, with particular attention to anything declared unsafe. "Is this about the apartment building?"

"Yes," he replied, ushering me over to the hearth.

I'd grown cold sitting almost perfectly still in this large study while I worked, but it was warm by the fire, which had been fueled with plenty of wood. My cat was sprawled across a rug in front of it, her belly sticking out. Worried that she was so close she might singe herself, I gently pulled the rug farther away. The cat's triangular ears twitched, and she raised her head, looking annoyed. "There, there," I said, stroking her. Her fur was indeed very hot to the touch.

My husband and I took seats beside one another on comfortable lounge chairs. *I'll have to get out for a walk soon. I've been sitting for far too long already.*

"So, what did you want to ask me about?" I inquired.

"I've been looking into how best to handle the deterioration, but as expected, the bottom line is that repairs won't suffice. I intend to demolish the building and replace it with a new one."

"Well, I was also thinking that we ought to do that, but what about the residents? What will we do with them in the meantime?" A tinge of worry colored my voice. "Not to mention that the construction will be another huge expenditure."

This discussion concerned the apartment building Lord Simeon had bought for me not long ago. Rather than simply rent a room, he had purchased the entire building outright. It was probably the most expensive gift he'd ever given me. He'd sought it out when I was looking for a place to have meetings with my

editor away from prying eyes. I couldn't allow my writing career to be made public, and gossip columnists had recently been prowling around my publisher's office in an attempt to uncover the identities of female authors like myself. The apartment building in question had a rather unusual layout that made it the perfect secret meeting spot. Only, it was really quite old and had essentially been sold under the assumption that it would be demolished and replaced.

In an upbeat tone, Lord Simeon replied, "I bought it knowing that this would be necessary. We'll take care of the residents, of course. For those who wish to move in again after the construction, we'll provide temporary accommodations, and for those who don't, we'll provide compensation. We have someone in charge of all that who's used to making such arrangements, so there shouldn't be any issues. I've also found you another location to use for meetings in the interim. It should be better than continuing to rely on the apartment building."

With a shudder of trepidation, I asked if he'd bought another building, but he informed me that he was only renting this one. *Thank goodness. One is enough.*

"Since we're going to the trouble of rebuilding the place from scratch," he continued, "I'd like to factor in your wishes as much as possible. You'll need rooms for meetings, won't you? We'd better include features that will help to deceive any snoopers."

"Thank you. Only...how much is all this going to cost? Surely spending another fortune so soon will impact the family finances."

The sentiment behind Lord Simeon's offer thrilled me to no end. Having a building constructed to the letter of my own designs was such an exciting idea that I felt my heart threatening to soar, but I firmly held that feeling in check. To be clear, financial management was not an area where I typically intruded. I trusted Lord Simeon wholly and completely, so why not leave that all to him? Nevertheless, this was an extravagance, and purely for my benefit. I could hardly remain nonchalant with such absurd sums being thrown around.

Giving voice to this prompted a light chuckle from Lord Simeon. "I'm glad to have a wife with such a modest mindset, but if we couldn't afford this, I wouldn't have bought the building in the first place."

I got no inkling that my husband was trying to show off. Rather, his tone

suggested this was entirely natural and obvious. It was the way one might speak of a small indulgence. *I see. So for House Flaubert, that's all this is...*

The difference in our perspectives was still somewhat boggling to me. My family, House Clarac, was a minor viscountcy. Acquiring a whole apartment building, no matter how run-down, would be a rather significant purchase. Having to demolish and replace it after that would have us all staring down at the ledgers with worried expressions.

My good fortune was a reason to celebrate, of course. How could I ever complain about marrying into a rich family that offered me a life of luxury? Yet being surrounded by such opulence actually made me genuinely uncomfortable at times. I had to wonder if this degree of indulgence, this amount of spending, was truly no object. And yes, I realize that worrying over every last coin makes me sound like an utter skinflint.

In the end, this is one of the inevitable struggles in a marriage between people of differing status. I had to become a suitable young mistress for House Flaubert, neither shrinking in fear of this—nor getting carried away and enjoying it too much, of course. The day I would reach that point still felt endlessly far away.

The cat got up, stretched once, then came over to me. She jumped up into my lap and nuzzled up against me, so I picked her up. While stroking her, I looked out the window, where I could see that snow had started to fall. The sky was dark and overcast. *I wouldn't be surprised if it settled. Perhaps I'd better give up on the idea of a walk.*

“The construction work won't start for several months yet, so there's no need to rush,” Lord Simeon told me. “Take some time to think about it. When you're in town, you might also take the opportunity to look at a variety of buildings for reference.”

Lord Simeon thus departed without pressing me for a decision. With the cat still in my arms, I went over to the window and gazed outside. The ground was thinly carpeted in white. *It's not falling too heavily, I suppose. Perhaps it won't pile up too deeply after all.* I was hoping the weather wouldn't get too much worse.

“You want to go out in the garden too, don’t you, Chouchou? If we’re lucky, it will clear up tomorrow.” I looked up at the sky with my cat, yearning for the sun beyond the clouds.

Imagine if you suddenly got engaged to someone you’d only ever fangirled over from a distance. It’d be quite a surprising turn of events, wouldn’t it? Especially if you were a plain, bespectacled young lady from a lesser viscountcy whose face was quickly forgotten by all who met her. Aside from writing novels in secret, you possess no particularly distinguishing traits and have—needless to say—never once attracted a man’s attention.

In contrast, your new partner belongs to a highly esteemed earldom with status, history, and wealth. He’s practically from a different world. Being the son and heir to such a house would be incredible enough on its own, but his job as Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights is equally impressive. He even has a deep and trusting relationship with His Highness the Crown Prince. All in all, he’s a renowned figure whose superiority cannot be denied by anyone.

On top of that, he’s as dashing as the hero of any story and well versed in both military and literary arts. With a fine character to boot, he’s practically perfect. Admittedly, he tends to be excessively serious and stubborn. His lectures can also be too frequent and too long. Despite his youth, he has the somber nature of an old man. He’s even been accused of being a stick in the mud. Nevertheless, it’s all a manifestation of his kindness and sincerity, so when it comes down to it, he’s a most trustworthy gentleman.

By some miracle, this pair met and fell in love. It was a twist so dramatic that it would have shocked even God. And once the box was opened, a dazzling succession of surprises to follow came flying out.

I’d gotten engaged at eighteen, then married at nineteen. The seasons kept turning, and now it was winter, with a new year just around the corner. My days were so eventful that the sparkle never faded. In fact, I’d been enjoying myself so much that I hardly noticed as, ever so gradually, a certain doubt began to creep upon me. I’d been pondering it a lot lately... *Is it really all right for me to keep going like this?*

Lord Simeon treated me with love and affection, and my new family was kind

too. More than simply wanting for nothing, I had been given a life of luxury. Not only that, but Lord Simeon always kept me safe. Whenever I was anxious or troubled, whenever terrible events shook my life, as long as he was there, I could trust that I would be fine.

In which case, shouldn't I be providing something equivalent in return?

I wanted to be useful. To make the people around me happy. To bring Lord Simeon great happiness. Only, I was afraid that I was incapable. As Lord Simeon's spouse, the woman he'd chosen to spend his life with, it was my duty to support him. Yet, looking back, I didn't feel like I'd been much of a ballast at all. Like a certain crown prince once told me, whatever I did, I had disasters and key figures buzzing around me like flies. In a way, I felt like I'd done worse than not being useful to my dear husband—I'd actually generated more work for him.

Hence my question: *Are things really all right this way?*

No one else was going to say anything to me, and so I had to be the one to pull myself together. If I simply basked in the status quo, allowing myself to be spoiled day after day, then it would be too late to turn back before I knew it.

Whenever I look up, his kind gaze meets mine. Those light blue eyes that seem so sharp at first are actually filled with love and thoughtfulness. I could easily fall under the spell of that sweet warmth, but before I melt into goo, I must get a hold of myself. Come spring, I'll be turning twenty. I, Marielle, must become a dependable wife and an adult in practice—not in name alone!

White flecks had begun sticking to the window. Even when it was frigid outside, it was cozy inside the house. If I wanted my days of loving and being loved to be even more bountiful, I had to redouble my efforts.

Chapter Two

One day of snowfall turned into several, and the city was gradually blanketed in white. You might think society would take a hiatus with everyone confining themselves to their homes, and that was true to a certain extent, but it was far from the whole picture. Seasonal events and gatherings specific to this time of year abounded.

With Noël fast approaching, the Flaubert family was sitting around the dinner table one evening when my mother-in-law said, “I’d like you to attend the tea party being thrown by the Easdalian embassy the day after tomorrow.”

I had just put my knife into my duck confit with a classic orange sauce. This familiar dish, made of slow-cured meat cooked to fragrant perfection, was absolutely delicious served with wine. I wondered if the house chef had been specially trained in some way, as its flavor was of a caliber unlike anything I’d been served in the city.

“Me?” I replied, somewhat taken aback. I was aware of the annual event, and I had even heard that an invitation had arrived—but it was addressed to the actual lord and lady of House Flaubert. There was nothing particularly wrong with me attending, but the earl and countess should really have been the ones to do so.

“They changed ambassadors this year, so it will be thrown by the new one, won’t it? That Nigel Shannon,” she continued.

“Yes, that’s true,” I admitted.

“And you’re better acquainted with him than we are. Besides, quite a number of your other connections will be among the guests—His Highness and Prince Gracius included.” She turned toward Lord Simeon. “Isn’t that right?”

My husband nodded. Alcohol had a very strong effect on him, so he didn’t touch a drop even at home. Instead, he had a glass of water with his meal. “It’s true that Marielle will know quite a number of the other guests, but I won’t be

able to escort her, as I'll be accompanying His Highness."

Without a moment's delay, his youngest brother, Lord Noel, leaned forward in excitement. "Then I'll go! Miss Marielle and I can attend together!" His face was the very picture of glee.

A pair of glacial blue eyes glared at him. "It's not an event for children."

Not prepared to give in, the younger brother pouted and pleaded, "You always say I'm too young for everything, but have you forgotten it's my birthday this month? I'm turning sixteen!"

Lord Simeon was about to say something back, but he was cut off when their father spoke up. "What would be so wrong with Noel going? It's high time for him to start going out in society. Marielle can't exactly go alone, and you'll be at the venue anyway, so it would surely be fine."

"I'll be working. I won't be able to babysit my younger brother."

"Who says I need a babysitter? I'd rather not have my older brother hounding me anyway!"

"If you want a Noël present, I'd be quiet if I were you. Father, doesn't pairing this one with Marielle give you cause for concern? Each of them individually already requires someone to keep an eye on them."

"Oh, I wouldn't have thought that," the earl replied. "Are you certain it's that much of a concern?"

"Honestly, Lord Simeon," I interjected, "when have I ever done anything inappropriate at a tea party or a ball?"

"You've certainly gone wandering and poked your nose into places you weren't supposed to."

"Yes, but no one ever notices. If I can blend into the background well enough that no one can sense my presence, it's not a problem."

"It very much *is* a problem!"

"Now, now, settle down." The countess clapped her hands to silence the family argument. Having gathered everyone's attention, House Flaubert's highest authority handed down her judgment thus: "Marielle will go alone this

time. It's only a tea party, so she requires no escort. Noel will stay home."

"But—"

"If you want to be seen as an adult, learn when to stop arguing. I'll take you to the New Year's party at the palace at the start of the year. There will be more young people in attendance then, so you'll be much happier there. The Easdalian embassy's tea party has a strong political bent to it, so you wouldn't care for it anyway. Marielle, you know how to comport yourself on such an occasion, don't you?" She turned a forceful smile my way.

I could do nothing but nod vigorously. "Yes," I replied, my voice wavering. *I'll put information gathering aside and firmly devote myself to socializing. If Lord Simeon is there, I won't draw much attention anyway... Wait. If I let myself blend into the wallpaper, I won't manage any socializing at all, will I? Oh my, this could prove rather difficult. If I'm alone, people won't remember me even if they talk to me! I'd better devise a suitable plan.*

"At least going to this party with Miss Marielle would have brought *some* excitement to my life," the youngest Flaubert brother complained. "I've been so bored lately. Hardly anything interesting has happened at all. Even my birthday party is being combined with Noël again."

Indeed, this was a common complaint for children born around the festive season. From what I'd heard, the Flaubert family had historically gone out of their way to celebrate the occasions separately, but they'd been combined in recent years on the premise that Noel was no longer a small child. *Well, they are only a single day apart. Celebrating them together is the obvious choice.*

I suggested that we go take a peek at one of the public events being thrown instead. Around Noël, such festivities were held all over the city. Even the Easdalian embassy was holding one with a view to sharing their national culture. When I said that he and I could go together, my brother-in-law regained his good cheer somewhat. *And I'll be sure to get you two separate presents as well.*

Lord Simeon cast me a surreptitious glance filled with gratitude. Smiling back, I thought about the tea party I'd be attending in two days' time. *This sort of thing is the duty of someone in my position, isn't it? I can't focus solely on my*

research as I did when I was unmarried. I have to dedicate myself to the task at hand. This was the condition that had come with continuing my work as an author. I was usually allowed to do whatever I wished, so at times like these, I had to fulfill my obligations.

Now, on a different note, there'd been brief mention of a name that caught my ear. Prince Gracius was said to be the surviving heir of the formal royal family of the Republic of Orta, our neighboring country to the east. The situation there still wasn't stable, so he was currently being safeguarded in Lagrange while preparing to ascend the throne.

I had first met him around the start of autumn while I was staying at a relative's house in the countryside. He was on the road between Linden, where he grew up, and Lagrange at the time, and a series of events led to us meeting by chance. A rather fraught incident ensued that can't be summed up briefly. To put it very simply indeed, Prince Gracius was being hunted by a team of assassins, and Lord Simeon and his men rescued him...more or less.

Going into a tad more detail, frankly, quite a kerfuffle transpired. In a state of despair, Prince Gracius had run away when his would-be assassins took his journey as an opportunity to attack his traveling party. The attack, however, gave the prince temporary memory loss; and, among other things, Lord Simeon and I ended up running around in the mountains to escape pursuit.

By the time that tempest had passed, Prince Gracius had managed to recollect himself and I promised him my support. He'd decided not to run away from the difficult path ahead of him, and I wanted to help him to the best of my ability. I couldn't participate in politics or diplomacy, so I at least had to do what I could in social situations. *I'll pay close attention to ensure he doesn't feel alone and helpless at the venue. Rather than staying hidden away all the time, he's trying to show himself in public and widen his network of acquaintances. He, too, is doing what he can to face his obligations head-on. If I can help even a little, I should do that, shouldn't I?*

Yes, I thought with determination, *I will.* Settling on a firm goal, I felt a newfound drive and began to grow excited. I brought the duck meat to my mouth and savored the rich, fresh-tasting sauce.

Soon, it was the day of the Easdalian embassy's tea party. This event wasn't being held at the embassy itself. Rather, they'd rented out the popular social venue Fleur et Papillon. After all, an embassy was not a dwelling but an office—another country's bureau representing them abroad. Beyond diplomacy, it served to facilitate exchanges, public relations, intelligence gathering, consular operations, and more. It wasn't the sort of place one would invite a large number of people for tea.

Fleur et Papillon would forever remind me of an incident Lord Simeon and I had gotten wrapped up in shortly after our engagement. That was also when I'd first met Nigel Shannon, the current Easdalian ambassador. Back then, I secretly attended a masquerade ball in search of clues about who had framed Lord Simeon for treason. And the very same venue that had hosted that ball was, today, home to a refined tea party.

For a large tea party like this, a standing buffet was the typical approach. Small tables were dotted all around, and the guests freely roamed and conversed with whomever they liked. As was customary for an Easdalian gathering, lovely stands held plates of sweets and finger food. Soothing music came from a string quartet in one corner. In keeping with what Countess Estelle had said about the event's political significance, various countries' ambassadors were present alongside numerous domestic key figures.

That said, there were a number of young women in the mix as well. The reason for this came over to greet me personally. "Welcome! Thank you for coming," he said.

With his soft curls of a magnificent honey shade, eyes the same color, and golden-brown skin that reflected his southern heritage, this man made quite the impression. He had both feminine beauty and masculine strength all at once, exuding a mature sensuality. In a well-practiced gesture, he took my hand and gave it an elegant kiss.

"Good day, Ambassador Nigel. Thank you for inviting me," I replied.

The surrounding women's sharp gazes were piercing. Honestly, there was nothing mysterious about their presence or behavior when *he* was throwing the party. Anyone with a daughter the right age had probably been *begged* into

bringing her along. The target of all these passionate stares was aware of this, of course, and enjoyed the attention, but he didn't respond in any conscious way. For him, this was the norm, so it probably sparked no real interest.

Instead, he continued our conversation with his usual joviality. "We haven't met for some time, but word of what you've been up to has reached my ears. You had quite an amusing episode just recently, didn't you? Such a shame. If I'd known, I would have come running to see."

"Oh my. Whatever could you be talking about? I couldn't even guess."

"I swear, I'm truly sorry that I missed it. That pretty little prince climbing up to a third-floor window, and you raining pepper and flour and soot down on him? No one else would ever dare such a thing."

"It sounds like you already know everything!"

He hadn't changed at all. He was well connected enough to be informed about everything, and he liked being present to see it unfold for himself. I shrugged; if he knew so much already, surely that was enough, even if he hadn't had a front row seat for the show.

"But I'm surprised," I remarked. "You're actually giving your job the proper attention today."

"Don't be silly. I'm always working hard. You just don't get to see it."

"Hmm, I wonder about that," I replied, quite certain he was fibbing. Glancing away, I searched out a familiar face. The petite, black-haired boy was very close by, and he gave a nod when he caught my gaze. Beside him stood a tall woman who hurriedly nodded as well when our eyes met. I returned their polite greetings and turned toward them. "Hello, Arthur. And...you must be Lady Eva? This is the first time we've properly introduced ourselves. I'm Marielle Flaubert. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The woman's hair, of a strong reddish tinge, was bound into a bun high on her head. When I addressed her, she straightened her posture so sharply that I could practically hear her snapping into place. "Oh! That's awfully polite of you. My name is Evangeline Hart. I'm Ambassador Shannon's secretary. I'm just an employee with no particular status, so there's no need for such formality."

Her answer came in an almost military tone. When I'd last seen her, in fact, she'd been wearing a military uniform. Perhaps she really was an officer of some description, but her soldierly demeanor felt out of place in a dress. From the way she anxiously fiddled with her sleeves and skirt, I got the impression she wasn't used to wearing one. She was tall and broad-shouldered enough to give an average man a run for his money, so men's clothing did seem to flatter her more.

"His secretary, you say?" Deliberately hiding my face behind a fan, I whispered, "Having this man for a boss must be rather a pain, no?"

Her hazel eyes widened, and she gave a firm nod that felt most sincere. When I chuckled in response, Evangeline's expression softened slightly.

Though we were talking about Ambassador Nigel right in front of him, he didn't let it ruffle him. Remaining composed, he smiled and said, "Ah, your husband and his liege have arrived. Shall we go and say hello to them together?"

Following the ambassador's gaze, I saw that Lord Simeon had just entered, in uniform and accompanying Prince Severin. "No, I'll do that later when he's not so busy. Right now I'd only be interrupting his work."

Instead, I merely gave a distant curtsy to His Highness, who was looking my way. Behind him, I saw Prince Gracius enter as well. He appeared to be in high spirits, looking bold and confident rather than daunted. Perhaps that was because Prince Severin was with him, but he'd no doubt gotten used to appearing in public after doing it numerous times now. As ever, he was accompanied by his trusted confidant Isaac. His retinue also appeared to have increased, as he had several attendants with him as well. Deciding that there was no need for me to go over to him right away, I settled on making a circuit of the venue first. Prince Gracius would need to do the rounds himself to speak with all manner of people, so I could speak with him once the situation was less hectic.

Ambassador Nigel, meanwhile, headed over to the princes. I bowed one last time to Arthur and Evangeline, then walked off myself. *Now the real event begins. Today, I'm not to focus on observing, but on interacting with as many*

people as possible. That was all well and good in theory, but if I started striking up conversations, I was quite certain anyone I talked to would ask themselves, “Wait, who’s she again?” *Such is the downside of being so plain.*

Wondering where to start, I walked along, taking in the roster of guests who were standing around having pleasant chats. As expected, I saw no sign of any romantic strategizing. *Still, gatherings of wives can be an excellent source of material—they say all sorts of things when they get into the spirit, and... No! No, that’s not why I’m here! Socializing. Not research, but socializing.*

Suddenly, my eyes met those of a man looking my way. I let out a small gasp of surprise; this was one of those rare acquaintances who *did* recall my face.

“Good day, Mrs. Flaubert.”

I halted and returned the greeting with a curtsy. “Good day, Marquess.”

Being in his thirties, this gentleman was among the younger of the invitees. His handsome countenance was graced with a bountiful goatee, and, above all else, he radiated a certain presence that commanded attention—only fitting for such an active and influential figure in parliament. His grave, life-threatening injury had now fully healed, and Marquess Rafale was back to his usual imposing self. At first I’d found the man rather intimidating, but when he greeted me so amicably, he came across as charming.

Marquess Rafale was not alone, however. He’d been talking with two other heavyweights in the world of parliament whose names and faces were known even to me. The marquess introduced me to both as the young mistress of House Flaubert. “And you’re here as their representative?” he inquired in the process. “Are the earl and countess indisposed in some manner?”

“No, nothing is amiss. I was simply asked to attend this time. Ambassador Nigel and I have known each other for quite some time, so they felt it made the most sense.”

Marquess Rafale readily seemed to accept this. “I see. Given the time of year, I feared they might be in poor health. I’m glad there’s no need to worry.”

“Thank you. Yes, they’re both in fine fettle. In truth, they should have come instead. I’m not exactly the right person for this.”

“Oh, nonsense. You’re the next generation of House Flaubert, so you need to show your face and expand your social circle, don’t you? I bet that’s exactly why they offered this opportunity to you.”

Marquess Rafale was not afraid to share his frank and pointed opinions even with His Majesty the King on occasion. He wasn’t the sort to give false flattery. There wasn’t the slightest hint of rumor associating him with any women, to the point that one might think he didn’t care for them. All his energy, all his passion, was squarely devoted to politics. If someone like him was willing to say all that to me, I could take it as honest encouragement—and I was grateful for it.

“Still, I can’t help wondering what your husband is up to if he’s left his wife to attend alone.”

One of the marquess’s companions looked in the direction of Lord Simeon and the small crowd he was escorting. Marquess Rafale and his compatriots were of a faction that opposed the monarchy, so it was no surprise to see a hint of scorn in the man’s gaze. “He’s over there. Look, joined at the hip with the crown prince.”

“It must be difficult being married to a man like that,” said the other, turning a sneering, faux-pitying gaze on me. “As the heir to an earldom, there was no need for him to join the military, yet he abandons you to go cozy up to the royal family. How pathetic.”

I suppose interacting with people like this is part of being an adult, isn’t it? I knew that they held no genuine hostility toward me. This was no more than the friendly sparring that came with dealing with political rivals. So, beaming back at the men, I said, “You’re quite right. I’d like to ask him who he loves more, actually—me or His Highness. I can’t wait to hear how he’d answer.”

This comment was met with laughter.

“Not much I can do about it, in the end,” I continued. “A woman will never be able to trespass on the firm bond between two men. If you look at it a different way, it’s honestly rather...juicy, you might say. My best friend is *very* interested in that sort of thing.”

I had the distinct feeling that Lord Simeon was looking my way. *Is he worried because I’m surrounded by members of the reformist faction?* With a small wave

of my hand, I indicated that I was absolutely fine.

The sarcasm fell by the wayside as we moved into casual small talk of no particular import. In addition to following the conversational lead of Marquess Rafale, who was quite congenial, I assumed the other men wouldn't behave too immaturely toward a young lady. I doubted they meant any harm in the first place. If the marquess hadn't called me over, they never would have even noticed I was there. That was exactly how little I meant to them.

However, given this chance, it felt prudent to work toward forging a friendly relationship. Just because we were on opposite sides of the fence didn't mean we couldn't get along. *Even at the worst of times, it's easier to speak to someone with whom you have some past acquaintanceship than with whom you have no familiarity whatsoever. It would be nice if I could help smooth things out when Lord Simeon wants to talk to these people.*

I couldn't discuss politics, and I doubted these men wanted a conversation about that with me anyway. Instead, I offered them some special tips for marital bliss. I'd observed each of their wives, so I could guarantee the accuracy of my insights. Since they had daughters, I offered advice for dealing with them as well. There are many fathers who fret about being disliked by their swiftly growing children, after all.

My aim was true, and in the end, we sparked up quite a lively chat that went on for longer than I expected. Spending the entire party with one group was counter to my strategy, however, so I waited for a good opportunity to bring our conversation to a close and left the marquess and his companions behind.

After that, I circulated to look for people I knew and say hello to them. This included Ambassador Van Leer of Vissel and his wife, Duke Chaler and Princess Lucienne, and—scary though it was—Duke and Duchess Silvestre too. They were all surrounded by friends, so I was drawn into their folds and thus had occasion to converse with quite a number of people. That was welcome indeed, but the question was how long anyone would remember me after the fact. I did my best to bring up subjects that would make an impression in hopes that my name, at least, would stick with them.

Honestly, this is making me keenly conscious of the fact that I'm not a born

socialite. Having such a nondescript, forgettable face is fatal in this arena. I'm convinced I would have made a much better spy. Look! Right at this very moment, everyone is walking right past without noticing me! If my goal was gathering intelligence, all I'd have to do is stand here in silence, and mission accomplished.

Today, however, my goal was to forge connections. In the close-knit world of the nobility, being isolated was highly inconvenient. Not every relationship had to be a deep one, but I needed to ingratiate myself enough that these people would all speak to me in the future if the situation presented itself.

As I was struggling with this, Prince Severin came over with Prince Gracius in tow. I smiled, glad to see the latter of the two. "Hello, Your Highness," I said first before turning to the other man. "Good day, Prince Gracius. You must be exhausted after chatting with all those people. Why don't you take a break to eat something sweet and delicious? Why not sit down right here? If there's anything you'd like, I'll happily fetch it for you."

"Hold your horses," His Highness cut in in a peevish tone. "What about me? That was an awfully curt greeting."

"You're used to it, so you'll survive. What is it you wanted me to say?"

"Simeon, your wife is being terribly mean to me."

This sort of playful exchange was normal between us, and everyone understood that his complaining was only for show. The royal guards and attendants laughed, and even Lord Simeon allowed this to pass with a wry look of his own. He drew his face to my ear and said, "You've been working quite hard as well. Are you all right? Remember to pace yourself. No need to go too far."

Evidently, even while busy acting in his capacity as a royal escort, he'd been keeping an eye on me. I smiled back and assured him that I was fine. *This is not the time or place to shy away. I have to be bold and keep going.* "I've only been talking to people I know."

"Did those men from the reformist faction say anything untoward?"

So *that* was indeed his greatest worry. His Highness's face mirrored the

concern, but I shook my head and smiled at both of them. “We only engaged in idle chatter. They wouldn’t have started an argument with me. I’d say they were gentlemen through and through.”

Just because they weren’t from the monarchist faction didn’t mean they weren’t perfectly nice people. When I said as much, His Highness shrugged his shoulders with a chuckle. “For all you claim to want to hide in the shadows where no one will ever see, you sure put on fearless displays of unbridled confidence sometimes. You’re a bloody peculiar person.”

Peculiar? How rude! When I sullenly objected, saying that he could have simply praised me *without* that qualification, it prompted more laughter from those around us. Even Prince Gracius snickered upon hearing the exchange interpreted by an attendant.

“Anyway, you might as well take a breather, Lord Lucio,” said His Highness. “Sorry to leave you in the lurch, but there’s someone I’d like to talk to over there, so I’ll catch up with you later.”

Without lingering any longer, he headed off, leaving me alone with Prince Gracius and his trusted attendant Isaac. *What a shame to be separated from Lord Simeon so soon after I finally had the chance to speak with him. Inevitable though it is, it’s still a little saddening.*

Still, at least I’d gotten an eyeful of my husband at work! That brisk stride, that dignified posture... I watched in adoration as he walked away. At home, I fangirled over his informal look, and when he was working, I fangirled over his imposing dignity. In the end, I could fangirl over him in all forms. *It’s Lord Simeon’s fault for being too attractive!*

After generously refueling the flames of my fangirl heart with the sight of my beloved departing—he stood out even among the large crowd—I again invited Prince Gracius to sit. Isaac kindly went to get drinks.

“It’s been three months since you came to Lagrange,” I said. “Do you feel like you’re getting used to it?”

He only spoke broken Lagrangian, so I started our conversation in Lindenese. I always conversed with him that way, in fact. I should have ideally used Ortan, but I was still learning, so that would have meant I’d be the one struggling with

a language barrier. Besides, Prince Gracius had been raised in Linden since he was a baby.

“Somehow or other, I am,” he replied. A charming smile spread across his slim, boyish face. “Prince Severin has helped me in all kinds of ways. I’m most grateful.”

He was just twenty years old and, though he was trying his hardest to face the circumstances around him, he still looked so fragile. It stirred up a desire to protect him. I imagined that Prince Severin felt like an older brother to him at this point and couldn’t leave him to suffer alone.

“There’s so much I don’t understand about politics. Every time I’m reminded of the difference between Prince Severin and myself, I feel so pathetic,” Prince Gracius confessed.

“I don’t think there’s much point in worrying about that. He’s eight years older than you, Lord Lucio. He has that much more experience, that’s all. You just need to keep gaining experience too, and in eight years, you’ll be far more knowledgeable and capable.”

He paused a moment before saying, “No doubt.”

“And in no time, you’ll have more and more people around you to help. Isn’t that right?” I glanced at Isaac, who nodded.

Isaac, who was a few years older than Lord Simeon, had left his homeland alongside the royal family when he was quite young himself. He was more than a mere retainer. He and Prince Gracius seemed as close as family.

“There are people working hard toward your return,” I continued. “Demolishing the military regime in Orta and preparing for the monarchy’s restoration. No?”

“You’re right. I want to measure up to their expectations.”

“I’m sure they’d be glad to hear you say that. Just make sure you take things at a slow and steady pace. Don’t run yourself ragged by trying to take on too much.”

“It almost sounds like you’re older and wiser, Marielle.”

“Apologies if I’m overstepping a touch.”

“No, I appreciate it.”

As we smiled at one another, a thought flashed through my mind. *It’s easy enough to give advice like that, but can I follow it myself? Will I grow and change as time goes by as well? I hope I can become a proper wife who’s able to support Lord Simeon.*

I looked around for my husband again, and despite the great distance between us, I found he was looking at me too. Contrary to his insistence that he had to focus on work, he was still watching over me. Though this did make me happy, it also made me wonder if he really did feel like he *had* to keep an eye on me.

Even while taking a break, Prince Gracius had visitors coming over to speak to him every so often, so I helped out with the interpreting as needed. As expected at this time of year, Noël was a frequent topic of conversation, and the prince seemed rather curious about the holiday in Lagrange. He asked me what the city was like during the festive season.

“I think it’s largely the same as in Linden, really. There are special markets in the streets, and... Oh, did you ever get to see those in Linden?”

“Once, a very long time ago, I was allowed to go out to take a look. I only got to see from inside a carriage, but everyone looked like they were having so much fun. It was so merry and bright with decorations everywhere. I wish I could have gotten out and walked the streets.”

I’d heard that he had barely ever been able to leave the palace due to the constant threat of assassination. It sounded like the people around him had done their best to provide him with at least some of the holiday magic, but even then, he’d been kept under strict protection in the confines of a carriage. Imagining a childhood like that made me feel very sorry for him.

“Things are different now and I’m much older. I wonder if maybe I could now.”

“Walk the streets, you mean?”

“Every year at Noël, I get such an urge to go outside. I suppose it’s because it’s

meant to be a day to celebrate with family. My aunt and uncle were very kind to me, never excluding me or anything, but I've known all along that I didn't have real parents or any brothers or sisters."

He'd been forced to leave his homeland soon after his birth, and his mother and father had died so early in his life that he had no memory of them. Even under the protection of the Lindenese royal family, he'd always felt lonely and out of place.

"I knew that, wherever I went, I wouldn't find anything. My parents were long dead and I had no siblings. No matter how the city brimmed with cheerful crowds, I'd always be an outsider. I was sure going out would likely only confirm that, but I still wanted to go. That's when I was a kid, of course. I don't feel that way anymore, though I still long to go out into the city. Just to see all the merriment."

He tried to smile, but a hint of sadness remained. *It's no use asking for something that doesn't exist. Sometimes all you can do is accept the situation and move on.* Of course, saying such a thing wouldn't ease his melancholy. Just because he was older now didn't mean that old wounds had healed.

I wondered if he might soothe the heartache of not having a family if he found a wife and had children one day. No one could ever replace his parents, but having a family of his own was still a wish that could be granted. *I hope for his sake that the day that happens isn't too far off...although I imagine anything of that nature will have to wait until Orta is more stable.*

"I was watching out of the carriage window on my way here too," he continued. "I bet things are busier closer to the city center. Since I don't even know where I'll be celebrating Noël next year, it would feel like a shame not to see the streets of Sans-Terre while I'm here."

"That's a good point."

I wanted to show Prince Gracius the lively sights of the festive season. Whatever twists of fate had led him this far, he was in Lagrange now, so I wanted to help him make as many good memories as he could during his stay. However, Isaac's face darkened considerably as he listened in from beside us. Without even asking, I could tell that the prince's wish would be difficult to

grant.

It wasn't as though the threat of assassination had entirely disappeared now that he was here. There were still those opposed to the monarchy's restoration, and there was a chance of them taking drastic measures. The utmost caution was still required to ensure Prince Gracius's safety.

There must be something we can do though. Can he really be a good king if he was raised without seeing any of the world outside his castle, then goes back to Orta and is confined to a castle again? Will his country have a bright future if it's led by someone who leads such an unhealthy life? Even royals need to go out and enjoy themselves once in a while. If they're to live anything resembling normal lives, there need to be allowances for that. How upsetting for Prince Gracius to be the only one told he can't.

Indeed, this wasn't all about having fun. Anyone responsible for ruling needed to see what the world was like with their own eyes. To know what mattered to the common people. *Perhaps I should consult with Prince Severin*, I thought, gazing at His Highness across the room.

Suddenly, a group of men briskly approached and surrounded Prince Gracius. "Your Highness," I heard—but that initial salutation was about all I could follow. They were speaking Ortan so quickly that I couldn't keep up. My reading and writing of the language were fairly good at this point, but conversation remained a challenge. Particularly hopeless were my listening skills when faced with such rapid speech.

These were the men who'd accompanied Prince Gracius since his arrival. They apparently weren't attendants provided by Lagrange after all. When the prince had first come to Ventvert Palace, the only other Ortan with him was Isaac, so these men must have been dispatched after the fact.

Prince Gracius rose to his feet, seemingly rushed by the men. Pushing aside the one who tried to insert himself between us, the prince apologized, "Sorry, Marielle. It looks like I have other people I need to say hello to. I wish we could have had more time to chat."

The look in his eyes told me that he was genuinely disappointed. By all indications, his regard for these men was quite different from the wholehearted

trust he placed in Isaac. Rather, he appeared a bit frustrated with them. His brow furrowed just slightly. When he made that face, it gave him a high-strung air that reminded me of the impression he'd given me on our first encounter.

"That's quite all right. I'm glad I got to see that you're doing so well." I stood up as well and gave a quick curtsy. Ultimately, my goal was also to socialize as widely as possible. I couldn't stay sitting forever. "If you have time, let's talk again. You can get in touch with me anytime."

"I will. Thank you."

Even during this brief exchange, the Ortans continued to pester him and started to drag him away quite forcefully. The only one of them to offer a polite goodbye was Isaac. The others ignored me completely—or even glared at me, if I wasn't mistaken.

My, what a frosty reception. I wonder why. Do they think I'm trying to win the prince's affections, perhaps? Even then, their behavior wasn't appropriate for a setting like this. They should have remained calm and courteous even if they had to whisk the prince away. Carrying on as they had risked damaging Prince Gracius's reputation.

I wondered what sort of people they were. Watching them disappear into the crowd, I couldn't help harboring a modicum of doubt and anxiety. What Prince Gracius needed most of all were allies among his fellow countrymen, so a growing entourage should have been cause for celebration. What was making me think otherwise? Why couldn't I shake this unsettled feeling?

Just then, someone approached who gave me even more cause to feel doubt and anxiety.

Chapter Three

“Such a rude way to treat a lady,” Ambassador Nigel said in his seductive voice.

I turned around upon hearing it to see him walking over with no sign of Eva or Arthur in tow. Instead, a lone young man followed behind. He didn’t have the air of an embassy employee about him, so I presumed he was one of the invitees. His face wasn’t familiar to me.

The ambassador was still eyeing the departing group of Ortans when he stopped next to me. His stunningly handsome face didn’t hold its usual pleasure-seeking joviality, but rather a rare coldness. Still, he turned to me with a gentle grin and said, “Don’t take it personally—they act that way toward everyone. They don’t seem to want Prince Gracius getting too friendly with foreigners.”

“How can that be?” I questioned. “That’s hardly a way to foster diplomacy.”

“You’re telling me,” he replied with a shrug.

He then ushered the fellow behind him to step forward next to him. I’d have guessed the young gentleman was roughly a few years older than Prince Gracius. His pale skin made for striking contrast with his dark hair and eyes. The expression on his face appeared full of haughty pride, but it changed in an instant to an affable smile.

“He asked me to introduce him to you,” the ambassador continued. “This is Lord Yugin from Slavia.”

I’d just regained my composure following Prince Gracius’s sudden departure, and here I was caught off guard once again. *This man is Slavian? Why would he possibly want to be introduced to me?*

“My name is Yeremei Yugin,” he said in fluent Lagrangian, adding a bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Flaubert. I was hoping for a chance to speak with you.”

I was careful not to let my discomposure show outwardly.

“I told him that introducing men to you would make the Vice Captain angry,” Ambassador Nigel remarked, “but he was very, very insistent.”

“Honestly, what a thing to say at a time like this. Nice to meet you, Lord Yugin. I’m Marielle Flaubert.”

I casually tried to gauge Ambassador Nigel’s mood, but I could see nothing beyond his usual smile. *He’s probably amused by all this, I bet. Otherwise he wouldn’t have taken the trouble to bring a Slavian over to me. Still, he must have decided that no serious trouble would arise from a mere introduction...most likely.*

With that in mind, I let my guard down a little. “You’ve traveled such a long way to get here. Welcome! What a rare opportunity it is to speak with someone from Slavia. I’m most grateful.”

That said, my mixed feelings certainly hadn’t subsided. Slavia was a large country spanning from the north to the east. To us Lagrangians, it was our neighbors’ neighbor, past Orta, Linden, and several other nations. Though it was quite far in terms of distance, the countries from there to here were all connected by land. It wasn’t uncommon for people to make the trip.

However, the only Slavians I’d expected to see at this party were the Slavian ambassador and anyone with a connection to him. Representatives of the Slavian government, in other words, not ordinary people. I couldn’t imagine why someone like this Mr. Yugin had approached me.

“I’m flattered,” I told him, “but I must say I’m surprised. What about me could have sparked your interest?”

“Perhaps you’re not aware, but your name is rather well known. I’ve heard that you took part in the plan to protect Prince Gracius from assassination, even acting at the risk of your own life.”

That comment, made so readily, left me utterly stunned for a response. Haltingly, I began, “No, that’s not how it...”

My goodness, what a topic for him of all people—a Slavian—to bring up right out of the gate!

I'd heard that General Mengibar—who'd driven the entire royal family out of Orta and seized power there until just recently—had been supported from the shadows by Slavia. In other words, the nation of Slavia was party to the plot to assassinate Prince Gracius. How could this man dare to bring up the topic with so little hesitation?

In the end, Slavia's true goal had apparently been to capture Orta and then invade farther westward. The overthrow of General Mengibar had derailed this plan, and for now, they were—at least on the surface—maintaining friendly relations with Lagrange and the other western nations. *I'm sure such situations are perfectly normal in the world of diplomacy, but for an ordinary person like me, making sense of this is rather a struggle.*

Deciding it was best to deny everything with a strained smile, I started again. "I can't imagine what's been spreading and what form it's taken for *me* to be 'well known.' My husband was there on a mission, and I happened to be in the same area. That's all, really. I didn't do anything special."

Admittedly, I'd been recruited to help as the matter devolved. But I couldn't have Mr. Yugin thinking I'd been part of Lagrange's strategy from the start. How had he gotten this information anyway? How had it reached his ears?

"You do appear to be rather familiar with Prince Gracius, however," the man replied. "Are you serving him in an advisory capacity at present?"

"Oh my, whatever gave you that idea? We *did* become acquainted during those events, but that, too, was entirely through my husband and Prince Severin. I myself am hardly qualified to serve in any such role."

While giving that cautious reply, I looked around for Lord Simeon as discreetly as I could manage. I didn't feel I could rely on Ambassador Nigel for any assistance here. He was merely watching things unfold with a look of amusement. *He's definitely enjoying this. Perhaps I should stamp on his foot?* My face was a mask of calm, but my thoughts were anything but.

"It hasn't been long since the prince came to Lagrange, so I suspect he's still getting his bearings. I thought a familiar face might help put him at ease. That was why I spoke to him—to offer whatever meager hospitality I could."

"You are very modest. I've heard tales of your involvement in a variety of

other incidents, but rather than boasting, it seems you insist on stepping back and letting your husband take all the credit. The picture of a good wife.”

“My, such unmerited praise. I do wish to become a model wife, but in truth, I have more shortcomings than I can count.” I followed this with a fit of tense, polite laughter, my face strained beyond belief.

Other incidents? Which ones does he mean?! There are too many to even guess! Just how much does this man know? I wanted to groan loudly. *Lord Simeon! Where are you, Lord Simeon?! I’m trapped in conversation with this strange man!*

“I have to agree that one never gets bored of watching you,” the ambassador chimed in. “You’re always doing such unexpected things that I can’t wait to see what will happen next.”

And you! Comments like that are hardly helping! Oh, but there’s Evangeline. Evangeline, please give your boss the tongue-lashing he deserves!

Perhaps noticing my desperate gaze, the tall woman walked over to us. Seeing her made Ambassador Nigel change his tune. “Anyway, perhaps we’d better leave it at that, Lord Yugin. If we woo her away from her husband, we’ll soon find there’s hell to pay.”

While urging Mr. Yugin to move on, he subtly pushed me toward Evangeline. Their eyes—hers hazel and his the color of honey—locked for a moment, and a silent conversation was conducted between the two of them with that alone. Saying not a word, Evangeline came to stand by my side.

Mr. Yugin obliged the ambassador without resistance. “What a shame,” he said. “I’d have liked more time with you. I hope we can talk again soon, Mrs. Marielle.”

“Yes, this was a lovely opportunity. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

After their polite goodbyes, he and Ambassador Nigel walked away. I breathed a sigh of relief watching them go. It had been a fairly ordinary conversation—Mr. Yugin hadn’t said anything disagreeable or unpleasant—and yet I was thoroughly exhausted. I might have even preferred naked hostility on his part. Not being able to grasp someone’s true intentions was frightening and

mentally taxing.

Evangeline peered down at me with concern. “Are you all right?”

Dabbing the sweat off my forehead with a handkerchief, I smiled back at her. “Yes. I was a tad nervous, that’s all.” After a moment’s pause, I asked, “Do you know anything about that man? All I’ve heard so far is that he’s from Slavia.”

By now, the two men were across the room, engaged in conversation with someone else.

“I gather that he’s a distant relative of the Slavian ambassador,” she replied. “He’s come to Lagrange to study.”

“Oh, I see.”

So Mr. Yugin wasn’t an underling, but a relative. That did seem more fitting. He didn’t strike me as the type to serve under someone else. Despite his courteous manner, he seemed fundamentally arrogant, as though firmly convinced of his own superiority.

“Is the ambassador Slavian nobility?” I asked.

“Yes. Of the prestigious House Noskov,” Evangeline answered.

I replied with no more than a vague hum. Even I wasn’t familiar with the names of Slavian noble houses, so I wasn’t aware of any particular prestige associated with this one. I’d have to look into it later.

Are the details Mr. Yugin mentioned known to their ambassador too, I wonder? In fact, isn’t there a chance that the Slavian ambassador ordered him to make contact with me? Given the way he used my first name in the confusion of being hurried away so suddenly, I have to consider that he gave off a lighter impression than first appearances suggested.

I must have truly worried Evangeline, for she promptly showed me over to Lord Simeon and His Highness. His Highness, apparently detecting that something was amiss, readily accepted me into his party.

“Are you all right?” Lord Simeon asked in a surreptitious murmur.

I wanted to apologize for bothering him while he was busy working. Actually, what I wanted was for him to embrace me, but I couldn’t ask for such a thing

under the circumstances. Instead, I simply nodded. “Yes. Just being by your side is a great reassurance to me. I’m so sorry for intruding.”

“Perhaps you should get some rest in an antechamber. Or you could go home early. If you’re leaving, I’ll assign you an escort.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Truly, this alone is enough.”

He paused a moment. “I hope you’re not merely putting on a brave face. I’m sorry that I can’t inquire further at the moment. You’ll have my full attention later.”

“Thank you.”

I couldn’t talk in detail about the matter with others present anyway, nor could I let myself appear too perturbed. I held my head high, dignified, as though nothing was wrong.

Momentarily, I felt a large, warm hand on my back. There he was—the man I could depend on. His hand was gone again after only the briefest touch, but knowing that I was being kept safe was enough for me.

My goodness, just having him beside me really is heartening. Lord Simeon’s presence means there’s nothing to be afraid of at all. I’m always so spoiled, relying on him. I have to become a stronger person. That thought alone, that feeling, made me tremble. I could practically feel myself dissolving like a sugar cube. *You’re the one who makes me weak, my dear husband. You’re too dependable. This simply won’t do.*

Conjuring up such silly excuses in my mind, I stayed with His Highness and his entourage until the party drew to a close. Before leaving, Lord Simeon pulled Ambassador Nigel aside to demand an explanation. The ambassador thus led us to a private room. Rather than answers, however, our expectant looks were met with disappointment.

“This was the first time I’d ever met him myself,” Ambassador Nigel said, shaking his head. “I don’t know anything more than what you’ve heard already.” Even Lord Simeon’s glare didn’t make him flinch at all. Laughing, he added, “Don’t be angry, Vice Captain. If I’d refused to introduce him, he’d have gone over and spoken to her on his own. Compared to that, it was better for me

to be there keeping guard, right? I also ended the conversation quickly rather than letting it draw out.” He smiled at me. “Isn’t that right?”

I gave a sullen huff. “But underneath, you were having fun, weren’t you? You enjoyed watching me struggle.”

“Allow me to deny one aspect of that. It wasn’t your struggle I enjoyed, but rather your courage and intelligence. It was exciting to see how you would dodge and counterattack. That’s all.”

“I won’t fall for your flattery! You admit you were enjoying it!”

Despite my loud objections, Lord Simeon’s icy aura, and His Highness’s scornful gaze, Ambassador Nigel wasn’t ruffled in the slightest.

I felt sorry for Prince Gracius. He was only with us by chance, but based on his posture and his expression, he was more nervous than anyone. “A Slavian wanted to meet Marielle? I wonder why.” No doubt he feared this had to be related to him in some way.

“Did he approach you, Lord Lucio?” His Highness asked.

“He came over to introduce himself with the Slavian ambassador. We only talked about inoffensive topics. He didn’t start probing me like he did Marielle. I was afraid that they would.”

“They must know anything too blunt and inappropriate directed at you would worsen their own position,” said His Highness. “I’ll wager that made them choose their words jolly carefully.”

Ambassador Nigel nodded. “Still, it’s not such a surprise that they have information on you, Marielle. Anyone who’s done their homework could take a guess at your importance.”

“Because I’m Lord Simeon’s wife?”

This comment provoked a change in Lord Simeon’s expression. Worried, apologetic eyes turned to face me.

“I’m not expressing dissatisfaction,” I quickly clarified.

“It’s my fault that you’ve been put in danger time and time again, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Honestly, if I was worried about that, I wouldn’t have made a lifelong commitment to you! It’s hardly your fault, Lord Simeon.”

My husband’s spirits were rapidly declining. “But—”

The ambassador interjected, “Well, I won’t say that isn’t *partly* the cause, but it’s primarily Marielle herself.”

This statement, made matter-of-factly, kept Lord Simeon in check.

“You’re quite right,” Prince Severin agreed. “When she pokes her nose into so much and constantly lands herself squarely in the middle of all the biggest incidents, it’s no surprise people are talking about her one way or another.”

This time I was the one left hanging my head. *Well, I can’t claim I haven’t poked my nose into certain things, but I’m often dragged into them against my will. Besides, Your Highness, weren’t you the one who brought me in during the case with Prince Gracius?*

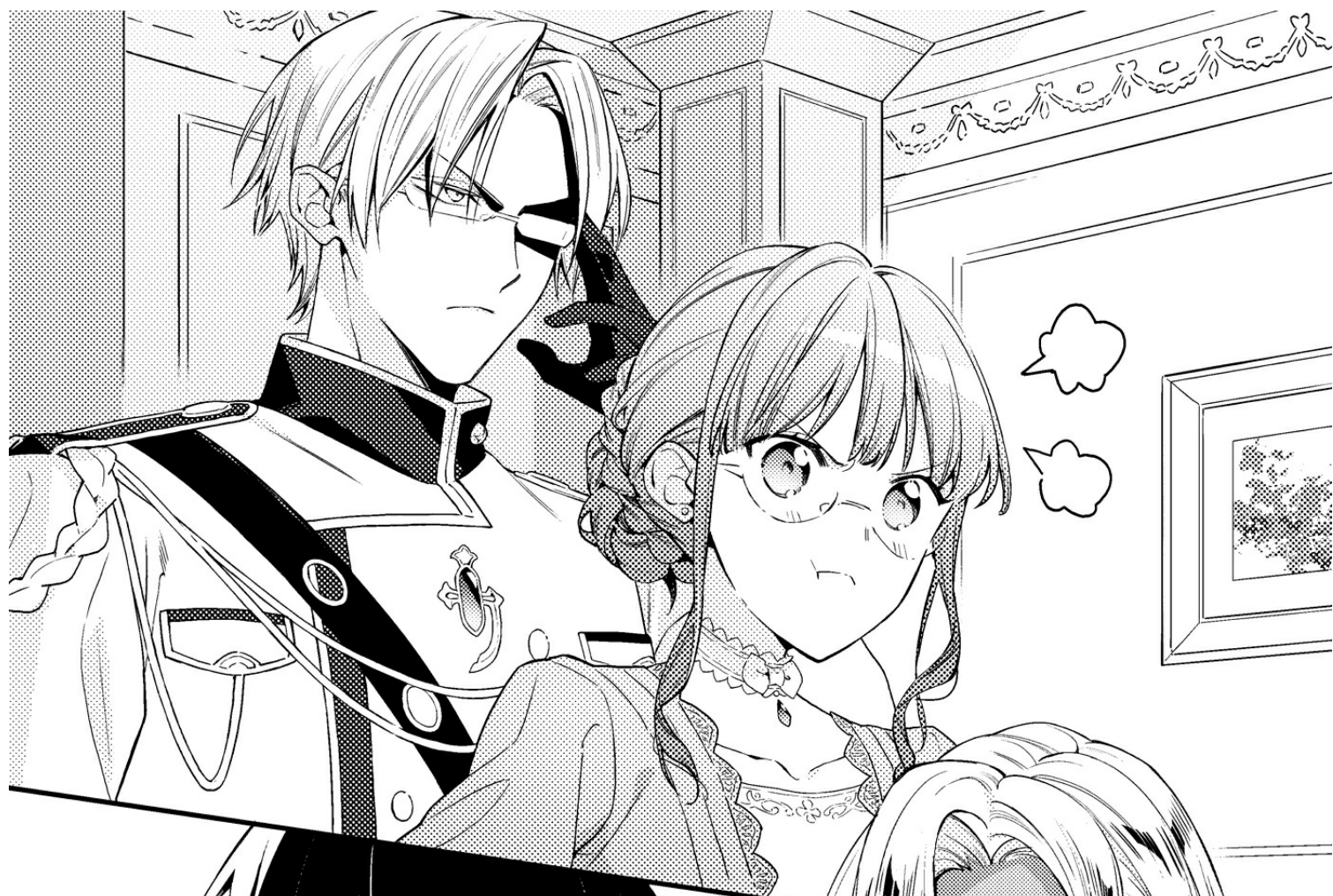
He went on, “If a stranger were to hear of her, they’d instantly think, ‘Who in blazes is that woman?’ Perhaps that was simply what piqued his interest. When he realizes that you’re nothing but an overly curious oddball with the devil’s luck and a penchant for running headlong into danger, I doubt he’ll delve any deeper.”

“Well,” I said, faltering, “I can’t exactly argue with any of that, but do you have to bring the devil into it? You’re in no position to comment when you were born under a star of patheticness!”

“I will heartily argue with *that*, I tell you! I was born under no such star!”

“You’re both such fun to watch,” Ambassador Nigel cut in. “I think you each draw plenty of interest in your own way.”

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon after a moment, “for the time being, I’d like you to take more attendants than usual when you go out.”



Although we were meant to be having a serious conversation, before I knew it, the tension had dissipated completely and we'd fallen into our usual chatter. Prince Gracius was the only one who didn't join the banter. He merely observed it all with wide eyes.

Aware that further discussion wouldn't lead to any meaningful conclusions, we quickly wrapped up and stood to leave. His Highness and Prince Gracius would be returning to the palace together, and of course Lord Simeon would accompany them. Since he was worried about not being able to keep watch over me, the men decided to escort me to my carriage. When we stepped out into the corridor, the royal guards standing by came over to us, as did Isaac.

"Lord Lucio, where did the others go?" I asked. There was no sign of the Ortans who'd dragged him away earlier.

Prince Gracius looked somewhat troubled. "They went on ahead. It can be maddening when they're around. They're always getting in the way. It's hard to have a normal conversation."

With some hesitation, I began, "I don't know if it's all right to ask this, but those people..." As I formed the question that had been on my mind, I carefully observed His Highness and Isaac's reactions. *They're not grimacing. Perhaps it's fine after all.* "How do you know them? Did they come from Orta?"

"That's right. They suddenly arrived not long ago. I don't really know much about them either. I didn't ask them to come here, and we didn't receive any word from Orta."

I cocked my head for a moment. Even Prince Gracius didn't know them? Upon reflection, that was perfectly understandable. There was no way he knew anything of Orta when he'd left there as a baby. Until the fall of the military regime, he hadn't even been in contact with his homeland. It was only obvious that he wouldn't know any of the people who lived there or what they were like.

The same applied to Isaac, who shook his head to indicate that he wasn't any the wiser himself. "They're Ortan nobility, apparently, but who can say what position they occupy? They said that they're involved in establishing the new government and that they each plan to take on various ministerial roles and

such.”

“Not to put too fine a point on the matter,” I remarked, “but they’d do better to say ‘hope,’ not ‘plan.’”

This made Ambassador Nigel burst out laughing. Prince Severin made an amused face as well, and even Lord Simeon stayed silent rather than chiding me. This told me that everyone else shared my thought.

“I think I more or less understand. In other words, they’re aspiring hangers-on to Lord Lucio. They’ve barged in here to advertise themselves to him.”

“Marielle, choose your words more prudently.” Even this rebuke from my husband lacked his usual intensity.

The cold look Ambassador Nigel had given the Ortan men during the tea party made perfect sense now. Prince Gracius certainly needed allies, but flies swarming around him, drawn to power and influence as if to sugar, were far from welcome.

“There are some with better intentions,” Prince Gracius said. “I’ve received several letters from a man called Marquess Tortajada. He’s apparently supported the royal family since my father was king, and the reestablishment of the monarchy is proceeding with him at its center. Isaac says he’s a well-liked figure and one I can trust.”

“Yes, although my memories of him are from twenty years ago,” Isaac cautioned, somewhat apologetically. “He also opposed His Majesty’s approach, and relations soured between them. I was only a boy at the time, so I didn’t see or hear any of this personally, but my father spoke of it. He believed the marquess was a fine man, and it worried him when he and His Majesty had their falling out.”

“Because my father wasn’t a very good king, it seems.” For a moment, Prince Gracius looked awfully lonely, but his face brightened when he looked at me again. “If Marquess Tortajada stood up to my father, he was probably very concerned with the state of the country. The impression I get from his letters is that he’s an honest man with a strict mindset. I think he’s exactly what Orta needs right now.”

It was a relief to hear that Prince Gracius had someone dependable on his side. If the marquess could assist him, and help turn Orta into a calm and peaceful land, I would have no objections. At the moment, the aid of other countries was all that was keeping conflict at bay. Orta needed to stabilize in such a way that it could govern itself without the presence of foreign troops.

The men showed me outside, and I said goodbye to His Highness and Prince Gracius when we reached my carriage. I decided that if I was going to inquire about the potential for a trip into the city, it would be now or never—but just as I was about to ask, the aforementioned aspiring hangers-on came over and formed a close circle around the prince.

I whispered to His Highness, quietly enough that they couldn't hear, "Prince Gracius wants to tour the city streets. Do you think it would be possible if he went out in secret? Incognito?"

The frown on his face was no surprise. "Incognito? Hmm..."

"Would it still be dangerous?"

"I'd say so. I understand the need for recreation, but going incognito presents its own problems, you see."

When I looked at Lord Simeon, he, too, was wearing a serious expression. I couldn't help groaning. *Surely it would be all right if he was suitably guarded... Except if he has a group of men buzzing around him, he wouldn't be incognito anymore. I see. This is quite the challenge.*

We couldn't have a full conversation about it here, so we quickly went our separate ways.

That night, when Lord Simeon got home, I tried bringing the matter up again.

"The planning could all be done discreetly," I suggested, "and we could secretly assign a suitable guard on the day of. That should do the trick, shouldn't it?"

"That would be the only way, but we can't be certain we can conceal the operation entirely, so it's still something of a gamble."

While answering me, Lord Simeon waved a piece of string about in the air. The cat was intrigued and followed it with her eyes, but didn't jump up to grab it. *He's moving it too monotonously and too quickly. You have to wiggle it in a way that mimics prey, and at a speed that makes her think she can catch it.*

"The anti-monarchist faction is probably sending people here specifically to seek out information like that. There have been some slightly concerning developments lately as well, so we mustn't behave imprudently," he continued.

"But surely it's not good to be so worried that you curl up into a ball either."

"If we put a foot wrong, Prince Gracius's life will be in danger. Something 'probably' being safe isn't safe enough, I'm afraid."

He was absolutely right, of course. Unable to find any way to refute this, I merely sighed. "There must be some way to make it feasible."

"His Highness is considering it. It's just that, with the crowds this time of year, there's more crime as well. It would be better if we could put it off until a different season."

"But then it would lose all meaning." I took the string from Lord Simeon's hand. "Like this!" I told him, giving him an example to learn from.

"Why does she suddenly start jumping up when *you* do it?"

"I've told you, you aren't doing it right. Imagine it's the kind of small animal that cats like to hunt. Think of a mouse's tail, or maybe a lizard. At first, the poor creature is simply wandering in search of food, scampering about without care in the world. Then, suddenly, they come face to face with a cat! 'Ahh, panic! Run away! I'll be eaten! Is there anywhere I can hide?! Wait, maybe there's some way I can fight back, and— No, it's the end for me!' Do you see now? Here, you try."

After a moment, he replied, "The power of your imagination never ceases to impress."

My husband was the son and heir of a prestigious earldom, not to mention the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. He was feared as a demon by his subordinates—and he was down on the carpet on his hands and knees, desperately trying to catch a cat's attention. *This is confidential. I'll keep this*

image of him locked away in my heart for me alone to enjoy.

“Tomorrow I’m going out with Lord Noel,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes, you did agree to that. Apologies for the bother,” he replied.

“We’re just going to enjoy the festivities. It will be fun. It would be nice if you could find time to join me for something similar, but I understand you’re busy.”

It had been a while since we had been out on a date. Now that the festive season was upon us, I wanted to go tour the joyous sights of the city with my husband.

His handsome face turned to me with a kind expression. “I won’t be able to join you tomorrow, but on my next day off, I’ll make time for it.”

“Really? Thank you!”

In high spirits over this happy news, I wrapped my arms around him from behind. Even in this odd position, with me hanging off his back, Lord Simeon stayed firmly in place, his knees still on the ground. Chouchou, who had given the string up as a lost cause, saw our silly behavior and took it as an invitation to jump on top of us. Now I was on Lord Simeon’s back, and Chouchou was on mine. *This is definitely not an image for public consumption.*

“Maybe while we’re out, we can also look at some other buildings as references for ours,” Lord Simeon suggested.

“Oh, on that note, I’ve had some ideas. I think we should have the outer walls and window frames painted in bright colors so they make a strong impression. If we can make people see it and wish they lived in a building like that, I’m sure we’d get a lot of tenants quickly.”

“True, the building’s outer appearance seems to be a major factor.”

“Also, what if we didn’t put any apartments on the ground floor, but shops instead? Just imagine—whenever the residents need something like condiments or other consumable goods, anything they don’t quite have enough of, they could simply walk downstairs instead of having to go all the way to the store. Wouldn’t that be convenient? There aren’t any shops like that nearby, so I think the neighbors would be frequent patrons in addition to our residents.”

“Hmm, yes, I see.”

“And one more thing. I want to create a store for people who share my interests.”

He paused. “A bookshop?”

“Books will be the focal point, but it will carry far more. We could sell goods using popular illustrations, or prints—that sort of thing. Even better if we can commission new artwork. We could go beyond images and reproduce items that appear in stories too. Goods that would only be recognized by people in the know! You’d be able to feel like a character in the book yourself! It would also be an ideal place to buy novels. A normal bookstore doesn’t always have every volume of a series in stock, and when shopping there, you tend to worry about what other people think of you. In a specialty bookstore, however, you’d have the whole catalog at your fingertips and be able to peruse without reserve. You might even find a new series that’s to your tastes. After all, why hesitate? What’s there to fear among people of like mind? Our customers may even bump into kindred spirits and forge new friendships. It would be a place of dreams unlike anywhere else.”

“All right. I understand. So...please, calm down.”

Winter nights were long, and our evening together was young as I started expounding on my passionate vision. Chouchou, still sitting on my back, tucked her front paws under her body, making herself at home.

“By the way,” Lord Simeon asked, “how long are we going to stay in this position?”

“Well, I don’t want to disturb Chouchou.”

I could have set her down if I so wished, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. Such is the life of a pet owner. We stayed in that odd configuration, not moving, for quite a while.

Chapter Four

Snow fell during the night, and it still hadn't melted by the next day. The streets were covered in white when I took Lord Noel to the Easdalian embassy's festival. The embassy was located halfway between the northern noble district and the southern business district. It was usually a tranquil area with little carriage traffic, but today it bustled with huge crowds. Lots of folks had brought children with them.

Stalls lined the embassy's outer fence. I had our carriage stop before reaching that point, and Lord Noel and I proceeded on foot toward the front gate. Cheery music could be heard from the gardens, which were open to the public today. I'd heard that an Easdalian dance would be performed.

Lord Noel gazed with interest at the dishes being sold at the various stands. "There's so much on offer. Although I've heard that Easdalian cooking is quite simple, so they don't have many tasty dishes."

"I don't know about all their specialties myself, but they do have some delicious treats. Scones are a favorite of mine in particular."

"Oh, I like those too. I wonder if they're selling them somewhere."

"I'm sure they will be. Let's get enough to take some home!"

The stalls nearby weren't only selling confections, but savory dishes in small portions too. We bought such delicacies as half-moon-shaped pies containing meat and vegetables, as well as sausages cooked in an unsweetened pudding batter. Had his tutor or mother been present, Lord Noel never would've been allowed to eat on the move—so when I told him he was allowed to do just that, his eyes lit up. Promising that it would be our little secret, we sank our teeth into the still-warm pies in our hands. The crust was flaky and fragrant, and the ingredients inside had the perfect balance of salt and other flavors. Bits got stuck all around our mouths, and the filling spilled down in large globs as well. This was all part of the thrill of eating while walking, and Lord Noel looked as though he was having the time of his life.

The people around us took notice of this pretty young man who was clearly of high birth, and I could see them wondering what house he was from. *Having this many eyes on us actually makes us safer in theory, but I suppose we should be on guard anyway just in case.* Keeping watch to ensure no one suspicious approached us, I made for the front gate with Lord Noel in tow.

Beyond the open gate, we found ourselves on the embassy grounds in front of a simple stage where performers were dancing in rhythmic steps. Each time their shoes struck the floor, it made a particular noise; they must have had metal patched onto their soles. The dancers weren't moving their upper bodies much at all, only their legs. They swapped their feet around too quickly for my eyes to follow, jumping up and down, hitting their shoes against the stage. Beyond dancing, they were also serving as percussionists.

When the number was over, they bowed to generous acclamation from the audience. The common banter was that Lagrangians and Easdalians didn't get along, yet you never would have known it based on the merry smiles on everyone's faces.

This is what's so lovely about a festival. Everyone gets into the spirit together, with no concern about the nationality of the person standing next to them. If only we could always get along like this, both war and domestic strife could be a thing of the past. What is it about separating the world into units called "countries" that makes matters so difficult? If it weren't for the strife, Prince Gracius would be able to walk around freely as well.

"Oh my, that was a weary sigh. Aren't you having fun?" asked a voice from right behind my head, startling me. It was slightly deep, with a sweet sultriness to it.

What a nuisance he is, brandishing such sensuality during his working hours.

I turned around and curtsied to the man, who was so much taller that I had to crane my neck. "Good day, Ambassador Nigel."

He was drawing the gazes of all around in his coat with a white fur collar. It suited his glamorous features very well indeed.

"It's good to see you too. I'm glad you came," he replied. "And this here is the Vice Captain's youngest brother, as I recall."

He spoke much like an uncle greeting a relative's child. He remembered Lord Noel even though they'd only met once before, and briefly at that.

Lord Noel greeted him with a prim and proper expression, as befitting an earl's son. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Ambassador Shannon. I am Noel Flaubert. Thank you for all the help you've given my older brother and his wife."

"Good to see you again too."

They exchanged a handshake and pleasant smiles. *Only, I feel like there's a little devil tail waving about behind Lord Noel—and a hint of wickedness lurking behind Ambassador Nigel's honey-colored eyes. Could they actually be two peas in a pod?*

Two more familiar faces stood behind the ambassador. "Good day to you too, Arthur, Evangeline," I said to them.

"Thank you for coming," the boy replied with his usual composure.

"Welcome," said the woman beside him. She then added with some hesitation, "But...you can call me Eva."

She was dressed head to toe in men's clothing, albeit everyday wear rather than a military uniform. With her height and long legs, it suited her well, yet her gentle face gave her an androgynous appearance. I'd met another woman who dressed in men's clothing before, but hers was an entirely different sort of charm. *Oh no, I feel as though a new door might be opening. I'm sure she must be hugely popular with ladies. I shall have to introduce her to Julianne.*

"People in Lagrange seem not to use nicknames very much," she added, "but, well, my name is awfully long. I'm sure people find it cumbersome."

"I wouldn't say that. Are you sure you don't mind if I shorten it?"

She nodded, and Ambassador Nigel turned around with a look of amusement. "Eva hates her name. She thinks it's embarrassing—that it doesn't suit her."

"Shut up."

"Dear me. Well, I wouldn't have said that at all," I commented.

The music started again, and I enjoyed taking in the dancing while chatting with the ambassador and his companions. Lord Noel seemed to grow bored

before too long and tugged on my sleeve.

“Is it all right if I go over there for a bit?”

He pointed in the direction of a marquee that had been set up. When I asked Ambassador Nigel what was going on there, he said it was a rest area that served alcoholic refreshments. The quintessential Easdalian drink was whiskey—and Lord Noel was too young for that.

“Don’t worry,” the ambassador assured me, “they have ordinary sweet drinks as well. Arthur, go with him. In the unlikely event that anything should happen to the young man of House Flaubert, I ask you to protect him.”

“Very well.”

Taking charge of Lord Noel with a polite bow, Arthur looked far more mature than Lord Noel despite being younger. Lord Noel was still coming into his own, but there was something to be said for the difference in position between the two boys.

Watching them walk off together, I decided this was my chance. I looked up at Ambassador Nigel. “There’s something I want to talk to you about. Is now a good time?”

“Hmm? Certainly. You’ve gotten me quite curious.”

Wondering where to begin, I took a quick glance around us. The crowd was full of city folk who’d come to enjoy themselves, so I didn’t think there was much need to fuss, but just in case, I continued speaking in Visselian, which was less likely to be understood by anyone who might overhear. “It’s about a certain nobleman being taken care of in a certain palace.”

“Wait, sorry, hold on a moment. Is that Visselian? I can’t speak Visselian.”

Oh. Really? Somewhat surprised, I stopped short. Ambassador Nigel spoke fluent Lagrangian, so I’d presumed he had a general command of the surrounding countries’ languages as well, just as Lord Simeon and Prince Severin did.

Perceiving that this was a sensitive discussion, the ambassador invited me inside the embassy building. There he led me to a small room close to the

entrance that appeared to be used for administrative proceedings. Most business was on hold today, so in contrast to the clamor outside, it was empty and quiet indoors.

There was no heating, so we kept our overcoats on as we sat across from one another at the modest table. Eva went off briefly and returned bearing hot tea from the seating area.

“My apologies,” I said. “What I’d like to talk to you about is that particular nobleman from the east.”

“What about him?”

I thus recounted my conversation with Prince Gracius at the tea party. Where Orta was concerned, Easdale and Lagrange were working together, so there was no need to keep secrets from the ambassador. I asked if he had any suggestions for how to pull off a furtive trip into the city. “I understand the challenges, but I’m certain there must be some way. Fate has brought him to Lagrange, so I’d like him to create at least one happy memory here. Not to mention that he’s always holding himself back. He’s expressed a personal wish for once, so I’d like to help grant it.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean.”

“I wouldn’t care so much if he were a selfish man who always carried on as he pleased, but he’s been so patient, foregoing freedom due to his situation. I’m worried that if he’s left to his gloom, it’ll keep building up and it might explode. That’s what caused the previous brouhaha. He was ground down so much that it affected his state of mind, and when it came to a head, he ran away. If nothing changes, I’m afraid things will go down the same path again.”

He furrowed his brow, folded his arms, and looked up at the ceiling. “Hmm, indeed. What you’re saying is all valid, but the hurdles are extreme. There are strange movements in Orta, for example.”

“Lord Simeon said something similar. Is there going to be another war?”

“No, it’s not like that. As of now, Orta isn’t fit to wage one, so I don’t think that’s on the table. However, there’s still a great deal of domestic turmoil and their attitude toward other lands is far from unified. There are factions who

seek friendship, and those who want just the opposite.” Seeing my worried expression, he shook his head and explained further in a kind tone, “That’s exactly the concern—we don’t know what’s going to happen. And, if he’s supposed to be incognito, it’s tougher to place guards around him.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“The basic setup would be to disguise guards as normal people and place them around him for a strong perimeter, but we must carefully consider who to place right next to him. We’d need someone who doesn’t look like a guard but can still be relied on.” He paused a moment, then looked across at his secretary, who was listening silently. “Eva, would you mind?”

I was slightly dubious, thinking, *Really? Eva?* Yet she appeared not at all perturbed by the suggestion suddenly presented to her.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she replied, “but only if Lagrange approves. We mustn’t act on our own without a request from them. Also, you’d better actually do your work properly when I’m not around.”

“Come now, why wouldn’t they approve? They’ll never find anyone as suitable as you.” Ignoring her last barbed comment entirely, the ambassador turned back to me.

“Eva is a member of the Knights of the Rose. Despite appearances, no soldier would be any match for her.”

“Goodness!”

In my shock, I stared at Eva rather impolitely. Duke Shannon’s Knights of the Rose were known as the strongest combat order there was. They had been established long ago to protect the duke of that era, who faced constant attempts on his life. It was well known that the order’s ideals and expertise had been passed down to the present day.

For various reasons, he’d left it in the hands of another for the time being, but Ambassador Nigel was actually the current head of the order. *And Eva’s more than a mere secretary—she’s of their ranks as well?* Eva flinched slightly at my gaze. *I’m sorry for gawking like this...but I see, yes. So this impressive woman is a Knight of the Rose, a member of the order said to be the ultimate in fighting*

prowess. All along, she was a female warrior!

“Why have you opened your notebook all of a sudden?”

“Apologies. If you could just wait a moment... Oh, goodness, it’s too much...”

Perhaps this is the age of strong women! Indeed, Lady Rose worked as a spy. If she teamed up with Eva, wouldn’t they be an unbeatable duo? That could work as the basis for a story—female protagonists who can trounce men instead of relying on their protection! Wouldn’t that be great? Of course, there’d also be wonderful gentlemen in the story, but it wouldn’t conclude with our protagonists falling in love. Though enjoying the romance, in the end, they’d leave in the most wonderfully aloof way—onward to the next battle! Oh my, characters like that would have me waving fans and candles in support!

“Lord Nigel, is she...”

“Something appears to have struck a chord with her. Let’s wait until she calms down.”

Obsessed, I let my pen race across the page as the pair from Easdale watched with slightly uncomfortable expressions.

A short while later, my raging torrent of fangirling subsided. I took a sip of tea and heaved a sigh. “My apologies. I was inspired in a manner that was simply uncontrollable. Next time, I hope you’ll allow me to thoroughly gather information about you.”

“Gather...information?” Eva replied.

“Anyway, so you’ll be offering Eva up as a guard?” I asked, finally returning to the topic at hand.

Ambassador Nigel nodded. “I think she could guard him in a way that looks most natural. Having a woman at his side would be less suspicious than another man, wouldn’t you say?”

“I... I would.”

“We could make it look as though two married couples who are friends have gone out together. I assume you’ll go along, which means the other party would inevitably be the Vice Captain himself. It’ll be the perfect act with flawless

protection to boot.”

I nodded. *Yes, indeed. That’s a very good idea. If it doesn’t look like he’s being guarded at first glance, it won’t attract any attention. That, in turn, will lower the risk of his identity being discovered.* My excitement rose. *This will surely be enough to convince Lord Simeon and His Highness!*

Alas, those hopes were soon dashed. “Only, even then, we couldn’t be completely sure of his safety. It would be ideal if we could bolster his guard even more. We might need one more push—a little something extra to convince the Vice Captain and His Highness.”

That knocked the wind out of my sails. *Really? It’s still not enough?*

Warding off my miffed expression with a smile, Ambassador Nigel shrugged. “Ordinarily, that would be more than enough security, but with Prince Gracius, we have to pile precaution on top of precaution, you see. Seventy or eighty percent safe probably won’t be enough to convince them. We need at least ninety.”

I sighed deeply. I had absolutely no idea what further measures we could take. The three of us gave it a good think together, but ultimately, we didn’t come up with any bright ideas that afternoon.

Following the festival, the days passed uneventfully for a while. Lord Simeon didn’t bring the outing up again, nor did I upon deciding it would be no help for me to pester him about it. I had a healthy array of household errands and novel work to take care of, so I was preoccupied in any case. It was still nagging at me in a corner of my mind, but there was nothing I could do at the time.

When we were just ten days out from Noël, I went into the city with my lady’s maid and another servant to visit Quatre Saisons. I had some memories associated with this department store; I’d visited with Lord Simeon previously and gotten caught up in quite some commotion just prior to our wedding. With the festive shopping period upon us now, the store was even more jam-packed with customers than usual.

The House Flaubert servants also wanted to take time off at Noël and go home to their families, but it wasn’t practical for them all to be off at the same

time, so we had them alternate. That meant there were an unlucky few who were tasked with working over the holiday season, so I suggested to my mother-in-law that we give them special presents on top of their wages. I felt that would be more compelling than money alone. At least, that was the approach we'd taken in my family.

Countess Estelle had in turn suggested that we give something to all of the servants, so in the end, we'd decided to get gifts for the entirety of our household staff. I was tasked with making the arrangements, hence my trip to the department store. I hadn't told the two servants accompanying me who we were shopping for, and I asked for their help making selections while they remained none the wiser. I furtively watched their reactions, and I suspected they'd be quite happy come the special day.

When we were finished, we stopped by the café on the first floor, partly because I wanted to thank them for their assistance. "Sorry for dragging you around with me. Feel free to order whatever you like."

I had a fond memory of visiting this same café last year with Lord Simeon to feed each other ice cream. Today, too, there were couples dotted around engaging in the same activity. *I'd like to come here with Lord Simeon again. Perhaps I'll ask him next time we're out.*

"Are you sure?" Nicole asked. "I've wanted to try the ice cream here. Oh, and the fondant chocolate too! And that tart looks good as well. I think I read in a magazine that the macarons and marshmallows are exquisite...but I think they might only have those for takeaway."

Nicole, one of the household maids, was younger than me, and still a girl in terms of her demeanor. As she held the menu in her hands, her sheer exuberance made it clear she had a sweet tooth.

Meanwhile, my lady's maid, Joanna, was a person of firm character. Chiding her younger colleague in the manner of an older sister, she said, "That's too much, Nicole. You need to hold back at least somewhat."

"It's fine, honestly," I told them. "When eating here, you ought to have two or three things. The macarons and marshmallows are indeed for takeaway only, so let's buy those afterward."

Nicole practically squealed with joy. “I love you, my lady!”

“Nicole, restrain yourself!”

Spirited Nicole was so adorable that I couldn’t help laughing. I bid Joanna to order freely as well and took a look at the menu myself. I was exhausted, but this sort of errand was good fun. It made me happy to think about other people’s tastes while selecting gifts for them.

Having made short work of the tea and desserts, Nicole wanted to go and look at sweets to take home right away. There was a sales counter in one corner of the café where little baked confections and such were arranged in cute little boxes.

“We’ll get them as souvenirs for everyone. Go and help her choose what to get,” I said to Joanna.

I’ll buy enough for all the staff, just as Countess Estelle said. Only getting some for those two would breed ill feelings. I knew that Joanna would consider that carefully when choosing, and the thought of leaving the decision entirely to Nicole made me a tiny bit anxious. I thought Joanna would rein her in.

“In that case,” Joanna said, “please stay here, and call me over if anything happens.”

“I will. Thank you.”

The two of them headed over to the sales counter. I leaned back in my chair and watched them go.

Nicole stared at the display case, fixated, prompting Joanna to slap her on the head. It was amusing to witness even from a distance. However, no amount of chiding was enough to discourage Nicole; the tendency was for Joanna to find herself on the back foot.

A shopping trip was the perfect way to lift the spirits. We’d enjoyed selecting what we wished to purchase and eating delicious treats, and beyond that, I’d made all manner of interesting observations and obtained new information. Relaxing at home was lovely in its own way, but an outing was always such good fun—practically a necessity once in a while.

The more I dwelled on this, however, the more I thought of Prince Gracius. *I dearly wish I could give him a taste of this joy.* All my thinking on his situation over the past few days had yielded nothing in the way of bright ideas. The matter had reached a deadlock, and I felt deeply ashamed of my own powerlessness. Again, I found myself of absolutely no use. Melancholy threatened to take hold of me once more.

Of course, the horror he faced—the possibility of assassination—was a danger I'd normally have no involvement with whatsoever. Given my position, I should have known my place and stayed on the sidelines rather than poking my nose in. Then I wouldn't cause any trouble for Lord Simeon, and I'd be at no risk of going beyond merely unhelpful and becoming a hindrance to him.

On the other hand, however, knowing my place would have meant ignoring Prince Gracius's plight. It was an unbelievably thorny situation, and in the end, I am the sort of person who leans toward poking my nose into things. It's who I am. Perhaps such curiosity is not ideal for Lord Simeon's wife, but I still wanted to help my friend.

I heaved a huge sigh, in part owing to my physical exhaustion as well. Then I heard a similar sigh from a person sitting directly behind me. I casually turned to look, assuming they were just as worn out as I was, and they looked my way at the same time. Our eyes met.

Sitting there, so near to me, was a certain black-haired young man. For a moment, I simply stared at him in silence.

"Why, hello there," he said.

I couldn't keep myself from leaping out of my chair and exclaiming wildly. Suddenly finding all eyes on me, I sat down again in a hurry. Once I situated myself at my table and restored a suitably placid expression to my face, the curious customers and staff whose attention I'd caught went back to their own conversations and tasks.

After making sure that nobody was looking anymore, I whispered to the man behind me, "What are you doing here?"

"That's one way to greet me. Why shouldn't I be in a café anyway?"

“Didn’t you return to Lavia with Prince Liberto? Are you back already?”

“Well, you might say I’ve been given detention.”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean? All part of some plot or other, I’m sure.”

“Hardly!” the black-haired man replied, waving his hand in a fervent denial. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

By now, I’d normally have expected him to be getting very close to me indeed without the slightest care for decorum. Yet today, he was lacking his usual vivacity. Seeing him resting his chin in his hands with a rather gloomy expression, I knitted my brows. “You don’t look very cheerful. You didn’t catch a cold that night, did you?”

“I did indeed. It was absolutely freezing. Don’t worry! I’m all better now.”

After a moment’s pause, I said, “It’s hard to talk like this. Why don’t you come and sit with me?”

Surprise gleamed in his eyes the color of the sea. “A most unexpected offer. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I nodded. “Not at all. Sitting at a table in a café together hardly amounts to a clandestine meeting. My lady’s maid is nearby as well.”

Joanna was over by Nicole, who was still engrossed in picking out sweets, but I wasn’t surprised to see her looking at me with some concern. I waved my hand as a signal that all was well.

Ultimately, sitting back to back made it hard to converse, and the unnatural arrangement also made us more likely to draw unwanted attention. When I pointed this out and asked him to join me again, he readily got up and came over to my table. Even without me indicating where he should sit, he did the gentlemanly thing and pulled out the chair opposite me. As brazen as he was, I’d expected him to take the seat next to mine. Perhaps he was paying some concern to what others might think.

This tall man, who sat down with a graceful ease, was clad in attire that made him look like he might be a wealthy commoner. His ensemble was dark in color

and lacked ostentatious trimmings. He looked perfectly natural here in the department store. Among the crowd of similarly dressed people in the café, he didn't stand out at all. At a closer look, his young face had a masculine handsomeness to it, and the silhouette of his lean, well-trained body was attractive as well. He no doubt drew the eye of many ladies, but there was a certain low-key air about him that made his charms harder to discern—all part of his skill as a master of disguise. He could change his face at will to look like a different person altogether. It was impressive every time I saw it, and this was no exception.

This was Lutin, the mysterious thief who was practically an old friend by now. He was also a spy for the Grand Duchy of Lavia who sometimes went by the name "Earl Cialdini." Our history was a storied one, and it included the most recent chaos in the city. I'd been sure I wouldn't see him again for a while, especially given the season, so this reunion was something of a surprise. Granted, surprise appearances were Lutin's *modus operandi*, so one could say this was par for the course.

While I was still slightly on guard without knowing what he'd come here to do, Lutin looked composed. His expression suggested something was weighing on his mind, however. His usual sardonic smile was nowhere to be seen, and he hadn't made even one spirited attempt to woo me—and that wasn't a matter of disguise. I was quite curious about what had affected him so.

"You truly do look out of sorts. If you're not unwell, perhaps you're worried about something?"

A hint of a smile overtook his blue eyes as he looked back at me. "Are you worried about me?"

After a moment's hesitation over how to reply, I decided to simply be honest. This wasn't the time to be mean to him. With a nod, I said, "It's only natural to be worried. If someone doesn't seem their usual self, one needs to trust their instincts. I once noticed Max from next door being more of a good boy than usual, and it turned out he was ill."

"Ah, that's your neighbors' dog, isn't it? The one who's always being bullied by your cat."

“My, you certainly are knowledgeable. You must have done a lot of research.”

His shoulders slumped. “You’re equating me to a dog.”

The affliction was worse than I’d thought. That was barely an objection. Where is his signature mockery? “No, I’m merely saying it’s best not to overlook oddities you observe. So tell me—what’s put you in this mood?”

“Yes, well, your concern is much appreciated, but it’s unwarranted. I’m absolutely fine. I was just given a slightly complicated order.”

“By your prince?”

“The very one. Nothing you need to be on edge about, though. In fact, it’s not related to my work at all. Purely personal. That’s what makes it so tricky. Annoying, I might say,” he concluded with a sigh.

Indeed, I could believe that the prince was responsible for leaving him in this sorry state. His master was likely the one and only person who could trouble him so. Only, what kind of order could it have been?

“Can I help you with it at all?” I asked. Lutin seemed so unlike himself that I couldn’t help offering.

For some reason, he only stared back at me. I watched his expression in silence. It seemed to hold some significance, as if he were unsure how to answer me. Deciding not to push him, I looked over at Joanna and Nicole across the room; they were still selecting sweets.

Finally, with another sigh, Lutin shook his head. “I’m afraid I have to resolve this on my own. Still, I’m grateful for the sentiment. Thank you.”

“Is the prince forcing you to do something unreasonable?”

“Not exactly... Though now that you mention it, it could be described as rather unreasonable. Still, nothing worth the dead-serious concern you’re looking at me with. If I told anyone the truth, they’d probably laugh at me. Even I think it’s ridiculous, but if I don’t do what he says, he won’t let me return home. That’s the long and short of it.” He threw up his hands in an exaggerated gesture.

So that was what he meant by “detention.” I pictured the beautiful yet

frustratingly roguish Lavian prince. Despite saying that he saw Lutin as a younger brother, Prince Liberto apparently wasn't above this harsh treatment either. A baffling man indeed.

"Still, I wonder what sort of order could possibly pose such a challenge for you." This was a puzzle unto itself. What would be a laughing matter to others but a struggle for Lutin? I had hoped my assistance would provide some relief, but all I could offer him now was encouragement. "Well, I wish you good luck and hope you can manage, but if there's some way I can help, let me know. In the meantime, would you like some cake? Or do you not have a sweet tooth? Maybe you'd prefer something savory."

"Neither, thank you," he said flatly. He appeared to have cheered up a little while we were talking; his familiar joviality had returned. "Are you sure you don't need to call those two back over?"

"It doesn't look as though they've finished deciding yet. Besides, they're well aware they ought to wait until they're summoned in such a situation. It's all right."

"They might tattle to the Vice Captain later. Not that I'd mind! It'd be quite amusing."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'll be informing Lord Simeon myself. He wouldn't blame me for this sort of meeting. Nor are Joanna and Nicole the sort of mean-spirited people you're suggesting."

"That must be your influence. You can tell a lot about a household by its servants. A good master inspires warmth, while an unkind one inspires spite in the staff."

"In other words, your own twisted personality is due to your master's influence?"

"I implore you to repeat that for Prince Liberto. You simply must the next time you have a chance."

I was enjoying this little exchange with Lutin well enough. As long as he wasn't teasing Lord Simeon or speaking ill of him, conversing with him was good fun. I'd avoid admitting as much to my husband because he'd certainly grow very

sullen indeed, but when I spoke to Lutin, it felt like talking to a friend.

Perhaps it was dangerous to see him that way when I knew that he had stronger feelings for me. Still, he was the one who told me he'd rather I laugh than give him the cold shoulder. This might be optimistic, but it would be nice if we could enjoy a relationship that was purely a mutual friendship one day.

"By the way," he said, "they started publishing a story of yours in the newspaper, didn't they? It's been pretty well received too. I thought it would be a romance, so I was surprised to see it was a mystery. I didn't know you wrote those too."

"Oh, yes, well... You've been following it, then?"

"This is probably when I'm supposed to tell you I enjoyed it, but I've actually never enjoyed a play or a novel. Sorry, but I figure it's better not to flatter you with a lie."

"I don't mind. For someone with your experience, I'm sure it comes across as an unrealistic fairy tale."

"No, I can still tell if a story's good or bad. I thought it was nicely written. It's just that I can never get emotionally invested. I start analyzing and nitpicking. All those unwanted thoughts distract me and make it impossible to immerse myself."

"Something of an occupational disease?"

"Basically."

I nodded; this made perfect sense. A man who worked in a specialist field like intelligence was probably used to poring over every last detail with a fine-toothed comb. *This is good information! I mustn't forget it.*

When I produced my notebook and started writing in it, Lutin laughed. "You have an occupational disease of your own."

"I can hardly believe I've never thought of that before. Consulting an expert would be a valuable reference when it comes to all sorts of fields. Can you share anything else? There's so much I want to know."

"That's not very specific. I don't know where to start."

“Hmm, I see what you—” My head shot up. “Oh!”

My sudden loud exclamation took Lutin aback, and he made a shocked sound as well. All eyes were on us again, but this time I didn’t care. I put my notebook down and leaned forward.

“That’s it! I have an expert right here!”

After a moment’s puzzlement, he replied, “What are you talking about?”

“Disguise! You’re a master of dis— Mmph!”

The words I’d been about to pronounce so enthusiastically were muffled by a large, lightning-fast hand.

“Come now,” he whispered. “That’s not the kind of thing I need you shouting in public.”

His concern about being overheard made me reflect on where we were. *Oh, he has a point. I shouldn’t be screaming from the rooftops about this.* With my mouth still covered, I surveyed our surroundings by moving only my eyes.

Comfortable that I’d calmed down, Lutin removed his hand. After gathering my breath, I continued in a far quieter voice, “My apologies. I suddenly thought of something while we were talking, you see. I could really use your assistance. Would you be willing to help?”

Lutin raised his eyebrows quizzically, unwilling to agree just yet. Such prudence was typical of him. “That depends on what you need.”

I took one more look around, then drew closer to him and whispered, “I’d like you to disguise a certain nobleman so that he can safely enjoy a secret excursion. Could you make him look like a different person, just as you did in Mauge?”

“Aha,” he said after a moment. Even without me giving a name, Lutin immediately surmised who I was referring to. When Prince Gracius was targeted by a band of would-be assassins, Lutin had played a part in the strategy to keep him safe. He nodded several times; the memory was still fresh, no doubt.

I wanted to applaud my own idea. We’d already used this plan before to allow

Prince Gracius to move about safely! Why hadn't it occurred to me sooner?

It's the same tactic we used when he was traveling from Linden to Lagrange. He needs a disguise, just like he did then. We can go beyond merely changing his clothing and hairstyle—he could have a different face altogether. Even the people after him won't recognize him!

Of course, this plan required Lutin's particular expertise, so it was fortuitous that he and I had crossed paths. I would have been at a loss without his help.

However, rather than readily agreeing, he twisted his mouth into a cynical grimace. "I doubt your husband or his master will agree to this. Disguise or no disguise, it'll be difficult."

"The man in question has been saying himself that he wishes to go out into the city. I've been trying to find a way to make it possible, and I think even Lord Simeon and Prince Severin would accept this. After all, His Highness is the one who thought up the plan in the first place, and it's worked in the past."

Despite my impassioned plea, Lutin remained unmoved. "I don't know, though. In my situation, this could prove...less than ideal. Weren't you listening to what I said? I can't accept on my own without permission from Prince Liberto first."

"Then get in touch with him and ask right away. In fact, no, I'll get Princess Henriette to help. We can send him a letter."

"No, don't do that!" Lutin insisted, genuine panic on his face. "I feel like that could turn out badly—especially for me. When he hears of it, who knows what he'll order me to do in his amusement?"

I truly didn't understand the power dynamic between Lutin and his boss. "Oh my, but I thought he was such a kind gentleman. He'll be happy to oblige, won't he?"

"I know you know better than that! Ugh, that's quite a threat to hold over me." Lutin mused a moment longer. "All right, I suppose I'll have to help you. Just be sure to get permission from your top dogs beforehand. I don't want them complaining about it afterward."

"Yes, of course! Thank you!" I leaped out of my chair and took his hands, so

jubilant that I forgot about all the other customers. “Now I’ll be able to show him the city! He’s had to hold back and miss out on so much, so I wanted to do this for him for Noël at least. I’m so glad I ran into you today. I’m so grateful—truly I am!”

I caught sight of Joanna out of the corner of my eye. She was frantically gesturing with her hands, as if trying to tell me something. Turning my face to look at her, I puzzled over what it all meant.

Just then, the hands I was holding moved around to clasp mine instead. “I can’t say I’m entirely thrilled about this. I’m glad that you’re happy, but it’s all for another man’s benefit.”

When I looked back at Lutin, he was drawing my fingertips up to his lips. Hurriedly, I pulled my hands away. *Oh no! We were having such an ordinary conversation that I quite forgot who he is—and how he behaves. I mustn’t let my guard down.* Taking a man’s hands was immodest in the first place, and we were surrounded by quite a crowd. Only now did I realize the reason for Joanna’s exasperation. I wanted to groan. *I’m so sorry, Lord Simeon.*

Rather than forcibly trying to keep a hold of me, Lutin chuckled at my reaction. He apparently didn’t intend to push too hard today, at least. With a hint of a mischievous smile, he simply added a request of his own. “So, am I putting in all this effort for no reward? I’m not keen on being used and discarded. You could give me a little something in return, couldn’t you?”

I sat back down in my chair, taking on a respectable posture again. “Yes, I see your point.” Indeed, it wasn’t fair to petition his help and not show him any gratitude. Asking for as much was reasonable. But at the same time, I couldn’t carelessly make promises to this man. It was now my turn to err on the side of caution. “I’ll repay you, but only within the realm of reason. I can’t promise to do whatever you’d like.”

“That’s fine. I wouldn’t want anything you only offered reluctantly out of a sense of duty anyway.”

He had been leaning on the table, but he sat up straight again, then casually rose from his seat. Nothing had changed about his attire, and yet the subdued aura he’d projected before had vanished entirely. The jovial man looking down

at me now certainly drew the eye. How did he manage such a change? The female customers and serving staff in the café who'd paid him no mind just moments ago were now stealing furtive glances at him.

"For now," he said, "step one is getting permission. If you manage that, contact me. I'll think about what I want in the meantime."

"All right. How should I get in touch?"

"You can just ask the Lavian embassy."

"Giving them the name 'Earl Cialdini'?"

"Yes, they'll know who you mean. But it won't be easy to convince the Vice Captain. If you're pleading with him for another man's benefit, he's likely to become even more morose than I've been. Such a small-minded man... I don't know if he'll go along with it."

Having returned to his usual demeanor, Lutin departed with that thoroughly unwanted remark. I watched him go with a click of my tongue. *Lord Simeon is not small-minded, I'll have you know. Just because he can be a little stubborn and inflexible doesn't mean he isn't kind and thoughtful. I'm sure he'll understand.*

As soon as he was gone, Joanna was by my side in a flash. "My lady! Who... Who was that man?!" She looked remarkably worked up, her face a little terrifying. "Don't tell me you arranged a liaison with him here!"

"Not at all. It was entirely coincidental. Well, I can't say that for sure, but I certainly didn't expect to see him here. Lord Simeon knows him as well."

"He seemed to be getting far too friendly with you."

"Yes, well, you see... I did forget myself a bit. I've been pondering over a problem lately, and when I realized he could help me resolve it, I was so happy that I carelessly got carried away. I realize it was improper of me. My apologies."

My honest apology prompted Joanna to put her hands on her hips and sigh. She did more for me than merely taking care of my daily needs. She was also a confidante and a chaperone, and now she chided me like an older sister. "You

mustn't forget that you're in public. You never know when an acquaintance might spot you. I know you insist that no one remembers your face, but I'm sure they will if they've seen you enough times. So if you act in a way that could be misinterpreted, it may lead to an unfortunate misunderstanding. You wouldn't want that."

"Yes, you're quite right. My apologies." I stood from my chair. "That aside, we must hurry to the palace at once."

"The palace? So suddenly?"

"I have something to discuss with His Highness and Lord Simeon. They might not meet me if I barge in without an appointment, but time is of the essence. I know! We'll forget the palace for now and head to Duke Silvestre's manor instead."

I picked up my handbag and started toward the exit in a flurry. Flustered, Joanna followed me. "Hold on a moment, please! I don't know what's going on, but if something's the matter, we should consult with Earl and Countess Flaubert."

"It's nothing like that. I merely want to enlist Julianne's help. If His Highness receives a request to meet from his beloved fiancée, he'll urgently make time no matter how busy he is."

"I'm still struggling to follow, but it sounds as though you mean to deceive His Highness the Crown Prince! Surely that's beyond the pale!"

"As long as he gets a chance to see Julianne, it'll probably be all right." I was in too much of a rush to explain right now, and I couldn't share the full details anyway. Dismissing her concerns as best I could, I made for the sales counter.

Behind me, she grumbled to herself, "Honestly, on your head be it..."

Ignoring her, I went to sign the payment slip—only for a loud cry to ring out. "My lady, these chocolates are limited edition! They're absolutely delicious, I just know it—it's what my intuition is telling me! Please buy them...and let me try them!"

Oh dear. I forgot about someone.

“NICOLE!!!”

I calmed Joanna, whose frustrations were now targeted in two directions, and then we set off for the duke’s manor with the gluttonous young maid in tow.

Chapter Five

Glaring at me with reproachful eyes, Prince Severin said in a guttural voice, “And so you dragged Julianne into your scheme as well, did you?”

I could almost see a black haze wafting from him and feel the ground quaking. Behind His Highness, Lord Simeon was grimacing as if he had a headache.

“You said it was urgent,” the prince continued, “so frankly, I feared something awful might have happened.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” came a meek apology from Julianne, sitting beside me. She and I were the same age, and not only relatives, but best friends who’d bonded over our shared hobby. She had recently gotten engaged to His Highness and been adopted into House Silvestre, where she was now receiving the education required for a crown princess.

When I’d charged into the estate with a sudden request, she had listened and obliged. While it wasn’t ideal to make extra work for her when she had nothing to do with the business at hand, I knew that Julianne was more than eager to assist me—and that the contrition she was demonstrating right now was mere pretense. There was a reason she and I had been inseparable since birth. People always acted as though I was the only strange one, but Julianne’s behavior could be decidedly audacious in its own right.

Unable to complain at his sweet little fiancée, His Highness cast a resentful look my way. “Marielle,” he began.

“I’m profoundly sorry as well. I cannot apologize enough. Only, it’s true that the matter is urgent. Considering the time it will take to arrange everything, there’s no time to lose.”

“Yes, I suppose—but I daresay you and I have entirely different definitions of what constitutes ‘urgent’!”

The room had been cleared and guards posted outside the door to the audience chamber, as this was business not to be overheard by anyone. Once

His Highness learned what the fuss was really about, he was dumbfounded at first, then launched into an endless series of barbed comments. Lord Simeon was glowering at me too. *Oh my, the icy gaze of the Demon Vice Captain—I can't get enough of it! I'm shuddering with nerves, as if he might put the screws on me. Tee hee! It's terrifying, yet so captivating!*

A sigh escaped Lord Simeon's lips. He'd evidently noticed the inner fangirling despite my admirably lowered head.

His Highness sighed deeply as well, then rested his chin in his hand with an exhausted look. "If it's a matter that requires my speedy attention, you can say so in a way that makes that clear. You can write to me with a summary and I'll give it a look over. I won't simply ignore it or put it aside—so next time, contact me in a normal manner!"

"Yes, Your Highness. I'm terribly sorry."

We were indeed pressed for time, so he didn't spend too long tediously berating me. "Anyway," he continued, shifting his tone, "you're sure you've reached firm agreements with both Ambassador Nigel and Lutin? Absolutely certain?"

I gave a big nod. "Yes. They both agreed under the condition that permission was granted on our side."

"Well, it does sound like a suitably practical plan. I imagine His Majesty will agree to it. Except I trust Lutin about as far as I can throw him."

"I think it will be fine," I replied. "He's a man of his word to a surprising degree, and I didn't get the impression he was simply telling me whatever I wanted to hear."

At this point, Lord Simeon finally broke his silence to interject. "Your Highness, may I make an observation?"

The prince agreed, oblivious to my sudden fright.

Fixing his gaze on me, my husband asked, "It's hard to imagine that man agreeing to assist without orders from above. Did he happen to insist upon any other conditions?"

So perceptive. Too perceptive. But what else can I expect from my Demon Vice Captain? Lord Simeon wasn't the only one staring. All eyes in the room were on me. I fell silent and froze in my seat.

"Marielle?"

"Well, it would only be natural to show him my gratitude in *some* manner, wouldn't it? All I said was that if he had a request, I'd consider it and—" I yelped in shock. The moment those words left my mouth, I thought I saw a menacing glint upon Lord Simeon's glasses. His eyes, piercing at the best of times, grew in intensity even more as they narrowed. Lightning flashed behind him. I could practically hear the earth rumbling. When he was like this, he was too fearsome for me to even fangirl over.

His Highness, who was closer to the source, shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. "And what did he request?"

"He... He hasn't decided yet. He said he'd think about it. It certainly won't be anything politically motivated! It'll be a personal request. And I didn't give him carte blanche to whatever he pleases. I was very clear on that point! Lutin appeared to understand, and he agreed without objection."

"Simeon, control yourself. I feel as though I'm about to freeze solid and burn to death."

"Are you too hot or too cold?" Julianne chimed in. She then interceded on my behalf. "Lord Simeon, this is a touch excessive. A husband who would threaten his wife is the lowest of all men. It's thoroughly unbecoming."

Julianne's scathing words, true to form, conjured a look of shock on Lord Simeon's face. After casting his eyes down for a moment, he took a breath and reined in his murderous aura. "Apologies. It's him that I cannot stand. I mean nothing against Marielle."

"Then don't make that blasted face," His Highness grumbled. "You look like a husband angry at his wife for being unfaithful."

"I was not unfaithful!" I protested.

"Yes, I know," Lord Simeon soothed. "You were so determined to recruit his help that you accepted his conditions, whatever they were. He's a coward to

exploit you in a moment of need. That damned common criminal.” He practically spat those last words.

In the end, dealing with Lutin always put him in this sort of a mood. It was as predictable as predictable could be. However, his assessment of the situation wasn’t accurate. If I let the misunderstanding pass without comment, it would be unfair to Lutin—and I wanted to assure my husband there was no cause for concern.

Determined, I tried to explain. “You have it all mixed up. He was the reluctant party, and I don’t say that just to defend him. If I had to say who is exploiting whom, I should say I’m the guilty party. Lutin didn’t want me reaching out to Prince Liberto on the matter, so he felt pressured to agree. Then he said that he’d like something in return, and that only seemed fair, so I agreed. However, I made it as clear as day that I will refuse any unreasonable requests. Based on his reaction, I don’t see a need for excessive vigilance.”

Nothing came from Lord Simeon but silence. When I looked up, concerned by the furrows on his brow that wouldn’t go away, His Highness came to my aid. “Simeon, I agree with Marielle. She’s not the sort of person to be forced into anything without objecting. She’ll tell him no and that will be that. That man is already well aware of as much, so he won’t go asking for anything too preposterous.”

Julianne nodded enthusiastically. “And she’ll tell Lord Simeon about everything, of course! In fact, you could even go together to hear his request. Why not?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said, my voice faltering. “Julianne’s right. I absolutely, positively will not try to hide anything from you!”

Amid this sea of counterarguments, Lord Simeon sighed again. Returning to his prior calm, expressionless face, he replied, “Very well.”

I was glad to have some resolution on the matter, but it was less that he’d been convinced and more that he’d been forced into submission. Leaving things like this certainly wasn’t ideal. *I’ll have to talk it over with him properly later. At the very least, I should apologize for making the agreement all on my own.*

I stared at my husband’s face, which was not unlike the frozen visage of some

beautiful doll, willing as much gratitude into my eyes as I could. He was always more sensitive than necessary when Lutin was involved, so I couldn't be too careless. *To avoid any misapprehension, I'll have to be as clear as I can and explain multiple times.*

His Highness drew my attention by clearing his throat, then stood from his chair. "Now, I'm frightfully busy, so I shall have to leave it here. We'll arrange the schedule, so all you need to do is be ready. I'll be in touch in the next few days."

Julianne and I hurriedly got up. The prince glanced at his fiancée with a look of some lingering attachment.

"Sorry that I have to turn you away so soon. Still, next time, I hope you'll call on me because you have a need of your own."

An awkward half-smile formed on Julianne's lips. "I will. Apologies again for interrupting your busy day."

"That's quite all right. Marielle's the one at fault."

"I can't deny that," I protested, "but your attitude doesn't feel especially consistent." Julianne was my partner in crime, after all, yet the prince was all sweetness and light with her. It was hardly fair.

His Highness's expression immediately twisted into a sullen glower. He shot back, "You're a fine one to talk given your rotten treatment of me. Who but you would treat the crown prince so chummily?"

"No, that would imply that you're a background character. You're one of the named key figures."

"Oh, jolly good! I'm so marvelously joyous that I might cry!"

Quivering with rage, he turned and left the room. Lord Simeon followed, casting a momentary glance at me that said, "Don't tease him so much."

I wasn't even trying to!

The posted guards departed as well, leaving me and Julianne alone. I picked up my handbag, ready to leave as well. "Thank you for doing this. I'm sorry if it's caused any discord between you and His Highness."

“Don’t worry. We’re both happy to see each other’s faces, whatever the pretext.” The special joy of a young lady in love gleamed in her amber eyes.

Was that the real reason she helped me all along? I let out a small chuckle. “I’ve heard him complain about hardly having any opportunity to see you.”

“He’s busy, and I have my studies.” She paused before going on. “And I believe my adoptive father is secretly enjoying this.”

We left the room as we chatted. While I was at the palace, I wanted to see Prince Gracius and give him an update. Since Julianne wanted to visit Princess Henriette before going home as well, we walked down the hall together for a ways.

“He’s always going on about how it’s boring if we can meet too easily, about how love burns more brightly in the face of adversity, and so forth. The sorts of things you would say, to be honest.”

I blinked. “I wouldn’t expect to find myself of like mind with Duke Silvestre. You don’t think he’s deliberately making it harder for you to meet, do you?”

“He hasn’t said so directly, but sometimes His Highness regards the duke with great bitterness in his eyes, so...it seems likely.”

“Oh, my!” I rubbed both my arms, a chill running through me. It seemed that tormenting His Highness had become the loathsome duke’s latest obsession. I could just picture the smile on his face, which to him would be one of splendidly good humor, but pure wickedness to all who beheld it. *My condolences, Your Highness.*

However, if the crown prince was the duke’s sole target, that was a weight off my mind. I’d had quite enough of being drawn into that man’s games.

After parting with Julianne, I made my way to Prince Gracius’s temporary residence—a portion of the main palace building that had been annexed for him. Before I could enter, I’d have to go through an identity check and a search. Security was strict around the prince since there was no way of knowing how an assassin might try to sneak in. Even the housemaids serving him were searched every single time they entered, apparently. Though with only men among the royal guard, a female administrator had been borrowed from the army.

When I gave my name, the guards immediately realized I was their superior officer's wife, but that didn't mean I received any special treatment. I, too, was taken into a separate room for a search. Once they were sure there was nothing amiss, I was finally given permission to pass. A housemaid was summoned to show me to Prince Gracius.

When I reached the drawing room, I could hear rather animated voices from within. There seemed to only be men present, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. It didn't sound like Lagrangian.

When the housemaid knocked, Isaac poked his head out. "I've brought Mrs. Flaubert," she informed him.

"Thank you," he replied. Word had been sent in advance, so Isaac invited me in straight away. The conversation in the room stopped dead, and all present turned their gazes directly on me.

Prince Gracius, who was sitting on a chair at the far end of the room, stood and came over to meet me with a smile on his face. "Marielle!"

The others were not so welcoming. Their harsh stares told me they viewed me as an interloper—or worse, an enemy. The men looked familiar, though. The reason struck me after a moment. There were one, two...six of them, all between their thirties and forties. Indeed, this seemed to be the very group I'd encountered at the tea party. The aspiring hangers-on from Orta. *I see. They probably forced their way into Prince Gracius's company again today.*

I delivered a curtsy as Prince Gracius approached. "Apologies for imposing. I didn't realize you had company. I merely wanted to say hello while I was at the palace. I'll be on my way now."

He stopped in front of me. "No, you don't need to worry. We were just chatting—nothing important."

It was all well and good for him to say that, but the silent demand from the men behind him was quite strong—they wished me gone at once. When I stole a glance at Isaac, who was standing to the side, he screwed up his face apologetically.

"Thank you," I replied, "but you needn't fuss so much over me. I dropped by

without an appointment, so your guests already here take priority. I'll come again another day."

I gave a polite nod to the hangers-on as well. Regardless of their motives, it was true that I'd interrupted. Etiquette dictated that I withdraw.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. He'd evidently realized I was right. The signal he gave me with just his face, so that the hangers-on couldn't see, held more meaning.

I met this with a smile. "I spoke to Prince Severin just now. I've been pestering him on a matter regarding Noël, and I got a little carried away with the joyous fruits of our discussion. That was why I came by so suddenly. It was rude of me. My apologies."

With others present, I couldn't talk about it openly. However, Prince Gracius understood my surreptitious hinting. In a flash, his eyes widened. His pleading expression sought confirmation, which I gratified with a tiny nod.

"I expect Prince Severin will be along later to grumble about it. Can you tell him that I'm overjoyed?"

The underlying meaning in my words, that His Highness would likely explain the full details, was clear to Prince Gracius. He was trying hard to keep his sheer happiness contained, but I could see it on his face.

"I will. And I hope I'll have a chance for a long chat with you as well."

"Thank you. Yes, there are all sorts of things I want to show you. It won't be long now!" With the intimation that I would be going with him, I drew my visit to a close and curtsied again. "Well then, I'll be off. Allow me to apologize again to all of you for interrupting your pleasant chat."

From the hangers-on, I received nary a bow nor even an insincere smile. Instead, they practically turned up their noses at me as I left the room.

My word, they have no sense of decorum at all. Thinking back on the tea party as well, I can hardly say my impression of them is favorable in any way.

After all this time, Prince Gracius was finally getting to know some fellow Ortans, but it was hard to see their presence as beneficial to him. Still, he'd

mentioned contact with a well-regarded figure of better character, so I could not but hope *that* relationship would prove more fruitful.

The most important thing was that I'd gained permission for his secret excursion. I'd be able to take Prince Gracius out into the city streets. *For now, I'll focus on that. I did it!* That was enough to send my mood soaring. When I thought about the plan, about the truly delightful day we would have, all of the other petty matters vanished from my mind.

Though security was strict on the way in, the checkpoint guards didn't pay much mind to people leaving and they let me straight through. As I made my way outside with a spring in my step, so buoyant that I could have started humming to myself, I happened to come across Lord Simeon.

"I thought you'd have gone home by now."

"While I was here, I thought it would be a shame not to see Prince Gracius. He had guests, though, so I only got to speak with him for a moment."

Lord Simeon nodded. Based on my response, he'd intuited the reason for my visit to the prince. He sent his men on ahead and offered to see me to my carriage. For the Vice Captain to take the time out of his workday to see his wife off, there had to be some matter he wanted to discuss with me—or so I thought, but we walked in silence. When I looked up at his face, it looked somehow taut and slightly despondent.

I was going to speak to him when he got home, but perhaps it's better to broach the topic now.

Wavering, I began, "About Lu—" Then I caught myself. It was better not to mention his name. We weren't completely alone here, so it was best to demonstrate caution. "About, well, him... I'm sorry for striking a deal with him on my own, without discussing it with you first."

Lord Simeon looked as though he was about to say something—like he was searching for the right words—but then simply replied with a silent nod.

"It's just that we're pressed for time, and I didn't think it would be such a thorny matter. It was unfair to you, though, I realize now. I should have been more considerate of your feelings."

“I understand all that. I’m not overly thrilled, but I can’t fault you for it.”

“If you’re saying that, then I did slip up, didn’t I? I really am sorry.”

He shook his head. Though he’d been facing forward, he turned to look at me now. Behind his glasses, his beautiful eyes held neither anger nor dissatisfaction, but a certain sadness. As he had said, he wasn’t cross with me. He was in low spirits.

“No, it’s not that. I’m simply upset at how pathetic I am.”

“Why?” This gave me pause. I would have understood if he’d complained to me in exasperation, but I couldn’t comprehend why he was given to self-loathing. His thought process was a mystery to me. In any case, it was clear that this wouldn’t be resolved in a few words, so I stopped walking. “I don’t believe any part of you merits that description.”

Shaking his head again, Lord Simeon tried to usher me onward. However, I resisted by grabbing his arm and pulling him to a stop. “Why would you say such a thing? Please, tell me. What has you feeling this way?”

“You’re being awfully loud,” he chided, frowning. After a sigh, he continued, “It’s nothing you need to concern yourself with. I’m frustrated with my own uselessness. That’s all.”

“What are you...”

He gently pulled his arm from my grasp and stroked my head kindly. He looked as though he meant to smile, but failing, he turned his face away. “Since you came to me with this matter, I’ve been racking my brain for a way to make it work. I wanted to find a solution and make you happy, yet the circumstances seemed so insurmountable that I kept concluding that it was impossible.”

That was perfectly understandable. I’d found myself thinking the same thing. If I hadn’t encountered Lutin, I still would have felt that way.

Wait a moment. I sense where this might be leading...

“And then *he* comes along and cracks the matter so effortlessly. I find that intensely frustrating, but the fault rests entirely on me and my own uselessness. Pathetic, as I said...”

Ahhh! I knew it! It's all starting to make sense. The situation was frustrating to begin with, and then Lutin of all people got involved. That would put him in low spirits.

I wanted to cradle my head in my hands. I had slipped up after all. I'd been entirely mistaken about what had provoked Lord Simeon the most. It wasn't that I'd made an agreement without him—it was beseeching help from Lutin in the first place.

All that said, given the circumstances, I really did need Lutin's aid. I couldn't change that. For a moment, I wondered what I could say to convince Lord Simeon...and yet, that wasn't right either. He'd already accepted things. The situation had simply inspired feelings of worthlessness on him. *Which is utterly absurd!*

I finally spoke up again, choosing my words carefully. "If anyone's useless here, it's me."

Lord Simeon looked back at me, surprised.

"I concocted this entire plan, but I can't actually do anything on my own. All I can do is go to other people for help. All I do is rely on everyone else while being totally ineffectual myself. I act so high and mighty while having no way to back it up."

Oh dear. Talking about it is making me feel down now. The subject had already been on me, and as it came flooding back to me, my heart felt heavy. *It's true. I'm the useless one, not him.*

"Your part in this is still to come, Lord Simeon. Even if he makes the preparations, once things are in motion, you will be the one we're counting on. How does that make you useless? This entire plan will hinge on you. Meanwhile, I'm useless at every step of the process. I serve no purpose at all."

"You went around doing everything you could to get the help we needed. That's a legitimate achievement, so don't belittle yourself for no reason. You've been very useful indeed."

"If you're willing to classify that as an achievement, that's all the more reason you shouldn't call yourself useless. Who exactly is belittling themselves here?"

“But the deciding factor was *him*.”

“It was all happenstance! I’ll admit that when *he* appeared, I was quite thankful for a solution to our little problem. However, *he* alone isn’t enough to solve things. The plan still centers on those who will be working on the scene when the time comes. That duty will be entrusted to you—so please, don’t be so misguided as to call yourself pathetic.”

“But I wanted to grant your wish. I wanted to be the reason for your smile, your joy. I wanted them to be directed at me alone. Not only did I fail to do that, but *he* took it from me. *Him*, of all people.”

“That you feel that way brings me the greatest joy, though! You still come out with such wonderfully romantic lines without even realizing it! I love you so much!”

“Stop this at once, you nitwits,” a low voice interjected.

At some point, we’d forgotten our surroundings altogether and begun talking rather loudly. This remark brought us to our senses, and I saw that we’d collected quite an audience of housemaids, officials, and royal guards.

From among the many stunned faces and awkward chuckles, Prince Severin was glowering at us, a vein bulging at his temple. “What in blazes are you doing? This is *not* the place to make a scene.”

“Terribly sorry, Your Highness.” Lord Simeon lowered his head, looking as though no words would suffice.

I apologized as well. My attention had slipped entirely. *Everything’s fine, isn’t it? We weren’t talking in such a way that anyone would understand what it was about...were we?*

His Highness shooed away the onlookers, who departed with soft giggles. Only a handful of royal guards remained. They fought back the urge to poke fun at their superior officer, but the twitching of their mouths made it clear they were stifling laughter.

“I’ve made it abundantly clear that this is a top secret matter, but as soon as you start having a domestic dispute, all thought of that flies out the window! What a pair of utter dunces you are.”

“Indeed,” Lord Simeon replied slowly. “I truly am ashamed.”

“I’m sorry as well,” I added, “but I doubt anyone could have understood from listening to our conversation. We didn’t even use *his* name, we only referred to him as ‘*him*.’”

“Going on about *him* this and *him* that is hardly any better. When you talk about ‘*him*,’ it makes me picture a dark, foreboding presence appearing!”

“Oh my! Do you think he might show himself in the palace?”

“He could anywhere! The palace, the military headquarters... If he wants to sneak in, we have no way to stop him. Wait, that’s beside the point!”

“Imagine if he were the assassin. Now that would be terrifying.”

“An attack from him truly would make me start bawling!”

Lord Simeon’s voice rumbled. “*Him...*”

“Stop it, Simeon! If you say that, he really will appear!”

Though he had started off berating us, His Highness was now making quite a racket himself. Still, we had lost the original thread so rapidly that anyone listening was bound not to have any idea what we were discussing. Passersby who overheard our prattle only laughed to themselves.

I’m glad that Lutin isn’t actually here, though. If he found out we were talking about him as some nameless horror, it would definitely hurt his feelings. That’ll have to be our little secret.

Chapter Six

Prince Severin and Lord Simeon's preparations proceeded quickly, and the date was set for three days later—exactly one week before Noël. I was on tenterhooks that morning but relieved to see it was a clear, sunny day with not too strong a breeze.

We assembled in total secrecy at the palace, where Lutin—the much-talked-about "*him*"—upheld his end of the bargain. He sized up Prince Gracius and Eva, then made a rather extreme suggestion. "The best option might be to swap their genders. They're about the same height, and I think Prince Gracius could pull off a dress."

Prince Gracius, who had probably never even considered donning ladies' clothing, grew entirely flustered, his eyes wide.

"Don't be so rude," said Isaac. "How would you react if someone asked *you* to dress like a woman?"

"I'd do it if need be," Lutin replied. "Are you suggesting you've never done it yourself?"

"Is... Is that even possible with your build?"

Prince Severin and Lord Simeon didn't hide their exasperation as they stood on the sidelines of this exchange, while Ambassador Nigel merely laughed. Prince Gracius's face suggested he was completely at a loss as Isaac doggedly argued against the idea.

"There are plenty of tall women," said Lutin. "And, if they put on weight, they can be bulkier than a man as well. Prince Gracius is almost *too* skinny, so I don't think we'd need to build up his figure."

"That doesn't mean he has to dress as a woman!"

"I'm aiming to reduce his risk of discovery as much as humanly possible, and this is the best idea I've had. If we transform him into a lady, the chances of anyone seeing through his disguise will be drastically lower. He'll be able to

walk around without fear. Meanwhile, his bodyguards need to be able to move easily. A dress will get in her way if there's trouble."

"Well..." came the mumbled reply. Perhaps Lutin had a point after all.

However, Eva interjected, "Don't worry. I'll be able to act swiftly if so required."

She put a hand to her waist and appeared to unfasten a button, unfurling the skirt of her dress into a discrete piece of cloth. I was startled for a brief moment, but this reveal didn't expose her undergarments, for she was wearing trousers underneath. Her plain, sturdy-looking dress, like that of a governess, had transformed into men's attire in an instant. The ensemble was complete with boots firmly laced up to her knees and belts around her thighs, the right one holstering a gun and the left a knife. She made the striking impression of someone ready for action.

"You came well prepared," remarked Lutin.

"I sometimes have to enter places where I must blend in," she explained matter-of-factly while reattaching her skirt, "so I keep this special attire as an option."

She was so impressive it almost left me trembling. *What a marvelously dashing woman! I'll have to make use of this somehow. I must write down what I've just seen in my notebook before I forget.*

With a sullen look, Lutin discarded the dress and wig he was holding. "After I brought these with me just for the prince... How dull."

I knew it. He was entertained by the prospect. Although, quite honestly, the idea of cross-dressing is intriguing to me as well. I'd feel too sorry to force Prince Gracius into it, but I wonder if His Highness might agree to wear a dress...

Once that discussion was over and done with, Lutin got to work. The result was a couple who appeared somewhat older than Lord Simeon. Prince Gracius wore a chestnut brown wig that was on the longer side, with a hat to conceal his distinctive forehead. And with a lighter touch of Lutin's magic, Eva now looked to be roughly in her mid-thirties. When I asked if it might not be better to age them even further, Lutin told me that would require adjusting their

posture and mannerisms as well. This was ultimately the best we could do for anyone who lacked experience with disguises, which was understandable.

“Jolly good work as always,” Prince Severin remarked in admiration.

“It’s hardly a skill set I can approve of, but it does come in useful once in a while,” Lord Simeon added in a tone that hardly sounded like he was praising Lutin at all.

Snickering, Lutin turned his head. “The best costume in the world won’t save a ham actor. Do you reckon you’re up to the job, Vice Captain?”

“Your concern is unfounded. Guarding important people is my forte.”

“Are you *sure* this is going to work?” Lutin asked. “It’s as if you don’t even realize why you’re forgoing your royal guard uniform.”

All this bickering was taking up valuable time, of which we had nary a second to spare. The spell would only last until the proverbial stroke of midnight, and the clock was ticking. So, knowing that the men would go on forever if left unchecked, I interrupted them. “All right, that’s quite enough. Lord Simeon’s villainous face is his selling point to begin with, so it’s fine.”

“I’m not particularly ‘selling’ anything.”

“Well then,” His Highness began once it was time to see us off, “be careful. And have a good time.”

These kind words made Prince Gracius hesitate for a moment, then bow with a look of genuine happiness. “Thank you.” It was odd to see him in the guise of an older man, but his mild-mannered expressions were the same as ever.

“I leave my prince in your hands,” said Isaac. Unfortunate though this was, he had to stay behind. His presence would make it harder for us to go unnoticed, and, after all, *someone* had to fend off Prince Gracius’s pesky hangers-on. The official excuse was to be that the prince couldn’t receive any visitors today due to ill health.

And so the four of us set off, making toward the city in a House Flaubert carriage. Not long into our journey, shortly after we departed the palace grounds, we were casually joined by a second carriage, which followed at a

distance while keeping close enough so as not to lose sight of us. Its passengers and driver were all knights dressed in plain clothes.

“Lord Lucio, if you show so much of your face, you’ll stand out.” He’d practically been glued to the window all this time.

“Oh,” he murmured, hurriedly drawing back. “Sorry.”

Eva was sitting beside him, with Lord Simeon and I on the opposite bench.

“I’m just so restless, and happy besides,” the prince added. “I can hardly believe this is really happening.”

He looked markedly beyond his years in his disguise, yet his blue eyes still gleamed with boyish excitement. He could scarcely sit still, his hands and legs shaking restlessly, and he continued to turn toward the window again and again. In truth, he was only twenty, after all—just a year older than me. His whole body was brimming with uncontrollable joy and anticipation for our trip.

“I truly didn’t think there was any way, but you actually made it possible. Thank you, Marielle.”

“All I did was ask around. Be sure to properly thank everyone who listened and worked so hard.”

“Of course, I’m grateful to you all. Thank you very much, Vice Captain, Miss Hart. From the bottom of my heart.”

This earnest appreciation was met by a curt response from Lord Simeon, who was focused on the goings-on outside. “No need to thank me. I’m only doing my job.”

His dismissive coldness had Prince Gracius instantly crestfallen. *Honestly, his safety may be important, but you need to focus on the situation at hand too!*

I lightly elbowed my husband in the side and whispered, “Be a little gentler with him, please.”

When he turned to look at me, his handsome face was bewildered. “Is something the matter?”

“Very much so. The knights behind us are keeping an eye on our surroundings, aren’t they? Rather than being so tense at every turn, you could

have an amiable chat with us. Just look. He misunderstood and thinks you're upset, and it's made him hunch up."

Lord Simeon returned his attention to Prince Gracius and, realizing the issue at last, softened his expression. "Apologies," he said after a moment. With us today were neither the subordinates used to being drilled by the Demon Vice Captain nor his closest friend, Prince Severin, who knew him so well. Recalling that he was accompanying the sensitive prince of a foreign land, he did his best to adopt a gentle tone. "His Majesty agreed that it's important for you to take a breather once in a while. Please enjoy yourself to the fullest today. You needn't worry about a thing."

"Oh, well, you see..." The prince's voice dwindled, but I heard the beginnings of an apology. "I must have caused you a great deal of trouble, Vice Captain. I've presumed on Marielle too much. I'm...truly sorry for that."

"No apology necessary."

"But I... I assure you I haven't done anything shameful. Marielle is so obsessed with you that she would never even dream of it. Her consideration for me is kindness and nothing more. You have nothing to fear! I swear!"

The more ardently the prince stressed this point, the more Lord Simeon floundered for a reply. He falteringly began, "No, that's... Honestly, don't worry about it."

I desperately struggled to contain my laughter. When my husband shot me a reproachful gaze, I made sure to return him a smile filled with all the love I could muster.

Eva, who barely knew any Lindenese, only understood that Prince Gracius had thanked her. "I think you're too serious, Prince Gracius. I certainly don't want you to be like my boss, but I think you should let loose maybe...a tenth of his example."

"Eva, Lord Lucio won't be able to follow such a detailed reply," I told her.

The prince chuckled. "Well, I understood the sentiment. Thank you."

"If you added them together and divided by two, it would even out just about right," Lord Simeon contributed.

“Rather generous of you, Vice Captain,” Eva replied. “*A certain someone’s* evildoing is too extreme for that. There would still be nothing praiseworthy about his character.”

This finally broke the ice, and we were all able to have a relaxed chat. Serious conversation between Eva and Prince Gracius required interpreting, which was somewhat inconvenient, but such was life; women capable of serving as guards didn’t exactly grow on trees. Insisting that it would be fine to stick to Lagrangian, Prince Gracius did his best with the broken phrases he could manage. Eva replied in Lindenese where she could as well, albeit only with simple yeses, nos, and thank yous. We had quite a flurry of languages flying about, with even Easdalian mixed in on occasion.

Just as we were discussing where we’d go take a look around first, Lord Simeon issued a warning. “Once we’re outside, both of you need to be very careful about how you address him. His name and his title must be strictly avoided.”

That was only obvious. What point would there be in disgusting him just to turn around and give the game away? “What about Franz, then?” I proposed. “Was that the name of someone you know, perhaps?”

Franz was the pseudonym Prince Gracius had assumed after collapsing in the Maigne region. Since it was the first name that had come to his mind, I thought it might have belonged to someone close to him.

As I expected, he nodded. “Franz was a staff member at Konstantinsburg Palace that I got along well with.”

“Then let’s use it again. If it’s the name of a friend, you’ll respond to it quickly, won’t you?”

After a moment’s thought, he said, “Yes, that makes sense.”

This was rather important, so I made sure to communicate it to Eva. As she would be playing the part of a Lindenese man’s companion, she grew concerned that she should have a Lindenese name as well.

“We could say yours with an accent,” I suggested. “In Linden, ‘Eva’ would be pronounced with more of an ‘F’ sound. Only, won’t that be a bit unnatural if

you can't actually speak Lindenese?"

"There's no need to go so far," Lord Simeon cut in. "We won't be going around advertising your life story to everyone."

Thus, we decided that Eva would use her own name. I assumed that would be fine, as she wasn't as widely known as the prince. While discussing all this, we passed through the noble quarter and rapidly began to approach the commercial district. We even passed in front of the Easdalian embassy. The gate, closed now as usual, was decorated with a wreath made of holly sprigs and pine cones.

As the scenery changed, the carriage and foot traffic around us picked up. Buildings were densely packed together on both sides of the road. Forgetting my earlier words of caution, Prince Gracius put his face right up to the window again. *Well, now that we've made it this far, there's no reason to fuss so much.* Even Lord Simeon let the prince do as he pleased without complaint.

The trees lining the streets were outfitted with adornments, and the stores were impressively decorated as well. Each new magical sight made Prince Gracius's eyes widen further. We were on our way to one of the city's most popular spots, so there were plenty of people about, and the view from the carriage was bustling whichever way he looked.

When we at last alighted at a designated parking area in the center of the city, we were upon Chardin Square. The square was beloved by both locals and tourists alike, and it was decked out for the season with stalls as far as the eye could see. This was one of the "Marchés de Noël" held across the city, where one could not only buy gifts, but also enjoy delicious treats to eat while walking around. At this hour, the stalls had only just opened, so the market wasn't overly crowded yet, but I was certain it would gradually fill with enough people that it would become difficult to even walk in a straight line. If we wanted to browse at our leisure, now was the time, so we set to it straight away.

The selection of wares for sale included ornaments and candles to be used as festive decorations, rare handicrafts, and, of course, clothing and food. Every conceivable good was arranged and piled up in white tents to protect them from the wind. The square, which was relatively ordinary throughout the rest of

the year, was now overtaken with a uniquely jolly atmosphere. For Prince Gracius in particular, it was a whole new world. He took his time at every single stall, gazing upon their merchandise with wonder.

Looking around was enjoyable for me as well. As much as I loved department stores, shopping here was a different kind of thrill. The way the goods were packed together in such a tight space was almost like peering into a toy box.

I stopped at one stall selling lovely little works of porcelain, my eye drawn to a figure of an angel so tiny that it could fit in the palm of my hand. It wasn't delicately sculpted, but rather a round shape with eyes, a nose, and clothing painted on. Still, it was as sweet and heartwarming as something out of a picture book. Just looking at it made me want to have it. I had no particular idea of what I'd do with it—it would just be one more thing to own—but I found myself wavering.

In my pondering, I happened to glance to the side and spy Prince Gracius similarly cradling something at the neighboring stall, deep in thought. I put the angel figurine down and walked over to him. "If something catches your fancy, I'll buy it for you."

In his hands was a scarf that looked like it could be decoratively worn in place of a cravat. He shook his head at my offer, however. "Isaac gave me money."

"Then you should be able to shop to your heart's content, surely."

"I suppose, yes." He paused briefly. "Actually, I was thinking this would suit Isaac quite nicely."

The bright mustard-colored scarf, made of silk with a refined woven pattern, was elegant indeed. Picturing it next to Isaac's face, I had to agree. "That would be lovely. Are you going to buy it for him as a present?"

He frowned. After a moment, he murmured, "Wouldn't that mean I'd be buying him a gift with his money?"

There was something so adorable about his reaction that I couldn't help laughing a little, rude as that was. *So that's why he's so concerned. What a serious man!*

"Imagine yourself in his shoes the moment he receives the gift. Do you think

he would care? When someone buys a present or a souvenir especially for you, it's the feeling behind it that delights. Isn't that how you..."

I'd started speaking with a great deal of confidence, but I suddenly lost steam when I found myself wondering if Prince Gracius had ever experienced the joy of receiving a gift. *He's told me that the Lindenese royal family was kind to him, so I assume they gave him birthday presents, at least...but I can't be sure.*

Anxious that I might have said something insensitive, I faltered, but Prince Gracius smiled kindly as though he'd read my mind. "Ah, yes, my aunt and the others gave me lots of gifts. They brought souvenirs back when they visited other countries too. I was so cynical at the time, believing they were trying too hard to be nice to me. But if they'd simply ignored me and not given me anything, I'm sure I'd have felt much worse." He considered a moment. "Now that I think about it, trying hard to be nice to someone *is* a form of kindness."

"Absolutely." Nodding with relief, I doubled back to my point. "Presents and souvenirs come from the heart. The exact feelings behind them can vary a great deal, but they always carry the same wish—to make the recipient happy. That's why we pick out things that the recipient will like. And when we receive gifts, the best part is knowing that someone was thinking of you. That's how I feel, anyway. So I'm certain that Isaac would be very happy."

This was the first time Prince Gracius had ever walked the city, and the first time he'd ever personally gone shopping. For him to be thinking of Isaac above all else demonstrated just how important the man was to him. If that sentiment was conveyed through a gift, how could Isaac be anything but thrilled?

Now, while I didn't give voice to them, some further questions did occur to me. Where had the money actually come from in the first place? Had Prince Severin given it to Isaac? Or had it perhaps been passed to him upon their departure from Linden?

A cheerful expression found the prince's face. "Thank you. I suppose I'll buy this, then! Oh, but this color would be nice too..."

As soon as he committed to his purchase, he got distracted by something else. *A feeling I know well! That sort of indecision is another of the joys of shopping.*

I took a look myself and tried to help him make up his mind. "There doesn't

seem to be any difference in quality, so there are no wrong answers. In these cases, I think it's better to go with whichever caught your eye first. After all, it jumped out at you because it appealed to you."

"Hmm. But it doesn't matter if it appeals to me, does it? It'll be Isaac wearing it."

"I agree that it'll suit him, though. In terms of your own taste, Lord Lu—I mean, Franz, which do you prefer?"

I hurriedly had to correct myself when I nearly called him by his name. *That was a close one.* I surreptitiously looked over my shoulder, fearing that Lord Simeon might be glaring at me, but he was still standing at the next stall along. Unlike me, he had to focus on our surroundings, apparently leaving him with little attention to spare for our conversation. Eva was similarly hovering nearby, her gaze fixed in a different direction.

"There's no point in deciding based on *my* taste, is there?"

"You could buy one for him and get a matching one for yourself in a different color." I switched back to Lagrangian and asked the shopkeep, "Would you happen to have any with the same pattern in different colors?"

The man produced two scarves, one an almost silvery ash gray and one a deep shade of red. "These would be the closest. The patterns are slightly different, but they're similar."

The keep showed us some other samples as well. When I asked Prince Gracius which he liked, he opted for the red one from the initial pair. "This one, maybe."

"It's a nice color, but don't you think it's a little understated for you, Franz?" I asked. I held it up to his collar to see how it looked on him, but of course, he had the unfamiliar face of a slightly older gentleman at the moment. Even his hair color was wrong, so there wasn't much point in judging the scarf against his current look. Recalling his usual appearance, I observed, "It actually suits you better as you are now."

He laughed, apparently having also forgotten he was in disguise. "I wouldn't want anything too garish, so this should be fine. Plus, it will have a different feel

depending on the outfit it's paired with."

"That's true. And you'd match Isaac, only with a different pattern."

"We'd match, would we?" He paused to picture it. "I can't wait to see Isaac's face." He chuckled again, as if a touch embarrassed, but also with the look of a child about to play a prank. With clumsiness that came from unfamiliarity, he took out his wallet and paid for the scarves.

Unlike a department store, market stalls didn't package their goods in boxes or bags. The keep simply handed him the scarves as they were. Patrons normally brought bags or baskets of their own, but Prince Gracius naturally hadn't, so I decided to take the scarves for now. After all, Lord Simeon and Eva needed to keep their hands free, and it wasn't as though they were a particularly heavy burden.

With Prince Gracius finally initiated in the shopping experience with his first-ever purchase, we moved on. The process of selecting and buying things himself was apparently more fun than he'd imagined, for he then looked around at all the wares on sale with more enthusiasm than before. Even sweets meant for children put a gleam in his eye. What with the huge variety of treats all packed together into colorful displays, I could understand his excitement. He bought some and put them in my shopping bag as well.

Among the offerings were also plenty of snacks meant to be eaten on the spot rather than taken home. We warmed ourselves with some of the famous local mulled wine and walked along with bags of roasted chestnuts in hand. Since Lord Simeon couldn't drink alcohol, I suggested he have some of the hot orange juice, but he declined in favor of keeping a rigorous watch on the world around us.

"I wonder where all the guards are." Snacking on my chestnuts, I glanced around for the knights keeping watch.

Lord Simeon knew exactly where they were, it seemed. "They've split into two groups and are maintaining a reasonable distance." He was eyeing the flow of people around us, not concentrating on more distant crowds.

I took a chestnut and offered it up to him. Noticing this, he opened his mouth and I popped it in. "Then surely you don't need to be quite so vigilant." After

eating a chestnut myself, I fed him another. Someone holding heavy bags brushed past us, and Lord Simeon pulled me in close to prevent a collision. “He looks like an entirely different person. A good friend wouldn’t recognize him, let alone an assassin.”

Prince Gracius was two stalls ahead of us, speaking with the owner, who was selling regional specialties and spoke Lindenese as well. I wondered if he hailed from somewhere near the border. Perhaps the prince had seen some familiar goods that stirred up fond memories.

“Today’s plan was hatched under the strictest confidence,” I added. “Hardly anyone in the palace even knows about it. Isn’t that right?”

“Being vigilant is my job. That’s why I accompanied you today. Besides, I have to be on guard against other crimes, not just assassination. Pickpockets and bag snatchers could be lurking anywhere, and there are those who target these sorts of places to commit violent acts. Don’t you recall those indiscriminate stabbings from three years ago?”

“Yes, I remember...”

As we spoke, Lord Simeon kept watch on Prince Gracius and his perimeter. Eva was right beside the prince, but that apparently wasn’t enough, for my husband’s sharp gaze didn’t let up for a moment.

Quintessential Lord Simeon, I suppose. I know we can rely on him. Even if an assassin does appear, I feel assured that everything will be fine. All the same, he was hardly paying me any mind at all even though we were walking along together. He would ordinarily be fixed on me, smiling kindly and growing a little exasperated at times—responding to me in all sorts of ways. I’d been worried that it might put him in a sour mood for me to be so engrossed in conversation with Prince Gracius all the time, but judging by my husband’s face, he was so focused on the task at hand that he wasn’t affected one bit. I felt lonely. Abandoned somehow.

Not that I can complain, of course. I’m the one who set this up in the first place, so I’ll keep my thoughts to myself. I’ll endure and stay quiet. I will! But still...

When Prince Gracius started going on ahead, Lord Simeon followed. His eyes

were glued to the prince, so he ushered me onward with just the arm he had around me.

Being treated this way does leave me a little unsatisfied. I know that this wasn't meant to be an outing for the two of us. It's for Prince Gracius's sake, not mine. I was also rather relentless in pushing for this to happen, so complaining about it would be entirely contradictory. I held in my grievances, telling myself that I mustn't be selfish.

Instead, as some manner of consolation, I lifted chestnuts to Lord Simeon's lips over and over again. He obediently ate them all, showing no hint of embarrassment. I suspected he wasn't even really conscious of it, since his attention was directed elsewhere. *How dull for him not to react at all. Wait, no! I should treasure this occasion. The Demon Vice Captain is leaving his mouth wide open—defenseless! That's special in its own way, isn't it? And I'm diligently feeding him chestnuts like a mother bird feeding her chicks in the nest.*

Then I happened to look up and spot something. With a short exclamation, I poked Lord Simeon in the back to get his attention. When he finally turned to me, I gestured for him to bend forward, and I stretched up on tiptoes to give him a light kiss. He shot me a quizzical look, and with a grin, I pointed above his head.

When he looked up, his expression changed; I could tell it made sense to him now. We were standing under an arch decorated with all sorts of ornaments—and among them, some sprigs of mistletoe. My husband smiled a little and kissed me back. After that, he returned his attention to Prince Gracius...but when he did, he handed me something.

I took it without a second thought, and only then looked at it properly. It was a small porcelain figurine—the very angel that had caught my eye earlier. I'd forgotten to buy it before moving on, and I hadn't been about to stop Prince Gracius and drag him back there. I'd given up on it, but at some point—who even knew when?—Lord Simeon had bought it for me. *I thought he wasn't paying any attention to me at all, but he managed to catch me off guard and bring me such joy!*

I clung to my husband's arm, stretched upward again, and kissed his cheek.

Though I pulled back straight away to avoid interfering with his guard duties, his large hand gently stroked my head even as he maintained a look of feigned innocence. *Honestly, I swear! I simply love him so much!*

As the joy spread from my grin throughout my whole body, I suddenly felt someone staring holes in my back. I turned to look as surreptitiously as I could manage and caught sight of a familiar face behind one of the tents. *He* had apparently bought a sandwich while on his own patrol and was practically crushing it in his hands.

I assure you that, despite appearances, Lord Simeon isn't shirking his duties! He hasn't abandoned them to enjoy a romantic moment with me—I'm merely having fun on my own. Besides, even if he is on duty, it's better to act like normal passersby rather than project a rigid, overprotective aura, wouldn't you agree?

My inner admonitions seemed to reach him. Despite glaring bitterly, he now bit into his sandwich. Seeing the baguette filled with oodles of melted raclette made me want one as well. *I wonder where they're selling those.*



We stayed at the market and had a lunch of dishes from the various stalls. People at the palace would probably roll their eyes to hear that, but for Prince Gracius, it was a rare and invaluable experience—and this approach gave no reason to worry about poisoning. Just as I'd hoped and planned, he delighted every bit as much in a walking meal as Lord Noel had.

As we finished eating, the market began to grow even more crowded, to the point of being congested. *We should probably start to make our way elsewhere.*

We left the square and returned to our waiting carriage, where we rested our tired legs. For a little while, we went on a tour of the city's sights, taking them in from inside the carriage. That only made sense; not only were we exhausted from all that walking, but it was awfully cold out. It was such a clear, sunny day, however, that the carriage interior was warm and toasty.

"I was wondering if we could go ice skating in Brunet Park, but I don't think it'll be possible in this weather," I volunteered.

"Indeed, the ice might not be solid enough," Prince Gracius replied. "I went skating every year at Konstantinsburg Palace, though. There's a man-made pond on the palace grounds. Come wintertime, they would decrease the amount of water and let it freeze. I used to go there to play with my cousins a lot."

"Oh, really? Then I imagine you're better than I am, Lord Lucio."

"Isaac never got better at it at all. After a while, he would just sit on the sidelines and watch." The prince spoke of his life in Linden with a certain fondness. It seemed his memories weren't all sad and lonely ones. He told me more about the time he *had* gone out during the holiday season as well. "The whole town was in a festive mood, just like here. Everyone looked like they were having so much fun. I felt envious of all the children running about with cheeks bright red from the cold." He paused. "Now I'm envious in a different way. After all, the people in Orta won't be having this much fun, I bet."

Though his eyes were looking through the window at the streets of Sans-Terre, his gaze seemed far more distant. Was he imagining the sight of his homeland—the place he'd been born but never laid eyes on even once?

“Peace has been a distant prospect for a long time. The military regime arrested any critics immediately, and I hear they often never returned home. The country’s economic situation worsened as well, and the people’s quality of life suffered for it,” he murmured, as if mostly talking to himself. “I have to fix all that. I want the people of Orta to have joyous, bountiful Noëls like this one. I’ll need to do everything in my power.”

“I’m sure the day will come. You’re already thinking so much about the people, Lord Lucio, and there are others who will work alongside you to restore the country. One day, they’ll be able to look forward to a wonderful Noël.”

He nodded slowly. “I hope so.”

I hadn’t said all that merely to comfort him; I genuinely believed it. The prince was so young, only twenty years old, and yet such great weight rested on his shoulders. Nevertheless, he wouldn’t let himself falter. He was firmly focused on the road ahead. He now seemed totally unlike the forlorn man I’d first met who was so unsure of himself. He’d found his goal and was taking his first steps toward it.

All the while, I remained keenly aware of how privileged we were with our bustling Noël crowds. We expected this every year as a matter of course, which was a sign of just how stable our kingdom was. Certainly, we had issues of our own. The reformist faction believed that the monarchy should be abolished, and even the royal family said that the times would change before too long. The crime rate increased with the population, and there were areas stricken with poverty. By no means was Lagrange a utopia.

Even so, being able to walk around freely as we pleased was a peerless blessing. Looking out at all the excitement of the city, I reflected anew on the peace we had and how precious that was.

Chapter Seven

As we passed through the theater district, I suggested we go and see a play. We still had plenty of time, so I thought it was a fine idea.

“It wouldn’t start until after sunset,” Lord Simeon replied. “It would end far too late at night for our purposes.”

“You’re thinking of places like the National Theater and the Théâtre d’Art. There are playhouses that put on matinees. They’re not as long as evening performances, so we should be all right.”

I apprised Prince Gracius of some better-known plays and asked what he would like to do. The theater was something he’d only ever experienced once or twice, so he was quite enthusiastic.

“We should ask Prince Severin to take you to the National Theater at some point soon,” I said. “In the meantime, let’s go over there to...” I gave directions to our driver. “Joseph, can you stop at the sixth building along from the one with that large sign?”

We passed by a number of fine theaters, and soon the road was lined with ordinary-looking buildings on both sides. The carriage ultimately came to a stop in front of a tiny four-story building that one would hesitate to believe was a theater.

“Is this the place, my lady?”

“Yes, this is the one. Thank you, Joseph.”

We got out, and Lord Simeon and Eva rather dubiously beheld the establishment. Its exterior made it look more like a plain apartment building than any kind of playhouse. There was an entrance on an upper floor reachable via stairs on the side of the building, and the sign there listing the program was the only indication that it was a theater. The people painted on the sign looked like religious figures, yet there was no solemnity or beauty about them. Instead, there was something of a jesting atmosphere.

Our two guards both looked at me with questions plastered all over their faces, but I decided I should get them inside sooner rather than later. Though I wasn't sure about Eva, I had a sense that Lord Simeon wouldn't allow this if he knew too much in advance. Better to act before his preconceptions got in the way.

Just then, Lord Simeon's expression changed quite dramatically. His eyes widened behind his glasses, but he wasn't looking at me—he was looking *past* me. Before I could turn my head to see what had shocked him so, I heard a strangled gasp. *Hmm? Why does that voice sound so familiar?*

Lord Simeon's handsome face was a mask of menace and his voice was a low rumble. "What are you doing here?"

In a feverish haste, the man behind me replied, "Well, what about you? What are *you* doing— Aha! Marielle! *You* must have brought him here!"

Of course. I knew without even looking. I slowly turned around, and there, as expected, stood Prince Severin and Julianne. *A secret date, is it? As soon as you saw us off, you sneaked out yourselves.*

They were both dressed in the inconspicuous attire of commoners. Julianne was one thing, but His Highness still stuck out like a sore thumb. As much as I admired his effort, this was living proof that a simple change of clothes wasn't enough to change the man.

"Your Highness," Lord Simeon growled, enraged. He'd apparently heard nothing of the prince's outing.

His Highness visibly flinched, but he did his best to shield Julianne by keeping her behind him. *Yes, that's the right way to act.* My eyes met Julianne's and we shared a sly smile in secret.

"I... I brought guards with me! Surely there's nothing so wrong with that, is there? I only wanted to enjoy a rendezvous with Julianne!"

Indeed, there were watchful figures standing some distance away who weren't part of our escort. *I hope it hasn't been too unpleasant having to chaperone a couple in the throes of love...and that they at least had a chance to eat lunch.*

“I understand the sentiment, but why didn’t you consult me beforehand? I’ve told you that we need to take precautions to keep you safe, Your Highness. Or are you trying to suggest that the idea for this excursion only suddenly occurred to you today?”

“I know you too well, Simeon. If I’d told you I wanted to go out on the town too, you would’ve been so concerned that you couldn’t focus on your *current* task. Without a shadow of a doubt, you would have suggested combining it all into one grand day out together to pool guard resources or some such. I would find that thoroughly unplea— No, that’s not what I mean! This is all about Lord Lu—er, you know. I want him to be able to fully enjoy his day!”

As Prince Severin desperately tried to justify himself, it might have been my imagination, but I thought the knights on guard looked somewhat pleased. *I suppose if they’ve been forced to watch over the besotted couple, seeing the Vice Captain tell His Highness off must hold a certain charm.*

“Anyway,” His Highness concluded, “that’s the long and short of it, so you can be on your way. Goodbye!” And, forcibly ignoring the even more intense chill filling the already-frigid air, Prince Severin took Julianne and started toward the theater entrance.

Lord Simeon clapped a hand on His Highness’s shoulder. “It’s all worked out very conveniently indeed. We were just about to go in ourselves.” His mouth twisted into a smirk.

A sound escaped the prince’s throat akin to a chicken being strangled.

“If I had to guess, Miss Julianne recommended coming here, didn’t she? Marielle also wished to pay this theater a visit. No surprise that such close friends would choose the same venue.”

A hateful glare found me. “Marielle...” His Highness muttered in a low snarl.

Honestly, you have no right to blame me for this. It’s not as though I planned it. If you wanted to avoid me that badly, you should have stayed away from anywhere we might run into each other. Oho ho ho ho!

Just as I was chortling on the inside, a real burst of laughter reached my ears. *Who was that?* I turned to look at Prince Gracius, but he only looked back at me

in puzzlement. It wasn't Eva either. That was definitely a man's voice. Having noticed it himself, Lord Simeon turned toward the direction the laughter had come from and spotted a certain someone poking his head out from around the side of the building.

"Oh no," he exclaimed. "You've spotted us."

"You're the one who laughed," Lord Simeon replied.

Beyond the worn-looking wall, we could see the laughing man's magnificent golden mane shimmering in the pale winter sun. And beyond *him* was another man—one with black hair that flicked up playfully at the ends. I hadn't seen him yet, but I already knew he was there.

While Lord Simeon and I stared with glazed eyes, Eva charged forward, her shoulders set with anger. "What in the *world* are you *doing*?!"

The man she dragged out of hiding was, needless to say, Ambassador Nigel. He suffered her strikes with a warm chuckle as Lutin appeared from behind him with a sigh. "You weren't really trying to hide."

"I was too," Ambassador Nigel objected. Then he grunted in pain and said, "Please, Eva, hold back a *little*."

"Did I or did I not tell you to *do your work properly*?! *Why* are you here instead?!"

"Sorry! I just thought it would be entertaining—I mean, I thought I'd stand guard from the shadows as well!"

"You worthless gadabout!"

Leaving Ambassador Nigel to take his usual licks, Lutin walked over to us, maintaining a breezy air in the face of the stony looks that met him. Sighing again, he said, "My mistake was teaming up with him."

"Have you been following us all along?" I asked, putting my hands on my hips. "Watching us?"

If he'd wanted to come along, he could have just said so from the beginning. To know he'd been lurking around corners and observing us in secret made me rather uncomfortable.

He replied with a jovial smile, “No need to be upset, is there? It’s just as the ambassador said. We’ve been providing extra security.” He proceeded to explain that if he’d helped us and not seen the job through to the end, Prince Liberto would be cross with him if anything went awry. I was sure that much wasn’t a lie, but I could only shrug. I was equally sure this was mostly for his own entertainment.

Unable to keep himself from taking a thoroughly unnecessary jab, Lutin turned a sardonic smile on Lord Simeon. “I thought the Vice Captain would spot us, but his senses were surprisingly dull. I thought guarding important people was supposed to be your forte. Getting distracted, are we?”

Lord Simeon wasn’t about to let himself be cowed, however. “If you’d attempted anything, I’d have noticed you then. Still, I must acknowledge your ability to hide yourself and sneak about so. You’re a foreboding presence indeed.”

“Excuse me? ‘Foreboding’?”

“Yes—dark *and* foreboding,” I added.

“What are you talking about?!”

Eva came back over, pulling Ambassador Nigel along with her. All of a sudden, our small group had grown rather large. His Highness was still scowling at having his date interrupted, while Lord Simeon and Lutin were glowering at one another. I had no idea what to do amid all the chaos. Exchanging a glance with Prince Gracius, I was on the verge of sighing when the door to the theater flew open.

“You lot,” called a rough voice. “If you’re not coming in, can you loiter somewhere else, please? I can’t have you blocking the entrance.” A man of maybe forty stood in the doorway. He wasn’t as muscular as Dario, Lutin’s right-hand man, but he was tall and sturdily built. There was an angry glare on his face, but upon seeing us, his somewhat drooping eyes grew as wide as saucers. He put a hand to his cheek like a maiden and his voice suddenly rose in pitch. “What on earth?! You’re all absolute stunners!”

All of us drew back at once. Lord Simeon, Lutin, Eva, and even Ambassador Nigel’s faces stiffened. Only Prince Gracius, who couldn’t understand

Lagrangian spoken so quickly, stared in confusion.

“Are you actors from some other theater?” the man asked. “Oh, were you hoping to join our troupe? I’ll have you know that good looks aren’t enough to get a spot here. Care to show me your acting skills?”

“No, we’re—”

“Ability is what matters here. You don’t need to be amazing to start off with, though. I’ll put you through your paces once you’re on board. Anyway, for now, just come in.”

Without hesitation, he grabbed Lord Simeon and started dragging him inside. “Wait!” he said, his voice wavering. “That’s not why we’re— Marielle!”

When I stepped out from behind my flustered husband, the man’s droopy eyes looked at me. “Oh! You’re a familiar little mouse.”

“Good afternoon, Bruno.”

As we greeted each other, Julianne stepped forward to join me. “It’s been quite some time.”

Bruno let out a sigh of undisguised exasperation. “You two... Standing among such ludicrously handsome men, you only look even *more* plain.”

“Is that how you greet us again after so long?” Julianne replied.

“We’re plain today on purpose!” I added.

When I sullenly pouted, Bruno suddenly smiled and released Lord Simeon. He then embraced both Julianne and me at once. “It *has* been ages! I thought you’d abandoned us. Especially you, Little Miss Glasses! I haven’t seen your face in almost a year. I thought you might have gotten yourself married off to some faraway house.”

“I did get married, but not to a faraway house. This gentleman here is my husband.”

“Really?! How’d you land a catch like him?! More to the point, are you even old enough to get married?”

“By the way, Julianne’s engaged as well.”

“Honestly, I wanted to tell him,” she objected. “Don’t go telling him on your own.”

“Dear oh dear,” Bruno lamented. “They grow up so fast. Is your fiancé that suitor you came here with before?” He looked around for a moment. “Ah, there he is! Well, congrats to both of you!”

As the three of us chattered excitedly, the others could do nothing but stand and watch. Then, one by one, more men emerged from inside.

“Bruno, what’s all this fuss in the doorway?”

“Oh, it’s those young ladies! How long has it been? I hope you’re doing well!”

“My oh my, such beauty! Such dazzling beauty before my eyes! Where did you get these fine, fine men?!”

“That woman is awfully dashing too, isn’t she? I can feel my heart beginning to race!”

I could see everyone breaking out in a cold sweat, overwhelmed by the frenetic comments.

Among our group, only Prince Severin took the offensive and held his head high. With a chuckle, he said, “How does it feel to experience this frightful shock for yourselves?” I could imagine he’d been in quite a stupor the first time he came here himself. He clapped Lord Simeon on the shoulder. The tables had certainly turned now. His voice had a triumphant ring to it, albeit with a hint of desperation as well. “You said you were just about to go in, didn’t you? Jolly good, then—let’s all see a play together. It will be simply capital.”

“Come right on in, all eight of you!” a gruff yet shrill voice beckoned from the wide-open door.

“Welcome to the Neighboring Moneylender!” came another of the same timbre.

Even Lutin, who tried to escape, was caught and roped in. Lord Simeon looked as though he was about to pass through the gates of hell. Still, everyone was forced inside whether they liked it or not.

The play itself was standard fare at its heart. The theater had taken the

familiar Noël story that everyone knew from school and church and reworked it into a comedy piece. The gist was the same, however, so Prince Gracius could understand it without too much need for interpreting.

The Neighboring Moneylender was such a small playhouse that the seats were right in front of us as soon as we entered and the stage was just across the room. If I had to point out one difference compared to other theaters, it would be that the entire cast here was composed of men. Given their characteristic manner of speaking, the venue was sometimes mistaken for an establishment catering to...particular tastes...but in truth, the players were serious about their acting craft.

There was no lie in Bruno's claim that ability was what mattered here. It takes a truly talented performer to make a comedy *feel* like a comedy and really make an audience laugh, and by the time the play was over, everyone's expressions had transformed completely. We each had our own impressions to share, but we all had a great time.

By the time we stepped back outside, the sky was beginning to darken. The hour the spell would break was fast approaching. When I asked Prince Gracius how he'd like to conclude his day out, he answered without any real hesitation.

"I'd like to go to a church."

"A church?" I replied. "The cathedral, you mean?"

The cathedral on a sandbank of the Latour was an icon of Sans-Terre. It was typically the first spot tourists to the city sought out, and I had naturally proposed it earlier when discussing today's outing. Prince Gracius had ruled it out, however, feeling there were other destinations he'd enjoy more. *Did he change his mind, perhaps? What a shame—if we'd known earlier, we could have gone to the choral mass.*

Lord Simeon pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. We could still make it if we hurried, although I didn't think we'd have much time to look around.

But Prince Gracius shook his head. "Not the cathedral in particular. Any church will do. Hmm... One that's not too crowded, ideally."

“One that’s not a tourist attraction?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

So he wasn’t interested in impressive architecture and stained glass, but rather a place of prayer. Was he recalling the church that had helped him so much in Mauge, perhaps? I could only imagine that had been a crossroads for Prince Gracius. Prior to that, he’d always been led by the nose by the people and circumstances surrounding him. Unable to take it any longer, he’d fled—but with no one to turn to, he’d run himself ragged to the point of collapse. In his hour of need, it was the priest of that small church who’d saved him.

Though he’d undoubtedly known there was more to “Franz” than met the eye, the priest was content simply to watch over him—and offer advice, I’m sure—for as long as he needed. For the first time in his life, Prince Gracius had found himself somewhere he didn’t know a single soul. He could stop and collect his thoughts for once. Admittedly, it wasn’t long afterward that he met me, Lord Simeon, and His Highness, and he was targeted by the assassins following him, but nonetheless, his time at that church had been a fresh start for Prince Gracius.

Perhaps, reflecting on that turning point, he wishes to talk to God again about something. I surveyed the surrounding streets. “The closest church would be...”

“Isn’t there one just over there?” Julianne recalled. She’d thoroughly abandoned the idea of her secret date and joined our group, as had His Highness, who wore a look of profound resignation.

“Oh yes, so there is. A tiny one, though.”

In fact, it was so small and plain that it was easy enough to overlook. Its only attendees were the local congregation. I’d never personally been inside the building.

“That doesn’t matter,” the prince insisted. “But will they let passersby in?”

“It’s a house of God. Its doors will be open to all.”

After a pensive moment, a faint smile formed on Prince Gracius’s lips. “Of course. That’s right.”

Our sizable group proceeded toward the church. We now had Julianne—and thus His Highness—in tow, and Lutin and Ambassador Nigel followed along as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The eight of us stood out even with Prince Gracius in disguise—especially when all the men were so dazzlingly handsome! Everyone we passed was staring. *Their gazes are focused on Lord Simeon, at least, so perhaps the effort to hide Prince Gracius is still a success.*

“We’ve become quite a crowd,” I whispered.

Prince Gracius smiled in amusement. “You’re right about that. But it’s good fun, I think. I’m really getting that sense of what it’s like to go out purely for pleasure.”

Ambassador Nigel was still getting a tongue-lashing from Eva, while Lord Simeon and Lutin were still glaring daggers at one another. We weren’t exactly a harmonious group merrily enjoying each other’s company, and yet Prince Gracius was absolutely correct. Lord Simeon was with us for security purposes, and Lutin and Ambassador Nigel had joined for ostensibly the same reason, but there was no formality or reservation to jump in as we all chatted away. It truly did feel like a group of friends had come together.

This was likely a new experience for Prince Gracius. He’d never known the simple pleasure of wandering wherever his whimsy took him. Merely walking along an ordinary street appeared to make him very happy. I’d been dumbfounded when Lutin and Ambassador Nigel joined us, wondering what on earth they were up to, but their company ultimately proved to be quite a blessing.

This assembly of capable combatants was also quite reassuring from a security standpoint, and we arrived at the church without incident. Small though it was, its doorway was festively decorated with holly and ornaments. Inside, a display of wooden dolls recreated the scene of the holy birth. The paint on the figures was well worn in places, suggesting they had been cared for and passed down over many long years.

On the far side of the nave, behind the altar, was a stained-glass window, albeit a small one. The evening light gave it a reddish glow; no doubt it would have a different ambience altogether in full daylight. It was still a bit too early

for evening prayers, so there was no sign of the priest or any members of the congregation.

Prince Gracius walked to the center of the room and took a seat on one of the pews. The rest of us sat down nearby. This was no place to be making noise, so we all kept our mouths closed and prayed in silence. Lutin was the only one who leaned back rather than bending over in prayer, but even he refrained from his usual sardonic remarks in this reverent place.

I pray for this wonderful day not be the last of its kind—for such days to continue. I pray for Orta to have true peace, for many people to help Prince Gracius, and for him to build a family of his own. A moment later, I added, And for Lord Simeon and I to share endless joy, now and forever, and for our friends to live in happiness too.

Hopefully God doesn't get exasperated at me praying for so much at once. In the end, though, a prayer isn't just a one-sided request. It's also a promise to God that I'll work hard to achieve those goals. A wish for the road there to be bathed in light.

Prince Gracius sat still for a long time, staring at the altar. There was no form of heating and the front door was still open, so I gradually grew chilly. Without making a show of it, I nestled up close to Lord Simeon beside me. Across the aisle from us, Prince Severin tried to put an arm around Julianne too, but she rebuffed him. *Don't be discouraged, Your Highness. It's only because God is watching.*

The rays of sun filtering into the room faded, giving way to the dark of the oncoming night. The priest finally entered holding a lamp. He used it to light the candles, illuminating the church again before it gradually began to fill with members of the congregation. People who appeared to be stopping by on their way home from work all bowed to the priest before taking their seats in prayer.

Prince Gracius, meanwhile, stood up at this point.

"Was that what you needed?" I asked in a hushed tone.

He nodded in reply, so the rest of us rose and quietly exited the church without disturbing the other worshippers.

The red of the sky receded as twilight rapidly set in. The streetlamps were already lit, making the avenues appear to glow. The city would only get more beautiful from here on, but sadly, it was time for us to return. We made our way to our carriages and set out for the palace.

After such an active day, the swaying of the carriage made me sleepy. Prince Gracius was worn out as well, no doubt. He idly gazed out of the window, watching the lights of the city disappear into the distance.

In contrast to when we'd first left that morning, no one spoke; all was quiet inside the carriage. I suspected that, having spent the day tense and alert, Lord Simeon and Eva were now filled with relief. I was personally filled with the reluctant sadness of an enjoyable time coming to a close, mixed with the sweet solace of knowing I'd be home soon. At the end of any outing came a pleasant sense of fatigue and anticipation for next time. For Prince Gracius, "next time" might be a distant prospect, but I was sure it would come eventually.

Lord Simeon's voice slipped gently into my ear, and I felt my shoulder being shaken. "...elle. Marielle."

Apparently I had given in to the weariness and fallen asleep. I sat up and covered my mouth as I yawned.

"We've reached the palace," he informed me.

Only at this point did I fully return to consciousness. Looking outside, I saw that our carriage had entered the turnaround and was about to stop. "Oh," I exclaimed, somewhat flustered. "Oh dear. My apologies."

Prince Gracius smiled at me from his seat opposite. I turned away in embarrassment over falling asleep in front of him, but something caught my eye and I looked back at him again. He was his usual self once more, sans wig and all the other trappings of his disguise.

"Lord Lucio, you're back to normal."

"Well, returning looking like that would only cause more problems."

It would have meant entering the palace as an unknown outsider, which would indeed have been rather awkward. To avoid precisely that, he explained, Lutin had given him some makeup remover so that he could clean himself up

prior to our arrival. Eva was putting away a greasepaint-stained cloth that he must have used to wipe his face.

“Thank you for today, Marielle,” said Prince Gracius. “You’ve all provided me with experiences I’ve never had before in my life. Vice Captain, Miss Hart, you must be exhausted after today. Sorry for dragging you along.”

“Not at all,” Eva replied. “I had a lot of fun. I’m only sorry that my boss butted in.”

“It’s no inconvenience,” Lord Simeon concurred. “I’m used to escorting Prince Severin on a daily basis.”

The carriage came to a halt. His Highness’s had returned alongside ours, so people had come outside to receive him.

“We’re here,” I said to Prince Gracius. Conscious that the spell was now broken, I asked him, “Did this help you relax at all?” The day had passed so quickly. Though it didn’t feel like nearly enough, I hoped that he’d at least been able to make some good memories.

“Definitely. It was a lot of fun. Buying food in the square and eating it as we walked, seeing a play so close to the stage alongside other audience members... It was one new thing after another, and it was all so interesting. The day went by in a flash. I don’t think I’ll forget this as long as I live. From the bottom of my heart, I’m truly grateful.”

His tone underlined the importance of every word to him. The joy on his face showed just how satisfied he was, how deeply thankful that I’d kept pushing to make this possible. He made sure to acknowledge everyone else for their assistance again as well.

The door opened, and Eva and Lord Simeon got out first. Prince Gracius then rose from his seat. I could see Isaac waiting outside. When I stepped down from the carriage, shopping bag in my hands, the cold made a shiver run through me. Snow was falling in large flakes from the now pitch-black sky, heavily enough that I could picture it settling. I pulled up my hood to cover my head from the ceaseless snowfall.

“Welcome back,” said Isaac as he approached.

Just as Prince Gracius was about to reply with a smile, a group of men pushed past Isaac from behind. “Your Highness! Are you all right?!”

“You’re returning so late! We’ve been worried about you!”

These men, speaking Ortan phrases that I could follow with some difficulty, were—needless to say—the aspiring hangers-on. As Isaac and the rest of us watched in surprise, they surrounded Prince Gracius as if to cart him away.

They began speaking too quickly for me to make out very much. However, based on their expressions, their tones, and the fragmentary words I could pick up, they seemed to be annoyed with him. *So they found out about our excursion. Are they upset that he didn’t take them with him, perhaps?* I looked around, wondering if anyone present might understand Ortan. Lutin seemed a likely candidate, but he’d vanished at some point.

Sensing what I was thinking, Lord Simeon whispered into my ear, “They’re objecting to the fact that they weren’t informed of today’s plans.”

I looked up at my husband’s pretty face. “You can speak Ortan?”

“I can. As can His Highness.”

Watching the commotion from a short distance away, His Highness held a touch of bitterness on his face. *Impressive as always, both of them. I’ll have to hurry up and reach a conversational level too.*

“Weren’t they told that the prince wouldn’t be receiving any visitors today?” I commented curiously.

“It seems they forced their way into his quarters and discovered he wasn’t there. They’re angry that he behaved foolishly when he’s at risk of assassination.”

“Well, it’s true that he lied to them, but are these men really in a position to directly admonish Lord Lucio?”

“I wonder.” Lord Simeon turned a frosty gaze on the clamoring group. His loathing was entirely undisguised, just as it had been on Ambassador Nigel’s face at the tea party.

I understood the reason for that. The men’s objections weren’t born of worry.

Their expressions and attitudes showed no respect for Prince Gracius whatsoever. Rather, they had the air of people telling off their own sons or subordinates—and with no affection at that, only rage. It was plain that they looked down on him.

Prince Gracius himself no doubt felt this more keenly than anyone. Though I was sure he was most displeased with them, he meekly listened and apologized. Given his almost complete lack of connections in Orta, it was important for him to avoid making enemies while trying to build a following. He couldn't push away even thoroughly disrespectful, power-hungry allies.

After somehow managing to calm them down, he turned to us with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you. I worried them by going out without saying anything."

It wasn't a good idea for us to offer commentary under the circumstances. Even these unpleasant boors might become long-term associates of Prince Gracius, and it wasn't outsiders' place to interfere. I thus found myself at a loss over what to say, so I formed the vaguest question I could. "Prince Gracius, are you...all right?"

His expression made it clear that he understood my real concern. "Yes. I'll explain it all later. Thank you so much for today—truly. I'll be in touch again when things have calmed down."

The hangers-on were glaring at us hatefully, still looking ready to flare up at any moment. Wary of provoking them, Prince Gracius hurriedly said his goodbyes to us. When he walked off, the Ortan men followed behind him as if it were their proper place.

Watching them go, I remembered what I was holding. "Prince Gracius, don't forget these!"

As I called out, I stepped forward and quickly retrieved the goods stowed in my shopping bag: two scarves and a parcel of sweets. (I had the figurine as well, but that was mine.) These were the presents he'd purchased today for the first time in his life. Getting them to Isaac now would be far more enjoyable than me passing them to him another time. I was sure Prince Gracius wanted to give his confidant the matching scarf himself.

Prince Gracius turned back, and I made to approach him. Yet, the very next moment, a forceful swing of an arm sent the items flying out of my hands.

The shock made me stagger backward, but Lord Simeon ran at lightning speed to catch me. “Marielle!”

For a second, my mind couldn’t follow what had happened. In surprise, I looked up at the man who’d struck me. It was one of the hangers-on. He’d thrust himself in my way, his scowling face so full of animosity that it scared me.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lord Simeon growled in a tone that resembled a savage beast. I had no doubt his eyes were blazing fiercely.

The man before him recoiled slightly, but then, with a snort, he put on a bold front and replied in awkwardly pronounced Lagrangian, “I could ask the same thing. You might be laboring under some misunderstanding, but kindly avoid approaching His Highness in such an overfamiliar way. Not to mention that giving him such worthless junk is the height of rudeness.”

Lord Simeon’s arms held me tight, his large body shielding me, protecting me from the man’s malice. “The rudeness is entirely yours,” my husband told him. “What are you suggesting is wrong with my wife’s behavior? And even if there were a problem, it wouldn’t justify such violence. Is using force against someone weaker than yourself your idea of propriety?!”

The man scoffed. “Even a woman is capable of concealing a weapon. You can’t expect us to stand idly by while she approaches Prince Gracius.”

“You have some nerve to treat my wife like a common hoodlum. Which of us is laboring under a misunderstanding, pray tell? In speaking that way, you’ve insulted House Flaubert as well.”

“Flaubert? Never heard of it. A fine house, I bet! But how it’s viewed in *your* country has nothing to do with *us*. And if such an attitude prevails, then—”

“Stop!” Prince Gracius cried, interrupting the argument. Though he couldn’t have fully understood the Lagrangian being exchanged, I was sure the gist of it was perfectly clear. With an uncharacteristically forceful manner, he pushed the hanger-on back. “This woman has done me a great kindness! I won’t allow you to treat her so insolently!”

Though I strained, I could only make out portions of the man's reply. "Your Highness, I understand that she...you when you... Still, taking...of you when...makes me question...really on your side or..."

Lord Simeon covered my ears with his hands. "You don't have to listen to this. It's pure drivel that will only sully your ears."

Prince Gracius protested as best he could, but the man showed not the slightest sign of conceding. Instead, he grew even more irritated at the prince's lack of obedience. The other Ortans jumped in as well.

It's no use. They won't listen at all, no matter what anyone says. After all, they are the sort of people to barge in uninvited and impose. They're not likely to back down easily. In Lord Simeon's arms, I heaved a sigh.

Just then, a remarkably loud and resolute voice rang out, stunning everyone into silence. "That's enough!"

That reflexively made me straighten up. Prince Severin walked over, his boots clacking against the ground with every step. Their mouths at last closed, the Ortans all turned to face him. His Highness met their looks with a stern expression. "On the matter of today's excursion, it was a plan approved by myself and His Majesty. Careful preparations were made to ensure there was no danger, and security was deployed. If you have objections, I ask you to raise them via the proper channels."

In a majestic tone, he pronounced each and every word in Ortan so distinctly that even I could follow it effortlessly. Unyielding as he sounded, he spoke slowly, never raising his voice with emotion.

"Before disparaging others, you ought to learn your own place. You may have been granted permission to enter our palace, but that doesn't mean you are free to behave however you wish. Nor would I expect Prince Gracius to permit you to surround him and speak to him in this manner. What could possibly give you the right to treat your prince with such disrespect?"

The man opened his mouth as if to rebut immediately, but he swallowed his words with a grunt, evidently realizing that he couldn't snap at His Highness the Crown Prince of all people. Though his anger was still clear on his face, he listened in silence for now.

“I don’t recall receiving any communication from Orta about you. To what extent should we be entertaining a group composed of neither official envoys nor invited guests? I’ve tolerated your presence for the prince’s benefit, but if you’re disparaging even of him, I’m inclined to remove you. Well?”

Though still silent, the Ortans were grinding their teeth in resentment. Prince Severin had only spoken the truth, however. Their supercilious behavior would have been completely inappropriate under normal circumstances; having been given an inch, they’d taken a mile. And only now that they’d been told point-blank that their host could expel them if he so chose did the men finally appear to realize the precarity of their position.

That said, malcontent remained on their faces. They showed no sign of any remorse. *I almost admire their consistency, frankly.*

His expression softening in an instant, His Highness turned to Prince Gracius. “You must be tired, Lord Lucio. Why don’t you retire to your chambers and get some rest? We’ll send your guests away for now. If they’d like to speak with you, they can visit again another time.”

Though His Highness was addressing his fellow prince, his words were a clear warning to the hangers-on—they were to leave at once. Prince Severin additionally summoned royal guards who pointedly surrounded Prince Gracius. The hangers-on’s faces stiffened under the glares of the well-built military officers. I stifled a laugh.

Prince Gracius’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry for causing such a scene,” he said after a moment, even though he was hardly the one at fault. His Highness shook his head kindly and put an arm across his back, gently ushering him toward the door. “My apologies, Marielle, Vice Captain. And...today really was good fun. I was so happy. Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome,” I replied. “I had a lovely time as well. I hope you can join us again when you have the chance.”

“Yes. Thank you.” Departing with a bow, he entered the main palace building alongside His Highness.

Left behind and unable to follow their prince, the hangers-on lingered as if the idea of obediently retreating was repugnant to them. Just as their hostile

expressions, directed our way, made me fear that another skirmish might break out, Ambassador Nigel sauntered over. With laughter in his voice, he remarked, “His Highness the Crown Prince certainly knows when to step in, doesn’t he? Any potential harm to his wife makes the Vice Captain’s blood boil, so His Highness is more dependable in these situations.”

Lord Simeon’s face became a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment. I was slightly offended on his behalf, to be honest. *Lord Simeon is very dependable, thank you! He came to my defense, and I was very happy about that. You royal guards all think he’s a fine husband too, don’t you? Kindly refrain from rolling your eyes.*

“Even so,” the ambassador added, his honey-colored eyes fixed firmly on the Ortans, “I’m surprised to hear that you’re not familiar with House Flaubert. The Flauberts are extremely well known in *my* homeland, and Prince Gracius learned of them living in Linden. If you go back far enough, they have blood ties to several royal families, and on an economic front, they’re traders with great influence in numerous countries. For you not to know such a historic and influential earldom is...well, remarkable, to say the least!”

This was met with silence. Despite being made fun of, the Ortans could hardly object. Regardless of whether he truly hadn’t known or he’d merely meant it as an insult, one of their number had blithely declared himself ignorant of something he most certainly *should* have known if he wished to serve the future Ortan king. He had magnificently fallen into a trap of his own laying. Likely realizing their disadvantage, the group summarily disappeared.

The snow and the frigid night breeze blew straight across the now rather empty driveway. The chill had abated enough that I’d nearly forgotten about it, but it now returned with a vengeance. Noticing me shivering, Lord Simeon put his arms around me again.

“I’m so sorry for all this unpleasantness,” Isaac said, bowing low.

I only then realized that he hadn’t accompanied Prince Gracius. The reason he’d stayed behind, however, became apparent before I could ask. He began picking up the items that had been knocked out of my hands. The impact had split open the bag of sweets, spilling its contents everywhere. Chocolates,

marshmallows, nougat, and countless other treats were scattered across the settling snow.

“I should have tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t have listened to me. My father was no more than a chamberlain of common birth, so they’d only have sneered and said I should know my place. In spite of my years of service at the prince’s side, I’m in no position to do anything useful.” As he hung his head and slumped his shoulders, snow began to settle on those as well.

“There was no need for you to stand up to them alone,” Lord Simeon replied, letting go of me and moving to assist Isaac. “Given their attitude, they wouldn’t have listened to anyone.”

I hurriedly went to help gather up the sweets as well, but the work was mostly done by then. Some pieces had rolled farther away, but Julianne collected those and brought them over to us. “They were all wrapped up, so they’ll still be fine to eat.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “Are you sure you shouldn’t have gone with His Highness?”

“Quite. He apologized to me before entering the fray. He decided we’d have to part for today, since he needs to stay with Prince Gracius for now.” She paused a moment before adding, “This gave me a chance to see an impressively imposing side of him, so I’m satisfied.”

She deposited the sweets she was carrying into the bag Isaac was holding. The scarves had been flung out into the snow as well, but he neatly folded them up again. He then held out one last item, which I saw was the angel figurine. *This must have fallen out as well.*

“It’s broken...” One of the wings had snapped off the dainty porcelain figure. *And after Lord Simeon went out of his way to buy this for me...*

When I restrained a sigh and went to take it, another hand reached out first and picked up the doll. I watched as Lord Simeon put it in his own pocket. *How awful for him to have to see his present for me get broken right in front of him.*

Holding the bag and scarves like precious treasure, Isaac promised, “I’ll pass these on to my liege later.”

“Thank you...although, even if they haven’t gotten dirty, they were on the ground.”

“It’s fine. Prince Gracius won’t mind.” A smile formed on his timid-looking face. Even though he was older than Lord Simeon, he didn’t give the impression of stouthearted dependability—perhaps his lack of confidence was making him appear that way. Still, to Prince Gracius, he was an anchor of emotional support. No one could ever accuse him of being useless. The gifts in his hands would surely convey the prince’s feelings.

After Isaac left, the rest of us returned to our respective carriages and departed from the palace. Lord Simeon and I rode home without much in the way of conversation. This should have been a pleasant capstone to our outing, but that encounter put a damper on it at the very end. Even so, looking back on it, the day had been thoroughly enjoyable overall. Prince Gracius had been thrilled, and I could take satisfaction in knowing we’d made this plan and carried it out successfully.

I leaned on Lord Simeon’s shoulder, wanting to feel the warmth and security of his presence.

“Are you worn out?” he asked.

“Somewhat, yes. You worked really hard today, though. I’m truly grateful that you indulged me and went ahead with this.”

I closed my eyes and sleep began to come over me again. A whole day of activity had left me drained. Despite knowing that we’d be home soon, I couldn’t fend off the drowsiness.

Putting his arms around me as I teetered on the verge of drifting off, my husband stirred slightly. I felt the gentle warmth of his lips brush mine, and a sweet whisper tickled my ear. “I’m glad I was able to please you. I safeguarded your special day, didn’t I?”

“Of course.” Forcing my heavy eyelids open, I looked at Lord Simeon. His light blue eyes were right in front of me, and I wanted to convey to him the gratitude deep in my heart. I fought to ensure I said my piece before I fell asleep. “You were by our side the entire time, meaning we had nothing to worry about. If not for you, fear would have kept us from enjoying ourselves no matter what

measures were in place.” After a moment’s thought, I added, “Though that means I burdened you with all of the worry instead.”

“That’s my duty. As long as I carry it out effectively, I’m pleased too.” His smile widened.

Embraced by his tender touch, I let my eyelids fall again. “I’m sorry...for breaking the doll.”

“It broke in a straightforward manner, so it won’t be a problem.”

Warm kisses found my lips, my cheeks, my forehead, my eyes.

“I don’t mind if it’s broken,” I replied. “Either way, please give it to me later.”

“I’ll repair it first.” His voice was gentle through and through. How could I ever hope to repay this man who was so very good to me?

I searched for the words. “About my present for you... I consulted with a craftsman and had him make it with my assistance. It has a touch of my handiwork in it.” Despite my best efforts, this childish statement was all I could muster.

“Something to look forward to,” he replied. “I wonder what it will be.”

There has to be another way I can bring Lord Simeon joy. Something more than that. Happy as I was, I was also deeply concerned about what I could possibly do for him.

It wasn’t long, however, before I found myself in quite the opposite situation, leaving me at my wits’ end once again.

Chapter Eight

It all started on Noël Eve. One week after our secret outing, the much anticipated holiday was finally upon us. Noël celebrations begin the night before with family and relatives. The dinner table is laid with a special feast, and presents are tucked under the fir tree for the following morning. The mantelpiece above the fire is traditionally decorated with a model of a stable with dolls of the holy child surrounded by people, sheep, and angels inside. Unlike the wooden ones at the church, ours were made of porcelain. Though small, they were elaborately made, and if you looked closely, they all had their own individual facial expressions.

While celebrating the birth of God, however, House Flaubert was also holding a birthday party for Lord Noel. “Happy sixteenth birthday, Noel!” said his father, leading a toast with champagne; Lord Simeon alone drank sparkling water instead.

We’ll be going out after this, so I mustn’t get too tipsy. Perhaps I can have some more after we get back.

“Thank you,” Lord Noel replied. He pointedly added, “Although that won’t actually be until the day after tomorrow.”

Everyone laughed at his remark. As he said, he’d actually been born the day after God, but what was wrong with celebrating both at once tonight? It only made a festive evening all the more enjoyable.

“I tried very hard to give birth to you a day sooner,” his mother commented, “but you just wouldn’t come out.”

With Lord Noel’s mild objection dismissed, the party began in earnest. Since Noël presents wouldn’t be opened until the following morning, only those meant for Lord Noel’s birthday were brought out. A maid had to roll in the gift from Lord Simeon and me on a cart. We pulled back the thin cloth softly draped over it, revealing an elaborate model ship so large that no single person could carry it alone.

Lord Noel leaped out of his seat and bounded over to it. “Amazing!” There was no artifice here; his joy was genuine. *Apologies, Lord Noel, but seeing your eyes sparkle at the sight of this model makes you look every bit a child still. Still, I’m sure as time goes by, you’ll develop a more grown-up and sophisticated bearing. You already seem to have gotten slightly taller!*

Other gifts had arrived from faraway Enciel Island, courtesy of his grandfather, Lord Donatien, and his other brother, Lord Adrien. His parents, meanwhile, had procured him a carriage especially for his own use. As they explained how he’d need it now that he’d be going out more on his own, I couldn’t help reflecting on how different our worlds were. At my family home, we had but one ordinary carriage and one covered wagon, both to be shared by the entire household.

The twofold celebration was enhanced by a meal that showed off the chef’s fine talents. The food was so decadent and delicious, and the atmosphere so enticing, that I couldn’t help eating far too much. *My stomach is full to bursting, but it’s all right—at least we’re going out after this.* After taking the time to enjoy our dinner, we got into a two-horse carriage large enough to hold us all and departed for the night’s special mass.

We arrived at the same church where Lord Simeon and I had been married at the height of spring, which was bustling with holiday visitors just like us. Since it was close to the noble district, the majority were upper crust, which almost gave the gathering the feel of a social event. We greeted many familiar faces as we made our way inside. After using the holy water, we walked further in to find seats. The church was filled with solemnity and quiet joy—at least, that was the impression I got until I detected something strange.

I could feel eyes on us. People were whispering to one another loudly enough to hear, though not to make out the words. It didn’t have the air of mere curiosity. Rather the opposite. It seemed gossip was being spread—about me. I was all too familiar with this situation. Immediately after Lord Simeon and I got engaged, I’d encountered it everywhere I went. Indeed, it had been just like this, hadn’t it?

I found it quite odd under the circumstances, however. It felt awfully belated. *I could understand all the talk before, but no one should be so openly spiteful*

now. They should be speaking ill of me in secret, careful to prevent us from hearing about it. No one is in a position to make an enemy of House Flaubert, so even if they dislike us, they should be acting cordially in public.

I truly felt as though I'd gone back in time a year. Evidently, I wasn't the only one who thought it was peculiar. "Something seems rotten," Lord Noel said from beside me, letting his reaction show. "Everyone keeps looking this way and whispering."

"Be quiet," Countess Estelle admonished, though she had of course noticed it too. She exchanged a glance with Earl Maximilian and cocked her head in puzzlement.

Lord Simeon wrapped an arm around my shoulders. He must have known that it would take far more than this to hurt my feelings, but he wanted to protect me nonetheless. Since this wasn't the place for conversation, I expressed my thanks to him with a smile. He responded with a kind expression of his own.

It's all right—I'm perfectly fine. Compared to the vitriol I faced a year ago, this is a walk in the park. It's not as though they're coming for me in full force.

All the same, I was baffled. It would have been one thing if I were alone, but the whole family had assembled, and people were speaking ill of us within earshot. I couldn't imagine what was afoot.

"Marielle!" a hushed voice called to me—one I knew very well indeed. I turned and saw my parents slipping between the pews to hurry over to me. My older brother was behind them as well.

My eyes were inevitably drawn to my father's stomach first of all. *Is there really no way for him to pull that in?* With his protruding belly in the way, slipping between the rows appeared rather a challenge. My brother, too, looked as haphazard as ever, his black-rimmed glasses half hidden by his bangs. *Perhaps if he at least styled that mop neatly, he might draw a few young ladies' eyes.*

"Good evening," I said. "It's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

At any rate, it had been more than a month since I'd seen my family. Quite forgetting all the staring eyes, I stepped forward, glad to see that everyone was

so well. However, in contrast to my carefree delight, my parents' expressions were stern.

Accosting me, my mother scolded, "What sort of a blithe question is that? What on earth have you done, Marielle?!"

In surprise, and with a touch of panic, I pushed her back. "What's this all of a sudden? And not so loudly, please. We're in God's presence."

"Now's not the time to be concerned about that!"

"Not the time? Isn't that rude to God?"

Then my father drew nearer. "Rumors are spreading about you. They're saying you've been engaging in repeated acts of debauchery—that you're involved with numerous men."

Despite my own insistence on keeping quiet, I reflexively raised my voice. "Excuse me?!"

What had my father just said?! Me and...numerous men?! *Who on earth do they think I'm seeing? Well, I suppose I do have one guess as to who I'm allegedly involved with...*

"Who's saying such a thing?" I inquired.

"It's not just one or two people—the rumor has spread far and wide."

"My goodness..." Though I was shocked, I was also somewhat impressed. This was new to me. I'd faced all manner of insults before, but never *this* sort of rumormongering. *I can't even guess who'd want to spread such gossip about me. Me!*

The contrast to my prior experiences was so great that I was momentarily struck dumb. However, while I was unable to respond, my brother caught up to my parents and interjected on my behalf. "Mother, Father, calm down. Surely you don't think Marielle would ever do anything of the sort. If she could attract so many men, it wouldn't have been so difficult to find her a husband."

"I agree it sounds impossible!" my mother replied. "Far from drawing gentlemen's eyes, they always seemed to look right through her. I used to worry about how very plain she was. She might have stood out more if she'd

only put some effort into dressing up and looking fashionable, but instead, the strange girl took the exact opposite route and devoted all her effort to being as inconspicuous as possible! In fact, she's so skilled at making herself disappear that I've heard people speculate that House Clarac is involved in some secretive, underhanded business. There are even people who say she might be a fairy who grants wishes if you catch her! How on God's green earth can a girl like *that* be pursuing multiple men?! And yet...she did manage to land a truly astounding catch like Lord Simeon. She has that achievement to her credit. It was an unbelievable miracle, but it *did* happen. It makes me wonder if she has wiles that even I, her mother, have never realized."

"Of course I don't," I impatiently interrupted. She seemed liable to continue rambling forever if no one stopped her. "Anyway, be quiet."

In my exasperation, I looked to the altar at the far end of the room. *Would wiles be enough for a plain woman like me without a smidgen of sensual appeal to ensnare a man? What do you think, God?*

Approaching from behind me, Lord Simeon put an arm around my shoulders. "Don't worry. It's all complete nonsense."

My parents' gazes rose to look at him, and their expressions grew flustered. "Oh, well, Lord Simeon!" Mother said with feverish haste. "What a fuss Marielle has caused this time."

"We're truly sorry that such a disgraceful rumor has spread about House Flaubert," Father added.

Even though there was no heat inside the church and everyone was still wearing their overcoats, both of my parents appeared to be sweating profusely. *Maybe this is beneficial for Father. He might lose some weight. Wait, no! Now's not the time for such jokes!*

In a kind, encouraging voice, Lord Simeon reassured them that everything was fine. "There has been no disgrace at all. Someone was simply ill-natured enough to spread a malicious rumor, which is in no way Marielle's fault. Nor does House Clarac shoulder any blame, naturally. Please be at ease. There's nothing to worry about."

The rest of House Flaubert came over and joined us. "Quite right," Countess

Estelle agreed, presenting herself cheerily as if setting an example for my mortified parents. “Pay this ridiculous gossip no mind whatsoever. Someone’s jealous, that’s all, and it’s made them resort to foolishness. I recall being the target of such accusations myself once upon a time. It’s underhanded harassment designed to make you look bad through baseless rumors.”

“And what a churlish rumor it is,” Earl Maximilian added. “Hearing someone repeat it with glee would make me question *their* character. No one with any sense will humor it, so you’ve no need to be concerned. Noel, you’ll be socializing with a great many people from now on, so make sure you refrain from joining in such irresponsible gossip without thinking. It will inevitably come back to haunt you.”

My father-in-law, usually so placid and unassuming, was speaking his mind very frankly indeed for once. Of the nearby churchgoers attentively eavesdropping on our conversation, several now moved away, looking rather sheepish.

“I won’t!” the youngest Flaubert replied. “Some people really are mean, though, aren’t they? I wonder what would make them want to talk so viciously. In God’s presence, no less.” Despite having the face of an angel, this little devil delivered the final blow.

Yes, just what I’d expect from the family of an esteemed earldom. Even if they act blithe and unconcerned the rest of the time, when push comes to shove, they pull together. They know what to do at a time like this.

Their insistence that the rumors weren’t the end of the world finally prompted my mother and father to regain some semblance of calm. In more subdued tones, we all exchanged greetings once more before sitting down. Lord Simeon put his arm around me again, and I responded to his kind gaze with a smile filled with gratitude.

At the same time, I felt an intense urge to apologize. *I’m so sorry. I, too, am the kind of person to collect gossip about other people! Not to share it, of course—absolutely not—but should anyone charge me with lowbrow curiosity, I wouldn’t be able to offer a word in my defense.* My father-in-law’s words had cut me to the bone indeed. Still, it was all for the sake of my writing. It was

research, nothing more. *I swear not to spread gossip in the future either. So please, God, forgive me my sins!*

The mass promptly began, and the chattering died down almost entirely. The remarks from Lord Simeon and his family must have had an effect, as the gossipers were now restraining themselves. I knew, however, that didn't mean my name was cleared. Even during the service and while we were leaving, I could still feel eyes on me from all directions. I doubted so many people seriously believed the rumor; it was common for tales to grow in the telling, so I was sure most of them assumed it was an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the more embellished such sordid stories are, the more interesting they become. There was a reason gossip rags sold well even though no one found them credible, and it was because many people enjoyed exactly this sort of entertainment.

And that's compounded by the animosity some people bore me in the first place. To anyone who didn't like me marrying Lord Simeon, such a rumor must be quite welcome indeed. I suppose I can expect the talk behind my back to continue for a while. I wouldn't mind so much if I were the sole target, but this has involved our entire house in the scandal. Though it may be a complete fabrication, the rumor still besmirches our good name.

I was given to some self-reflection on the subject. Though the rumor about me was entirely manufactured, I couldn't entirely deny my own sort of dalliances. My excursions into the city were undoubtedly more frequent than those of an ordinary wife. When attending meetings with my editor, I even went out dressed as a commoner without a lady's maid. I'd also infiltrated many a place undercover in order to investigate and gather clues about cases.

If that were ever exposed, I'd be accused of depraved behavior for sure. I don't think there are too many people who can see through my disguises, but perhaps someone did at some point. Alternatively, maybe somebody has noticed how often I go out. Maybe that gave them the impression I'm a pleasure seeker, and the story only grew from there.

When I thought about it, the part about my supposed involvement with multiple men also had some genesis in my own behavior. Seen in the wrong light, my closeness with Ambassador Nigel and Prince Gracius could easily raise suspicions. Even if someone didn't *truly* believe it, they might have deliberately

put the worst spin on our relationships, suggesting that I was flirting with them. If that story spread, it could have easily grown into whisperings of something more immoral.

Then there was Lutin. If someone targeted that weakness of mine, I really would be in trouble. Not that I was seeing him, of course! My conscience was clear. And yet, I couldn't deny that he had an interest in me and had tried to woo me. Should someone ask if he was *truly* no more than an acquaintance, answering might be a struggle.

I thought back on our encounter at the department store. Had someone seen me, perhaps, as Joanna had cautioned? *My conscience really is as clear as can be. Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with making friends with men. Even so, perhaps I should be discreet for the time being.*

After a night of dampened spirits, dawn broke on the celebratory day itself. I ate a slightly late breakfast with my husband, but it wouldn't be long before he had to report to work. Much like the servants, the royal guards couldn't all take the holiday off. To relieve the burden on some of his men, Lord Simeon had decided to spend only the morning at leisure.

Now, the greatest joy of Noël morning was opening presents. When Lord Simeon opened his from me, he looked happy. "Ah, a pair of gloves. Perfect—I shall wear them today."

Since he had to commute to work on horseback even in the coldest weather, I'd thought they would be a useful gift. Also, though this was pure coincidence, one of his current pair had gotten snagged and damaged beyond repair just a few days earlier, so the timing was excellent.

The pair I'd gifted him was made of high-quality goatskin leather and lined with flannel. Both materials were thin, soft, and good at retaining heat. I'd spent a lot of time discussing various options with the glover in order to create something that would be the easiest to move in and least obtrusive. The cuffs were embroidered with thread that matched the color of the leather—a display of my own handiwork. I'd monogrammed them with Lord Simeon's initials, and though it wasn't done very expertly, each stitch had been made with love.

He put them on straight away, then opened and closed his hand to get a sense of their feel. “Very nice. They’re soft and flexible.” He gently traced the monogram with his finger. “They’re fine gloves indeed. Thank you.”

“I’m so glad you like them. I know it’s quite a conventional gift.”

“Not at all. It’s a lovely present that you put a great deal of thought into. If either of us has given a conventional gift, that would be me...”

I was currently holding Lord Simeon’s gift to me—a parure set consisting of a necklace surrounded by earrings, a bracelet, and a brooch. Each was made with pale rose-colored coral, decorated with a series of small stones accompanied here and there by pearls of the same size. The centerpiece of the necklace was a cameo of the same pale rose shade, depicting graceful flowers in bloom.

“I’m sorry it’s no different than what I might give you any day.”

My husband was the sort of man who struggled to think of a gift for a lady that wasn’t flowers, jewelry, sweets, or the like. I’d expected something along these lines. Still, I didn’t feel even a smidgen of dissatisfaction. I knew that he hadn’t simply bought this at random; he’d carefully considered every feature. Coral was more commonly as red as blood, so he must have deemed that a softer color would suit me better.

“No, this is a wonderful parure. It’s lovely. The elegant design would be flattering for any occasion, and since the pieces are made with coral and pearls, I can wear them without hesitation. Thank you.”

While expressing my gratitude, I made sure to highlight the points I was sure he’d been aiming for. As expected, his face flushed with relief.

He knows that I’m self-conscious about cost, so he didn’t have them use any excessively showy jewels. With only coral and pearls, it can’t have been too... Wait, no! I won’t be deceived! This is obviously worth an arm and a leg. If you’re not picky about their quality, coral and pearls can be cheap, but when we’re talking beautiful, round pearls of a uniform size and fine coral that can only be found in eastern lands, the price grows by orders of magnitude.

I was quite certain that the specimens used in this parure were of the highest caliber. I could well imagine that Lord Simeon had thought long and hard while

selecting the set, making sure that I could treat it as an asset should the worst happen, yet also accept it as a gift without worry. Taking his feelings into account, I decided to pretend I'd been fooled. What good would come of making a petty complaint about such a well-considered gift? After all, the sentiment behind it—the effort he'd gone to for my sake—made me very happy indeed.

Nevertheless...on the inside, I shudder to think how much it must have cost. I suppose I'm still poor at heart.

"By the way," I said, "there's still one box left. Who's that for?"

Even after everyone had opened all their presents, one package remained unaccounted for. The small box, tied with a red ribbon, was light enough to be held in one hand.

"Well, you see," Lord Simeon replied, "that's for Chouchou."

I almost burst into laughter. *He bought a present for the cat! What an adorably earnest husband!*

Chouchou was busy rummaging around in the scattered boxes and wrapping paper. "Isn't that nice, Chouchou?" I said. "A present from daddy. What could it be, I wonder?"

I untied the ribbon for her, revealing a stuffed toy fish. It was so well made that it could have been mistaken for the real thing at a brief glance. *This wasn't special ordered as well...was it? I can scarcely imagine his face when he requested it.*

"O-Oh my, it's a fish! Look, Chouchou! A tasty little fishy!"

I showed her the toy. She looked at it for a moment but didn't appear overly interested. To make it seem more like a real fish, I tried putting it on the ground flopping it up and down. *There's something unsettling about doing this myself.*

"Even though it looks tasty, she must know she can't really eat it," commented Lord Noel, who had come to peek in. "You should have gotten her a real fish instead."

The cat's lack of enthusiasm made poor Lord Simeon's shoulders slump.

“A real fish would have smelled awful,” I pointed out. “Besides, this is just the right size and shape for her to clutch and play with. She can chew on it and huddle around it.”

I brought the stuffed toy closer to the tip of Chouchou’s nose. After sniffing at it several times, she reached out her front paws and batted at...not the toy itself, but the ribbon from the wrapping.

My husband and I were both left in stunned silence.

Well, I shouldn’t be too surprised. What pet owner hasn’t had this experience?

Despondent, Lord Simeon set about getting ready to leave while I cleared away the large quantity of empty boxes and wrapping paper. The cat had taken up in the biggest box, so I decided to let her keep it for now.

As Lord Simeon was about to step out the front door—I’d followed to see him off—he said, “Since I’m working today, I have tomorrow off to make up for it. Why don’t we go out somewhere together? I did promise the other day, but with everything leading up to Noël, I haven’t had the time yet. I’ll take you wherever you’d like.”



Once he made a promise, he always remembered it. Ordinarily I'd have been thrilled, but in this case, I couldn't assent quite so readily. "Thank you," I replied. Then, wavering, I added, "But could we put off going out for another time?"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Do you have plans of your own? A meeting with your publisher, perhaps?"

"No, it's not that."

With Noël coming to an end, the world would start to return to normality as work picked up again. That meant it would soon be time for another meeting with my publisher, but I was considering asking Mr. Satie to hold off for the time being. I'd already written and submitted the last portions of my serialization, so I didn't think the delay would cause any problems. The unexpectedly favorable reception of my newspaper story had prompted talks of a follow-up, but I planned to put that off for now too.

Lord Simeon surmised my motives without even asking. "Are you concerned about that rumor? I'd have thought it would be like water off a duck's back for you."

"I don't mind on a personal level. People can say whatever they'd like about me. The issue is that gossip about me impacts your house...including you."

Rumors of a debauched wife chasing after other men was nothing short of a dishonor to her husband, regardless of whether they were actually true. The instant the gossip began spreading, the damage was already done. That was why I'd decided to refrain from any excursions. If I was seen out and about, it would only encourage tongues to wag.

"I don't think anyone really believes it," I continued, smiling to discourage his worry. "I'm sure it's nothing more than amusement to them. This is the season when people tend to spend more time cooped up at home anyway, so if I avoid drawing attention to myself, the tempest should die down soon enough. I'd prefer to go out then. I've been waiting for a chance to go out with you, so I'd like to be able to enjoy it to the fullest."

He hesitated a moment, but then conceded, "All right. I understand."

Though his expression didn't change as such, remaining mild, he began to exude the faintest hint of anger. Not at me, but at the culprit behind the rumor. *Have I made him think I'm forcing myself to abstain from the things I enjoy? I hope he doesn't do anything rash.*

"Indeed, it might be better to wait until that irritating chorus has been silenced. I want you to be able to genuinely enjoy yourself as well, so we'll arrange another day."

"Good," I replied, though with a tremor in my voice. "Thank you."

The icy chill in his smile was the quintessence of the brutal blackhearted military officer. *He said the word "silenced" so nonchalantly, but how exactly does he intend to silence them? Honestly, you mustn't do anything too rash!*

I passed his bag to him, and as he went to adjust it, he said, "Oh, I almost forgot. I was going to give you this." He looked down at the item in his other hand, which he then passed to me. It was the angel figurine.

"Goodness, it's as good as new." I frowned. "Is this really the same doll? Did you go and buy a new one just like it, perhaps?" The once-broken wing showed no sign that it had ever been damaged. Even scrutinizing it, I could see nary a trace of the fissure.

"It's the very same one. I filled the gaps with adhesive and sanded them down, then repainted it."

My eyes widened. "You're awfully skilled."

Laughing gently, he replied, "You get used to this sort of work with two younger brothers. They'd often break their toys and start crying, so I'd put them back together."

He spoke as if this were only natural, though for a rich earldom, it would have been perfectly ordinary simply to buy a replacement if something broke. *What a kind older brother he must have been. If breaking those toys made his brothers cry, they must have been beloved favorites—and Lord Simeon fixed them right up.*

He'd bought this little doll that had taken my fancy without me even noticing. Receiving it had thrilled me, but sadly, it was broken shortly thereafter. Seeing

my devastation, he'd gone to the time and trouble to fix it and lift my spirits once again. Elation and appreciation for my remarkable husband welled within me, so intense that I could almost explode.

"Thank you so much. Now I have twice the number of presents. This is the best Noël ever!"

I stood on tiptoes and gave my husband a kiss. He put an arm around my waist to support me as I did. I then watched him leave, filled with a joy entirely fitting for Noël morning.

Spending Noël with family meant no pesky voices from outside, so I had a fun-filled day. Gifts arrived from my parents, my grandparents, and others. Friends sent cards as well. I hoped that everything I'd sent myself had safely reached its destination. The servants on duty were also thrilled to receive their presents as well.

No one brought up the vicious rumor. Not a single question or accusation was directed at me. Everyone treated me exactly as always, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary going on at all. Though I was sure the matter still concerned them, I was grateful for their discretion.

Life slowly began to return to normal. A few days later, with the festive mood dissipated and New Year's right around the corner, some correspondence arrived for me. Joanna entered my study holding a tray as I was working on the concept for my new story.

"My lady, you have mail. Why don't you take a short break?"

Tea and some cake sat on the tray alongside the envelopes. After pouring me a hot cup of tea—perfect for a breather—she added wood to the fire to keep it from growing cold.

"This one's from Julianne, I see. Ah, and this is from Princess Henriette."

Two letters had come, one from my best friend and the other from the youngest child of the royal family, Her Royal Highness the Second Princess. She and I got along very well and also considered one another friends now. Wondering if her letter would be filled with fond talk of her fiancé or perhaps

some matter of concern, I opened the envelope.

Though it began with the usual openhearted greetings, when I ran my eyes down the page, I soon found myself surprised. Wherever she'd heard it from, Princess Henriette was clearly aware of the rumor being spread about me. Concern on my behalf wouldn't have shocked me in that regard, but her letter continued further.

There will always be baseless rumors spreading now and again, but this one is utterly malicious and unpleasant. I didn't feel I could sit idly by, so I consulted with my mother and my older sister. The conclusion was that it's no use for the victim to panic and act hastily in this kind of situation. Often, that only makes matters worse, so I ask that you continue as you have and refrain from taking it upon yourself to do anything. We will firmly deny the rumor.

Though the social season isn't in full swing and the only attendees will be aunts and grandmothers of my relatives, we have a gathering planned that will be just right for this purpose. It's a meeting to discuss our New Year's party, particularly the most foolish details such as our outfits for the day and how best to compete with social rivals. Still, it's a family affair, so I can't avoid showing my face. I wonder if it'll be the same after I marry into the Lavian grand ducal family.

Apologies, I've strayed from the original subject. The point is that this rumor about you is sure to come up, so we shall use that to our advantage. Mother and Lucienne are on our side. They're both very unhappy indeed with whoever concocted such a beastly tale about you. It's plain to see that you're devoted to Simeon. How could you possibly be involved with other men? We all laughed at the preposterousness of the very idea.

So please, take heart. The queen and princesses will decry the falsehood and attest to your thoroughly harmonious relationship with your husband. Anyone who'd dare to speculate after that—much less continue to spread lies—would of course risk the ire of the royal family. I'm sure they'll all impress as much upon their friends, putting the final nail in the coffin of this nonsense.

By the time I read through to the end, my hands were practically trembling. I hadn't truly been harmed in any way, only brought embarrassment upon my family. Princess Henriette didn't have to go to such lengths for me. *And yet she did.* I was nearly moved to tears. Without even a single word from me, she'd believed my innocence and come to my defense as a matter of course. Instead of quietly waiting for the rumor to go away on its own, she'd committed to quashing it. That was unbelievably kind of her. *Not to mention that Her Majesty and Princess Lucienne are helping too. What could I ever say to properly thank them?*

Joanna peered at me with a look of worry. "My lady?" My welling tears must have made her think the letter had contained terrible news.

I quickly wiped my eyes and shook my head with a smile. "Everything's fine. I was touched by her kind support. That's all."

"A letter of encouragement?"

"Exactly. She also said she'll deny the rumor to keep it from spreading any further, and that Princess Lucienne and the queen are on my side too. Isn't that absolutely lovely of them?"

"Oh my, it certainly is," Joanna replied, pleased as well.

Filled with gratitude, I handed the paper back to her with a nod. *I truly am as happy as could be. I'll have to write a heartfelt reply later.*

Next I turned my attention to Julianne's letter, which was along similar lines. Duke Silvestre's wife, Duchess Christine—Julianne's adoptive mother—would be attending the gathering Princess Henriette had mentioned. Now that she was a duchess's daughter, Julianne would be going as well alongside her fiancé, His Highness the Crown Prince. Since she was known to be my cousin and close friend, her defending me wouldn't have much impact. On that front, she'd asked Duchess Christine to assist. Though the duchess and I weren't particularly close, she had apparently agreed, which was another surprise to me.

Her letter continued, *"Duke Silvestre snickered on the subject, saying that if someone wished to ruin your reputation, they ought to have done a better job than this. I was too scared to ask what 'a better job' might mean in his eyes. Anyway, neither he nor the duchess believe one word of the rumor, and they*

seem to like you rather a lot. My adoptive father does have a penchant for oddities, as you know."

I wasn't sure whether to feel encouraged or insulted. Besides, if Duke Silvestre liked someone, it was usually more as a plaything than anything else. That said, their aid was still welcome. I held back my tears this time, but I was very happy indeed to receive such succor from my friend and, unexpectedly, from the duke and duchess too.

Imagine my reaction when even more letters turned up. Ambassador Nigel joked that he'd gladly like to be one of my supposed lovers, but he also wrote reassuringly that there was no need for me to fret. Marquess Rafale expressed his serious indignation on my behalf; with his characteristic righteousness, he declared that he would never forgive whoever started the nasty story.

Everyone is so kind. What nice people they all are. If there's one thing I can take from all this, it's that I'm blessed to have the kith and kin I do. Thanking God for the good fortune he'd bestowed upon me, I resolved to do everything I could the next time a friend was in need.

The last letter to arrive was sealed with Prince Gracius's coat of arms. I was somewhat taken aback to realize that word had reached even his ears. *Just how far has it spread?* This was the first time I'd ever received a letter from him, and I felt bad to have caused him enough worry to warrant it. *Or does he think this is his fault, perhaps?* Considering that explanation quite plausible, I opened the envelope to find a remarkably short message written in Lagrangian.

"Sorry to call upon you so suddenly. I'm in quite an unfortunate situation and I need your help. Could you please come as soon as you've read this? Come in secret, attracting as few eyes as possible. I'll be waiting."

That was all. The letter neither said nor contained anything more. *Whatever could be the matter?* This far-from-ordinary communication provoked a different sort of surprise in me. *Is this unrelated to the rumor about me? Alternatively, could it have caused other trouble for him? For him to write such a curt and impassioned plea, he must be in quite a hurry.*

Given that, it was rather strange that he'd written in Lagrangian. I could tell what it all meant from context, but there were errors in spelling and

vocabulary. I'd have been able to understand the same written Ortan without any issue, however, and the easiest language for him to use would have been Lindenese, which also would have been perfectly suitable by me. *Does he think that my foreign language skills are purely conversational, perhaps?*

"Hmm." I cocked my head, not entirely sure what to make of this. Was the letter really from Prince Gracius? Perhaps someone had deliberately written it in awkward Lagrangian to make it *look* like his work. *But if this is a forgery, to what end? Why would someone be trying to lure me in using Prince Gracius's name? Who would do such a thing?*

Checking the wax seal again, it was unmistakably Prince Gracius's signet. His coat of arms wasn't especially well known in Lagrange, so I could scarcely imagine anyone forging it. Perhaps he really was in a bind. If the matter at hand were truly urgent, perhaps he'd written the short note without putting too much thought into it.

I wrestled with the decision. *Should I go? Should I not?*

My conclusion came quickly, however. "When in doubt, it's better to act," I told myself. *I'll go. If I've been summoned, I shall answer.* After all, what good would it do to stand around mulling over it? Unless I went, I'd never find out anything. Besides, if Prince Gracius was so desperate, time was of the essence.

I rose to my feet and exited my study. "Joanna, I'm going out. Can you help me get ready?" On the way to my dressing room, I asked nearby maids for their assistance too.

"What on earth has happened?" Joanna asked. "I thought you'd decided to stay at home for a while."

"Something's come up and I need to go to the palace. I'm sorry, but would you mind coming with me? And one other person... Nicole, can you come too?"

"Really?" Nicole exclaimed. "Are you sure?! Hooray! I'm going to the palace!"

"We're not visiting for fun!" Joanna scolded in response to Nicole's innocent merrymaking as she briskly helped me change. One couldn't visit the royal palace in any old clothes. I needed to dress befittingly for the young mistress of House Flaubert while also retaining ease of movement. Even with a look of

frustration at this awkward request, my skilled lady's maid clothed me exactly as asked.

Just in case, I decided it was best to include a strong man along in our company. I explained the circumstances to my mother-in-law, excused myself, and then departed. Dusk was approaching in the mostly cloudless sky.

"It's so cold," said Nicole, shivering and drawing up the collar of her coat. "It's supposed to be *really* bitter tonight, you know."

Leaving the warmth of the house instantly had me feeling the chill in my bones. The breath of both people and horses formed white mist in the air.

"Sorry to make you go out so late," I told the driver, "but can you take us to the palace?"

Joseph, who would no doubt be even colder with the wind whipping against him in the driver's seat, showed no sign of being bothered. "Certainly, my lady."

The manservant sat up front next to him. Promising them special recompense, I got into the carriage.

A flock of birds passed overhead. Were they returning to their roosts, I wondered?

Just a few days earlier, my heart had been leaping with joy in anticipation of the fun to come, but now I was on my way to the palace filled with a mysterious unease. What should have been a quick journey felt like an awfully long one.

Chapter Nine

We faced no obstacles along the way and reached the palace without issue. If the letter I'd received was the work of a malicious actor, I feared they might show their face during our journey, but nothing happened in the end—something of an anticlimax after bringing a strong manservant for protection. Of course, an uneventful trip was preferable to the alternative, but it suggested that Prince Gracius really was in trouble, so it was worrying either way.

I had the driver go not to the front gate, but the Bonheur gate on the western side, close to the Royal Order of Knights' headquarters. We stopped in sight of the blue roofed-building and I got out with Joanna and the others. I'd decided it was better to see Lord Simeon first rather than go to see Prince Gracius directly.

There were a number of reasons for this. Despite being told to attract as few eyes as possible, I couldn't actually sneak in to see him. Passing through the strict security would mean being seen by a number of people who would also record my visit. If Lord Simeon were with me, however, I might be allowed to skip some of the formalities while also appearing to be at the palace for unrelated reasons. Moreover, even if I tried to meet with the prince in secret, I couldn't hide it from Lord Simeon—and if I was going to tell him about it after the fact anyway, why not just involve him from the start?

As I'd done several times before I was married, I went to the office right inside the entrance and asked the receptionist to send word. It wouldn't be long now before the end of Lord Simeon's workday, so I thought he might be able to come fairly quickly. However, contrary to my expectations, he was currently in a meeting in the main palace building—one that included not only members of the royal guard, but top brass from all military branches, government ministers, and even His Majesty the King and His Highness the Crown Prince.

"If it's urgent, I can still send word," the man on reception offered considerately. "What would you like me to do?"

I spent a moment pondering. It would be one thing if Lord Simeon were

merely in a meeting with his own men, but interrupting a royal audience was a dubious prospect—especially since I had no idea what was actually going on as of yet. *Also, I was asked to come in secret, and that would draw far too much attention, wouldn't it?*

Ultimately, I declined the receptionist's offer. Instead, I asked him to inform Lord Simeon as soon as the meeting was over. After ripping a page out of my notebook, I wrote a short message on it: *"I've gone on ahead."* I left that with the receptionist alongside the letter from Prince Gracius. "Could you give these both to my husband when he gets back?"

This should be enough for him to understand. I'd resealed the letter by stamping it with wax again.

"If the meeting continues and doesn't appear to be within sight of ending one hour from now, I'm very sorry to ask, but would you please go in and deliver these to him anyway?"

"Understood. I'll make sure the Vice Captain gets these no matter what."

"Thank you dearly. It's quite an important matter, so I really appreciate your help."

With that, I left the knights' headquarters and returned to the carriage I'd only just alighted from and had Joseph drive around to the front.

Was the meeting pure coincidence, or was it part of the plan? Reaching the palace without incident had given me reason to think there was no foul play afoot, but Lord Simeon's preoccupation gnawed at me. It was either excessively bad or good timing.

Meetings with the king must be planned well in advance. This council couldn't have convened on a whim. Is it possible that whoever planned this anticipated that I'd go to Lord Simeon and intentionally had the letter delivered at a time he'd be unavailable? Perhaps I'm being too suspicious. Who would find me important enough to concoct such an elaborate scheme just to draw me out? Anyone can spread gossip, but I can't even begin to guess who would go this far.

Whatever the case, I'd left the letter and my own short message for Lord Simeon. If all went well, his meeting would be over quickly and he'd come and

find me. I tried to reassure myself that I wasn't merely rushing into things without any precaution.

Reaching the front of the palace, I asked for entry as normal and was allowed inside. I couldn't take the manservant with me, so I asked him to wait with Joseph. With only Joanna and Nicole in my company, we were led by a housemaid toward Prince Gracius's chambers. She didn't escort us anywhere unusual; we proceeded along the same familiar hallways.

Indeed, nothing untoward is happening. Though if I did have to pick a point of concern... Is it just me, or am I seeing far fewer royal guards on duty than before? We weren't searched on the way to see the prince either. Perhaps the female administrator responsible for the job had already gone home for the day given the hour. In lieu of the security check, we passed through an unguarded corridor.

Proceeding with some definite misgivings, we finally arrived at the drawing room where the prince's aspiring hangers-on had barged in the other day. Inside the room now was the housemaid who'd been seeing to Prince Gracius. We'd crossed paths numerous times now and knew each other's faces; the recognition was clear in her expression.

Taking over for the maid who'd escorted us, Prince Gracius's maid welcomed us. "I've been expecting you. Please, come in," she said.

When I entered, though, there was no one in sight. Nor was the fireplace lit. "Where's Prince Gracius?" I asked.

"He's out at the moment." She then asked me a question in return. "Erm, I only heard about this quite suddenly myself, so I don't know the full details, but you didn't have an appointment, did you?"

"No. I received a letter asking me to come as a matter of urgency. I intended to bring my husband as well, but he's unfortunately in a meeting, so I've come on my own."

"I see," the housemaid said, tilting her head and putting a hand on her cheek. "According to the prince's close associate, he should be back in short order. I don't expect you'll have to wait too long."

Was that why so few knights were on guard duty? Were they escorting Prince Gracius? That made sense, but I had to wonder where he'd gone. *It couldn't be another secret excursion. Maybe he's attending the meeting too. If there are matters to discuss involving Orta, that would explain why so many other key figures have assembled for it.*

The maid quickly got a fire started. Trust the royal palace to have firewood and thin pieces for kindling on hand ready to use at the drop of a hat.

For the time being, I took a seat in a chair. Speaking to Joanna and Nicole, I said, "You two sit down as well."

Though Nicole was ready to do so without a second thought, Joanna stopped her and firmly declined. "We can't behave like that."

"But we don't know how long we'll be waiting," I told her. "If we're the only ones here, then what difference does it make if you sit?"

"Pardon," the palace maid interrupted in a diffident tone. "Could I ask your attendants to please wait in the neighboring room?"

"When Prince Gracius arrives, certainly, but surely this is fine while we're waiting for him."

"I agree with you," she replied, an awkward look on her face. "Only...the prince's associate requested that you be alone, my lady. He said there was a highly confidential matter to discuss." She paused, then began to apologize repeatedly. "I'm sorry, my lady. I'm terribly sorry. It wasn't my decision."

If this was a special request from Isaac, I suppose I have to oblige. Certainly, this maid isn't in a position to do otherwise, so if I object, I'll only be making her job harder. I ultimately requested that Joanna and Nicole wait in the next room as asked.

"Summon us if anything happens," Joanna said before disappearing with Nicole. The adjoining room was only separated by a single door, so even if we couldn't see each other, we weren't all that far apart in the grand scheme of things. I felt able to watch them go with ease, certain that they would come straight away if I called for them.

The housemaid briefly left and then returned with a pot of tea. Steam rose

from the cup as she filled it. It would take some time for the fire to start blazing in earnest, so the cold room hadn't quite yet heated up. On a midwinter evening like this, hot tea was most welcome.

The maid took some to Joanna and Nicole in the next room as well. Her considerate service diminished some of the disquiet I'd been harboring. *I'm sure it's all right to trust her, at least. Any staff assigned to a noble is carefully screened. Their entire families are thoroughly investigated. And in Prince Gracius's case, the palace would have been particularly careful. No one remotely suspicious would ever have been put in this position.*

Having completed her tasks, the housemaid left the room. Now alone, I thought about the situation as I warmed my fingertips on the cup. I hadn't expected to be left waiting, but the tea would help pass the time until Lord Simeon arrived, so it was just as well. If at all possible, I wanted him to be present for my discussion with Prince Gracius. *If something really is wrong, he should inform Lord Simeon and Prince Severin too in any case. I can't imagine I'd be able to take care of it on my own, nor would I expect it's something I should.*

The problem comes if the letter is a forgery. Since arriving, I'd begun to feel the chances of that dropping significantly, but I couldn't assume the possibility was gone altogether. I had potentially been lured here by someone taking advantage of Prince Gracius's current absence. *And if that's true, what's going to happen next?*

If someone had taken such pains to manipulate me, I suspected this might be related to the rumor. After all, wasn't it more likely that the events were connected rather than entirely coincidental? For example, perhaps someone trying to ruin my reputation had set up a trap to lend credence to the gossip. Maybe they planned to claim that I was making repeated visits to Prince Gracius in secret, or some such. He would be out of the meeting soon, and upon hearing of my visit, he'd come to see me...and we'd find ourselves alone together. Someone could spin such an encounter in a way that made it sound like an illicit liaison.

"Hmm..."

Wouldn't that be a tad forced? Even if a man and a woman see each other, it

could just be for ordinary conversation. It needn't be a "secret meeting" as such. Admittedly, this is a secret meeting in some sense, but I haven't stolen away into his private quarters. We'll just be talking in the drawing room. A housemaid was even arranged to welcome me. Could they be planning to use her as a witness? Ah, but Isaac sent her, and it's inconceivable that he's the culprit.

Perhaps a setup was out of the question after all. *Are there any other plausible scenarios? What other suspicions could be pinned on me?* I considered this for a moment. *Lord Simeon using his wife to ensnare Orta's future king, or some such? I've read twists like that in novels before—only, those wives were always beautiful and brimming with carnal appeal.*

"That would be a bridge too far," I said to myself, shaking my head. *That possibility was the most unlikely yet. To make good on it, they'd have needed someone like Lady Aurelia, the stunning daughter of Marquess Cavaignac.*

Though Lady Aurelia would consider this beneath her, I'm sure. She does ensnare gentlemen, but she does it because she wants to. She's not the sort of person to do it on someone else's orders. After all, she is the one and only golden rose, the sublime villainous young noblewoman of Lagrangian high society! Not that this is entirely relevant to my current situation...

Heaving a sigh, I brought the cup to my lips. With so little information, I wasn't going to reach a conclusion. The tea was delightfully warm, but I wasn't sure I should drink it all straight away. *It's still so cold in here, and besides, the nearest bathroom could be anywhere.*

I limited myself to half the cup. I held the rest of it to warm my hands in place of a proper fire, but it soon began to grow cold. There was still no sign of anyone coming, and as I sat there, it started to get darker too. *I can hardly bear the cold. Maybe I'll go over and wait by the fire.* I set down my tea and stood up.

At least, I thought I did.

Yet in fact, my body hadn't risen even one inch. I was still in the seat of the chair. The cup I thought I'd set down was still in my hand too. I must have dozed off—just for a moment—and dreamed of waking up while I was actually still asleep. I blinked several times and tried to chase the sleepiness away with a

yawn.

But it didn't work. Whenever I forced my eyes open, their lids fell down again. Even insisting to myself that I mustn't fall asleep made no difference. The drowsiness was strangely intense. With the last bit of awareness in my hazy mind, I fretted at how awful this was.

I tried to call for Joanna, but no words came out. Even when I thought I was speaking, all that emerged from my lips was a faint moan. I told myself, *You'll have to be louder than that for her to hear you*, but my throat wouldn't obey me.

Something was plainly wrong. The tea had been drugged without a doubt, but that realization came all too late.

Was it that housemaid's doing? Surely not. She couldn't have...

The consciousness I fought to maintain was fading away. Unable to lift even a finger, all I could do was cry out for help internally. *Lord Simeon... I'm sorry. I made a mistake. In the end, I should have called for you even if it meant interrupting. Now I'm causing you trouble again... I'm sorry...*

In my heart, I called out for him over and over again, wishing my husband would come before the very last string holding me together snapped.

Then I melted into obliviousness, unaware if my wish would be granted.

It's...cold.

It's cold... So cold. So very cold.

I sneezed—and my eyes flew open.

Gah, why is it so cold? Hmm, I must have fallen asleep on the couch. Without a blanket on me, of course I'd get cold.

I shook off the drowsiness and sat up. My glasses were still on my face; it hurt where they'd been pushed into my skin. They'd slipped down, so I adjusted them and then reached for my dress, which had also slipped down and— *Wait. Excuse me? How did that happen?*

At this point, it finally dawned on me that all was not right. The chill was due to more than merely dozing off. My dress was also half removed. The back was

entirely open, and when I moved, the dress began to slip off my shoulders. In a panic, I grabbed it and pulled it up around me. *How could I have fallen asleep in this state?* Even if I tried to cinch it back up, I'd never manage the task on my own. In hopes of finding Joanna, I looked around the room.

It took me a moment to realize I was in an unfamiliar place. It was a compact room with no fireplace and no other furniture beyond a chair and a table. A lamp fixed to the wall illuminated the room well enough, but apart from that, it was bare. It had the feel of an antechamber for a servant, perhaps.

Where on earth am I? What was I doing before I came here? I was briefly taken by confusion as I struggled to comprehend the situation. Then it all came flooding back to me. *Of course! I suddenly started getting sleepy after drinking that drugged tea. Which means...I'm here because...*

That part remained a mystery. It seemed like I should know what had happened to me, but I didn't. Still somewhat dizzy, I put a hand on my head as I thought back.

After I fell asleep, someone must have taken me away from the drawing room. Joanna and Nicole were next door, so it must have been a quiet affair. Wait—no. They'd have fallen asleep too. They were served the same tea. Is this a side room somewhere in the palace? If so, how did my dress come unfastened?

I had no recollection of trying to take it off myself. In fact, it had been so cold before that I'd kept my overcoat on. I could only assume that someone had deliberately put me in this state. But why?

Suddenly, a shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold. *No... It couldn't be that someone did something awful to me while I was sleeping...could it?* I almost screamed in horror. *No! For anyone other than Lord Simeon to... That would be...!*

I wanted to clutch my head and cry without a care for comportment. However, I caught myself just in time and desperately reassured myself in a whisper. "No," I said. "No. It can't be. That didn't happen. Calm down."

It's all right. Take the time to examine everything properly. I cannot allow myself to think that anything of the sort has transpired.

I consciously took deep breaths in and out, in and out. With my trembling hands, I inspected the state of my dress and undergarments. *There's no way such a thing has happened. Absolutely not.* Enduring the unpleasant pounding of my heart, I lifted up my skirt. *My drawers aren't disturbed... Below that, my stockings are perfectly in place... My suspenders haven't slipped at all.*

Aside from my dress, I found no troubling signs on my upper body either. My corset strings were still tied, and my chemise underneath hadn't been disturbed either.

Which means nothing happened, right? No one would assault me, then purposely dress me fully again afterward, only to leave the back of my dress open. Never. Plus, when I consider my own state as well...

The tension left my body. Now that I'd calmed down, it was absolutely clear that nothing had befallen me. Had I still been unmarried, ignorant of carnal relations, I might not have been so sure. But now that I was a wife, I could tell from experience that nothing of the sort had taken place. I was fine. *Fine!*

A sudden sigh escaped my lips. *Good heavens, I thought I'd never be able to look Lord Simeon in the eye again. Who was responsible for this?! Why are they doing this—*

When my thoughts reached that point, the truth belatedly occurred to me. I had indeed been lured here under false pretenses using Prince Gracius's name. I'd been drawn right into a trap. There was no longer any doubt in my mind that the letter was a forgery. Was the housemaid the culprit, or merely a coconspirator? Well, potentially neither. She could have been used or deceived as well.

But that doesn't matter right now! Shaking my head to clear my still-addled mind, I stood up. *I can't imagine this is the end of things. If I dawdle, who knows what might happen next?*

The drug hadn't fully worn off yet, as I wobbled on my feet. My dress threatened to fall off, but I held it in place. Carefully steadying myself so as not to fall over, I kept as quiet as I could and walked toward the door. With no idea what I might face next, I was determined to escape as quickly as possible.

I drew my ear close and listened. There were no voices or other signs of

activity. *The door might be locked*, I realized—but when I tried the knob, it opened without any resistance, to my surprise. Inspecting it further, I realized it couldn't actually be locked from the inside. Quietly, I poked my head outside. The relatively narrow corridor was empty.

Right! Now's my chance! I slipped through the doorway and gently closed it behind me to keep from making a sound.

Now, which way should I go?

The dark corridor was lined with a number of doors and turned sharply at each end. From my left, I could faintly hear chattering, as if a crowd of people lay beyond. From my right, pure silence. *Right it is, then. I can't let anyone see me looking like this.*

Restraining the urge to run as fast as I could, I walked quietly, my footsteps soft. Even so, the train of my dress made noise as it swished along the ground. With one hand firmly keeping my bodice in place, I used the other to lift up my skirt. I was in such an unsightly state that I was desperately praying not to cross paths with anyone, for no one to happen upon me, as I hurried in the direction that sounded scarce of people.

This place didn't appear to be the palace. There weren't any windows, so I couldn't look outside to make certain, but I didn't think the palace had anywhere like this. And yet, something about the location felt familiar. *Is it someone's manor, perhaps? Hmm, I wonder.*

If I kept wandering around aimlessly, I knew I'd eventually be spotted, so my top priority was finding somewhere to hide. However, I couldn't choose any of the nearby rooms. As soon as my abductors noticed I was missing, that would be the first place they searched.

Where else would be suitable? There must be somewhere.

I reached the corner and peered around to confirm no one was there before turning it. Here, too, the corridor extended to both the left and right, but not for long. At either end of the short hallway stood a door giving no indication whether it led to a room or an exit. For want of any basis for a decision, I opted for the left-hand door and tried opening it. It was not an exit, but rather led into a narrow room lined with shelves crammed full of silverware, tablecloths, and

such. *Some sort of a storeroom, I see.* I quickly slipped inside.

Hiding for now was undoubtedly my best option. Most likely, no one would immediately come to this room. Though I couldn't hide forever, taking refuge would afford me the time to calm down, contemplate my escape strategy, and do something about my outfit.

I'd already given up on fastening my dress. The design was such that after doing up all the buttons, there were ribbons to tie up from waist to neck—absolutely unmanageable by the wearer alone. *Perhaps I could tie some string around my whole body to prevent it from falling down, at least. Then I could drape a tablecloth around me to cover up. I'd still look like a disgrace, but far better than leaving myself exposed.*

I scanned the shelves to find suitable materials. There were more tablecloths than I could ever need, but I couldn't locate any string. *What are these black pieces of fabric, though?* When I picked one up, I realized it was a garment. Filled with anticipation, I unfolded it to reveal, as I hoped, a dress. One that was unadorned and easy to move around in, like the sort a maid might wear. *In that case, perhaps all these white ones aren't tablecloths after all...*

"I knew it!"

I'd happened upon both aprons and bonnets. With so many all in one place, this had to be the servants' uniform. *Perfect! Thank you, God!*

I quickly shrugged off the dress I was wearing to get changed. The open back actually made my life easier at this point; as long as I could remove the dress somehow, it no longer mattered. And, since servants' clothes were made to be put on easily, dressing myself again afterward was as straightforward as could be.

I gathered up my hair and stuffed it into one of the bonnets, then bunched up my discarded dress as small as possible and hid it in the back of the shelves so it wouldn't be found. *Everything's fine now.* The fear and turmoil I'd felt just moments ago had entirely vanished, and the more I moved around, the more my dizziness subsided. I chuckled to myself with furtive glee.

Though I hoped to find a mirror to make certain that I was presentable, alas, there was none. *I'm sure it'll be all right, though. No one would think me the*

young mistress of an earldom now. And, if I do say so myself, an outfit like this suits me far better than any fashionable dress.

Now was the time that all the research and effort that had gone into my disguise skills would finally pay off! Though I of course wanted to escape from my captor, I felt as though I could go beyond that—I could turn the tables and uncover who had done it.

Taking heart, I approached the door again in much higher spirits. With some still-necessary caution, I stepped through and went back in the direction of the noise I'd avoided before. It definitely sounded like a larger assembly than merely a few people. I could even faintly hear music. *If a ball or some such is being held, the servants will be rushing about, so I should be able to infiltrate without any difficulty.*

First, I wanted to ascertain where I was, then—if I could—find out who the culprit was. And a way to escape, of course.

Someone came toward me. I held my head high as if I were in my rightful place rather than shuffling secretively, even as I suppressed my presence. The approaching woman was a maid dressed in the same uniform I was and carrying a basket filled with soiled dishcloths. *They must be throwing a ball after all.* She paid me no mind whatsoever, walking straight past me without a word. *All right, I just have to keep going like this.*

Just as I was starting to feel comfortable, someone burst out of the nearest door.

“Ugh, what the devil is going on?! I was told a woman would be waiting! Were they having me on? Ridiculous!”

The young man's furious mutterings almost made me gasp in shock. I instantly made way for him and bowed my head, but he didn't offer me so much as a glance. Instead, he took off toward the sound of the crowd with angry footsteps. Wondering what was going on, I peered through the open doorway to find that it was the same room where I'd awoken. No one was there...which was enough to clue me in to the situation at hand.

Whoever had abducted me was indeed trying to set up a clandestine meeting. Though they had used Prince Gracius's name, it was only a ruse; their plan was

purely to frame me. They'd then easily recruited some frivolous man for this purpose and told him that a woman was waiting here. *Just as he was muttering about.* And, when he so excitedly arrived, he *would* have found me with my dress already half stripped off. *Would he have thought that an open invitation and laid hands on me, or taken advantage of the fact that I was out cold? Perhaps I wouldn't have been to his taste. Either way, if someone had walked in on us, it would have looked like being caught in the act. I wonder how much anyone would have believed me even if I'd explained the circumstances. It would have become an unimaginable scandal in an instant.*

That had certainly been a close one! I'd only escaped by a hair's breadth! If I hadn't woken up, I doubted the suspicions could have ever been cleared no matter how hard my closest friends worked to defend me. *Thank goodness I regained consciousness when I did. I wonder if it helped that I only drank half of the tea. Would I still be asleep if I'd finished the whole cup? Good gracious, I really did have a narrow escape.*

I felt a chill deep inside as I went to close the door. Just then, I jumped in fright again when I heard two pairs of pounding footsteps running toward me.

“——?! ————!”

“—! ————?!”

As the two new arrivals looked inside the room, a flurry of words flew between them that I couldn't follow at all. Noticing me, one of the men then asked in heavily accented Lagrangian, “You! Did you see a woman come out of here?”

“Oh, well, no,” I replied, keeping my voice low and my head somewhat bowed to hide my face. “I didn't see anyone, my lord.”

They didn't realize who I was. Instead, they ran off just as frantically as they had arrived, clicking their tongues in frustration. One went back the way they'd come, while the other made his way down the corridor leading to the storeroom. *Good luck. You can search from top to bottom and you won't find me there.*

Naturally, I recognized their faces. *They're Prince Gracius's hangers-on! Aspiring hangers-on, rather.* Specifically, there were the comparatively younger

men among the Ortan group. So they're *the ones behind all this*. Well, that *certainly fits*.

Identifying the culprits made a number of details clear. First and foremost, I'd been laboring under a misunderstanding. The "close associate" of the prince that the housemaid had mentioned didn't refer to Isaac at all, but to one of this pair. Since their ilk were always swarming around Prince Gracius like they belonged there, always acting as if they had official titles to justify it, the housemaid must have assumed they were closer to him than they really were. Which would have been easy enough to do, given that the men were his fellow Ortans. Furthermore, since I had come asking after the prince and it was known that I was close to him, the housemaid had probably believed the concocted story about a confidential discussion without question. As instructed, she'd shown me in and served me tea.

On consideration, I still didn't know at what point the tea had been drugged, but I suspected the housemaid hadn't done it herself. It was hard to conceive of her committing such an act willingly. Since Prince Gracius wasn't the one being served, there would have been no taster to detect the poison, so it was possible the hangers-on had sneaked it in. Given how much time they spent by the prince's side, they could easily have found a moment to use his seal and forge the letter too. They'd have been aware of the meeting with His Majesty as well, what with all their palace comings and goings. Knowing that there would be no interruptions, they'd called on me at the perfect time, then rendered me unconscious and spirited me away.

After successfully closing the door this time, I set off on my way again. Though it was a relief to have solved that mystery, another had reared its head. Why exactly were the Ortans treating me this way? Was it because of my closeness to Prince Gracius? Every time I crossed paths with them, they glared at me as if I were the one interfering. And on the day of the secret excursion, they'd expressed their disdain for me quite plainly. There was no denying that they wanted me away from the prince. Still, was that enough to motivate this kidnapping? It went well beyond bullying into criminal activity—especially unwise behavior for recently arrived foreign nationals.

It didn't quite hang together, and I couldn't help feeling there had to be more

to it than a mere wish to harass me. Nothing to do but investigate, I decided.

In truth, I'd rather go straight home. I'm sure Lord Simeon is worried sick and looking everywhere for me. Joanna and Nicole must be fretting too. They may have been drugged as well, and if not, I'm sure they're pale as sheets right now. I can picture the responsible Joanna crying and blaming herself for letting me out of her sight. Meanwhile, Nicole might be inconsolable. They're both suffering, I imagine.

I wanted to let them know I was all right somehow. To reassure them of my safety. Frankly, I wanted to reassure myself—to be back in Lord Simeon's arms and feel the warmth of his large body surrounding me, keeping me safe.

After coming this far, however, I couldn't simply turn and run away. I had to get to the bottom of this awful scheme and uncover what was fueling it. Ill treatment might not be the end of things. I had a foreboding sense that something more serious was afoot.

Beyond that, I'd find it deeply vexing to make my escape without obtaining a single shred of information for a counterattack!

There was no doubt in my mind now that the rumor about me had been started by the same culprits. Oh, how much anguish this had all caused me! I'd been stewing over the trouble I was causing the family and over being a burden to Lord Simeon yet again, and now here I was being as much of a burden as I could possibly be! *If those awful men hadn't plotted something so nefarious, I'd never have been in this situation! How indescribably, unfathomably annoying! I swear, I'll make them pay if it's the last thing I do. Whatever they're plotting, I'll put a stop to it. They'll regret taking me for a little woman who can't do anything against them. I may not have any weapons, but espionage is my forte!*

In the end, things would likely come down to me asking for help. But before then, I was going to collect as much intelligence as I could. To that end, I plunged into the ballroom full of people with fierce determination.

Oh dear! Going from a cold corridor to a warm room so quickly has made the world turn white. I wiped my steamed-up glasses with my apron and then restored them to my face. At last, I could see a vast room before me, where at least two hundred men and women were enjoying food, music, and

conversation. I'd picked up on it already at some point, but this was Fleur et Papillon. No wonder it had seemed so familiar to me—I'd come here just recently for the Easdalian embassy's tea party. As for the side room where I'd woken up, such accommodations were for guests when they needed a breather. I'd also heard that they were frequently used for clandestine meetings. The perfect place to catch me in the act of a secret rendezvous, in other words.

I was still stunned at the sheer magnitude of their malice, not to mention deeply grateful that I'd been fortunate enough to come to before the worst-case scenario. Still, it was quite awkward that the Ortan men had not only taken me from the palace, but all the way into the city. *It could be quite tough to contact Lord Simeon from here.*

As I gazed out at the guests from beside a table, an employee said, "What are you standing around for? We're busy, so get working!" She shoved a tray into my hands. "There! Take this around the hall."

The tray was filled with alcoholic drinks. I reflexively took it, then staggered under the weight. It was heavier than I had expected.

"Be careful! Don't you drop that!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

If I did drop the tray, I suspected it would unleash a most cacophonous sound. Keeping it carefully balanced, I slowly circulated among the partygoers. This was actually the perfect way to ascertain who was in attendance. As I invited guests to take drinks, thus lightening my load, I was simultaneously looking for anyone I might know.

Given the time of year and the venue, I assumed this party wasn't being thrown by a member of the nobility. Fleur et Papillon was primarily rented out by wealthier commoners, who often arranged parties of their own. As I glanced around, my hopes began to falter. I saw only faces I didn't recognize.

Just then, however, a familiar figure caught my eye. He was a relatively young man, with dark eyes and hair contrasting his pale skin. His appearance gave him a noble air, and he had rather a haughtiness about him... Not wanting him to spot me, I instantly positioned myself behind someone to hide. Though I'd met

him before, he was absolutely not someone I could trust. The sense of ease I'd regained began to give way to anxiety once more.

Can it really be pure happenstance that Mr. Yugin, relative to the Slavian ambassador, is here? Does he have some connection to those Ortans? It couldn't possibly be that he's pulling the strings from the shadows, could it?

Carefully avoiding his notice, I observed Mr. Yugin. He appeared to be engaging in perfectly ordinary conversation with those around him, though he occasionally glanced across the room. When I followed his gaze, I saw some men rushing back and forth with no regard for the groups of partygoers chatting amiably.

The full complement of aspiring hangers-on, of course. Are they looking for me, I wonder?

Mr. Yugin wore a faint smile as he watched them hurry about. *If he's the mastermind, shouldn't he be wondering what they're doing, or displaying some hint of anger? Perhaps he's not in league with them after all. And yet, if he's grinning, that does suggest he might be aware of the situation. Honestly, this is all so baffling.*

I was now under the impression that I'd gain more useful information by watching the Ortans rather than keeping a close eye on Mr. Yugin. I thus turned and set off toward the other side of the room. With my tray now bare of glasses, I gathered up empty ones along my way. The guests thought nothing of my presence, and neither did the real staff I passed by here and there.

Under the guise of carrying the glasses to a table by the wall, I approached the Ortans, now deep in conversation in a huddled group. *Time for the ancient and hallowed art of blending into the background!* Internally, I chuckled with glee. *They'll never guess that the enemy is standing right next to them.* Ever since my debut into high society, I'd been honing my ability to suppress my presence and merge with my surroundings. And now I was using that expertise to listen in on their discussion.

Only, there was one rather key obstacle I'd overlooked.

"I'm—you—so—"

“What——but——you see!”

“There’s no time. This means—have to—”

“But if we——we can’t—”

I could *hear* the men perfectly well. Whether out of confidence that no one else present could understand Ortan or a sheer lack of concern born from impatience, they weren’t bothering to hush their voices at all. Sadly, however, they were talking too quickly for me to follow.

Ugh, my word, how irritating! I’m right here in the best position to get information, and then at the crucial moment, this happens! That settles it. My new year’s resolution is to perfect my Ortan. I will do whatever it takes to develop perfect conversational fluency! I’ll even make Lord Simeon help me!

None of that resolve helped me in the moment, of course. With great determination, I listened as attentively as I could manage, but I could still only understand about half of what they were saying. Prince Gracius’s name came up every so often—that much I could make out. It sounded like the hangers-on were discussing some action they’d be taking soon.

Since one of them said there wasn’t any time, perhaps they intend to flee. I do hope they’re not planning to do anything to the prince.

Their discussion appeared to draw to a close as they dispersed and went their separate ways, looking purposeful. Rather than keeping my attention on those who left the ballroom, I watched the ones who headed deeper into the room. *Perhaps they’re going to talk to someone else. Perhaps the mastermind.*

Fearing I might inadvertently draw Mr. Yugin’s eye if I moved too soon, I waited where I was until I could no longer see the Ortan men through the crowd. Once I decided enough time had elapsed, I followed after them under the pretext of serving more drinks. Though I’d lost sight of the men, I soon found them again.

The moment I did, I only barely managed to suppress a yelp.

Prince Gracius was there. Isaac was with him too. They appeared to be guests at the party and were conversing with others around them.

“What is going on?” I asked under my breath. All of a sudden, I understood the situation even less than before. To allow myself a moment to calm down and think, I retreated back to the edge of the room.

So he wasn't at the meeting with the royal family after all. Could...Prince Gracius have been behind the plot to abduct me? I paused. No. No, no, no. *That is quite impossible. He'd have no possible motivation for that—not to mention that the plan went beyond merely abducting me and into the realm of fabricating a secret tryst and causing a fuss about it. Prince Gracius would never...*

My shoulders slumped. *Oh. I see what this is all about.* It was quite simple, actually. Now that it occurred to me, it wasn't such a surprise at all. The hangers-on wanted to make a scene right *in front* of Prince Gracius to make me appear scandalous.

Let's say you're interested in a man but have a rival for his affections. You might conspire to make your rival look bad in front of the object of your mutual interest. Even if they're totally innocent, you could concoct something and lay a trap to ensure scorn befalls them. That sort of downfall is common enough, both in novels and real life.

I was their rival for the prince's affections in this situation. I was closer to Prince Gracius than they were, and anyone else he could depend upon was in their way. In order to become his closest associates—to gain influence, in other words—they felt they had to dispose of any pesky interlopers.

I gasped sharply, quite forgetting the eyes around me. I wanted to ask how any upstanding adult could act so disgracefully. But of course, even in the world of adults, such low behavior was an everyday occurrence. All the more so if it was a means to seize power. Perhaps I had underestimated these men. I'd taken them for a group of small-time figures swarming around the prince to get something for nothing. However, there was nothing so unusual about such people causing major problems.

I was glad to have cleared up this remaining mystery at last. And yet, I felt a new urge to cradle my head in my hands. *What am I going to do? If I make this public, it will affect Prince Gracius's reputation, and he'll blame himself for*

putting me in such an awful position. Annoying though it may be, perhaps it's better to deal with the matter in secret.

Anyway, I've gained a grasp of the situation now, so I should make my exit for today. Later, I can report everything to Lord Simeon and Prince Severin and leave it in their hands. It's not that this has grown too much to handle... Rather, I can't just decide our course of action on my own.

Having settled on this, I put the tray down on a table. Prince Gracius would no doubt have royal guards present as an escort. I made my way to the door with the intention of covertly asking them for help and protection. *I can't approach Prince Gracius with the hangers-on surrounding him, and I wouldn't want to reduce his personal escort anyway. Better to look for the security posted outside.*

The maid uniform truly came in handy. No matter where I wandered, even to the ballroom's exit, I looked perfectly natural and no one questioned me. Maintaining an expression that said I was on some errand or other, I approached the way out.

From beyond the door, I suddenly heard quite a commotion. Others nearby turned to look as well, wondering what was going on. The door then flew open and new figures arrived.

I almost cried out in surprise again, but I frantically put my hands over my mouth. Military officers stood in array, still wearing their overcoats. Their vanguard was a tall, well-proportioned man with pale blond hair, an elegant bearing, and dashing good looks. His trained physique made him look dependable, and his narrow, silver-rimmed glasses projected shrewd intelligence. His pale features were refined without any hint of roughness, yet he had a roguish air about him nonetheless. *Oh my! Lord Simeon is here!*

The one I had wanted to see most of all, whom I had wanted beside me, had appeared with his subordinates in tow.

Chapter Ten

As Lord Simeon's eyes scanned the surprised crowd, they fell on me and stopped sharply. Our gazes met and entwined. Though his face had been exuding dangerous intensity, a look of surprise now found it, and I was quite sure I saw relief there as well. I myself felt tears welling up as the joy of relief found me.

No matter how large the crowd, no matter what guise I took on, he always found me without fail. He never walked past me without noticing I was there. Now, as ever, he had spotted me immediately and was approaching me directly. In my fervor, I wanted to run up to him...but that wouldn't do under the circumstances. With a sudden urgency, I gestured for him to stop.

A dubious look appeared on my husband's face. All the same, he stopped walking. With a small tilt of my head, I nodded toward the side rooms and started leading the way there. I picked up some silverware and dishcloths that happened to be sitting on a nearby table and exited the ballroom, pretending I was taking them to be cleaned.

I was sure that Lord Simeon would understand. Keeping careful watch to ensure that no one else was following, I went as far as the storeroom and stopped just outside of it. Before long, distant footsteps began to draw nearer. When Lord Simeon turned the corner, his face made it clear that he had endless questions to ask and things to say.

With a silent nod, I opened the door to the storeroom and ushered him inside. We both entered quietly, avoiding making any noise, then closed the door. At last, the tension left my shoulders.



“Lord Simeon!” I cried, dropping the miscellaneous objects I’d gathered and flying toward him.

He returned my embrace with his strong arms. “Marielle, are you all right? You’re not hurt, are you? Tell me if anything’s wrong.”

“I’m completely fine. I’m so sorry to have worried you.”

We both kept our voices subdued, but more intensity went into our embrace to make up for it. Lord Simeon felt around my back and shoulders as if to confirm I was truly uninjured. Then he stroked my head several times and kissed me on the cheek and the temple.

My word... This is the warmth I’ve been longing to feel. His reassuring arms and large body were a great comfort. With him here, I knew for certain that everything would be all right. He was right in front of me—I could touch him—and it made me so happy I could burst.

After I took a moment to convince him I was fine, Lord Simeon calmed down a touch and said, “When I heard you’d disappeared, it was as though my heart stopped beating. I thought there might be some activity around Prince Gracius, but I’d never have guessed *they* would go after you.”

His pretty face looked even paler than usual, and I doubted it was due only to the cold. I clasped my hands around his cheeks and stroked them, hoping to transmit some of my body heat to him. He relaxed slightly and let his forehead descend onto mine with a soft thump.

“Did you have some information?” I asked.

“Yes. Various reports have been arriving from the men stationed in Orta. And recently, there are all sorts of... Well, I can’t go into detail, but there have been some concerning developments. We’ve been discussing whether they might be planning something.”

“Goodness...”

That had to be the reason permission for our secret excursion was so hard to secure. Prince Gracius was already in a precarious position to begin with, and with disquieting reports coming in, it was no wonder Lord Simeon and Prince

Severin had been so nervous. Prince Gracius himself had never mentioned anything of the sort to me, so I had to wonder if he'd been left in the dark on the matter. Perhaps His Highness and His Majesty hadn't wanted to worry him.

"Did you see the letter?" I asked.

"I did. It's almost certainly a forgery, however. It's inconceivable that Prince Gracius wrote it." Though I'd wavered in coming to this conclusion, Lord Simeon stated it with confidence.

"I thought that might be the case, although I wasn't certain. I made sure to take precautions in the event that it turned out to be, but I didn't anticipate being kidnapped from inside the palace of all places."

He paused a moment. "I realize it's too late to say this now, but next time such a situation arises, please contact me straight away, meeting or otherwise. You wouldn't have been interrupting me on some frivolous personal matter, so there was no need for undue concern."

"I will," I replied, hanging my head. "Apologies."

A gentle sigh escaped his lips. "Well, I didn't tell you about any of this beforehand, and that's on my head. I'm glad that you were considerate enough to not want to interrupt the meeting. Still, it's common enough for me to have to leave on urgent business. There's a certain degree of flexibility in allowing people to be summoned from inside the room or given permission to enter. If I absolutely cannot excuse myself, I'll send instructions. And so, I ask you to please not take action on your own next time—well, I certainly hope there isn't a next time for *this*."

His final words made me chuckle. I raised my head and looked into his light blue eyes again, then our lips naturally drew closer together. Our glasses collided with a soft clink, which by now was an all-too-familiar occurrence. Even that made me happy in the moment. Being reunited with Lord Simeon like so brought me immeasurable joy.

I'd been forced to struggle alone in a hopeless situation, but the distress had melted and trickled away without a trace. All was fine now. Lord Simeon was here. By his side, I could brave anything and everything. His mere existence gave me courage.

“Now,” Lord Simeon began after our kiss, “what exactly happened? Tell me every detail, please.”

I briefly explained the sequence of events. I even touched on the reason for my abduction, albeit with the preface that my theory was only conjecture.

“Knowing what motivated this all, it’s rather dispiriting,” I added. “In the end, those aspiring hangers-on were one step ahead of us. Their work was impressively underhanded. If I hadn’t woken up when I did, right now I’d be—” I stopped short, my voice strangled when I saw Lord Simeon’s expression.

I’d been recounting events in the manner of an amusing anecdote, overwhelmed with relief as I was upon being reunited with my husband. However, when I looked up, the smile froze on my face, for I was met with a truly horrifying wrathful grimace. Blue flames blazed in his eyes, and murderous intent was starting to radiate from his entire body.

The intensity was so great that I seized up on the spot, lost for words. Noticing this, Lord Simeon hurriedly softened his expression. “I’m not angry with you. You must understand that. It’s *them* I cannot forgive.” He stroked my head again as he spoke, but I could still sense the anger welling within him. I could even hear his teeth grinding. “How *dare* they do such a thing to my precious Marielle? It’s the most vile...the most despicable behavior that I could ever imagine.”

His arms were quivering as they held me. *My word, he’s angry. Ridiculously angry. I mean, that’s a perfectly natural response. I’m angry too. I have no intention of letting this go unpunished. And yet...*

“I’ll kill them.”

His fiendish growl made me shudder. The words sounded as though they’d risen up from the gates of hell. *Eek! Calm down! Don’t fly off the handle! That won’t help one whit!*

He was boiling over with such violent rage that even I had no idea how to calm him. A change of topic seemed the only option. In a frantic attempt to change the subject, my voice faltered. “Lord Simeon,” I finally managed, “what brought you here? How did you know I would be here?”

Though the anger remained on his face, he took several deep breaths in an apparent effort to regain some measure of composure. “I didn’t. When I questioned the housemaid, it was clear that those hangers-on were behind this, so I came to put the screws on them and make them tell me where you were.”

I see. No wonder he arrived looking so furious. In the end, my escape was their salvation, I suppose. When a similar situation arose before, I heard he treated the culprit’s comrade very roughly indeed during the interrogation. He even said that the quickest way to make them talk was to inflict enough pain to make them think death was nigh. Such is the nature of a merciless demon. Despite his pretty face, he is a military man, after all.

“Since Prince Gracius is also in attendance, I thought it best to guard him just in case. I had to acknowledge the possibility that you weren’t the only target.”

“Yes, I saw him among the guests,” I replied. “I actually think he might be the one they’re really after... But Lord Lucio has a security detail, doesn’t he?”

“He does. I told them not to take their eyes off him even for a second. It’s purely a precaution, but anyway...” He sighed gently, having wrapped up that topic for now. “In protecting you like this, I’ve achieved my most pressing goal. What’s left is deciding what to do about those insolent wretches, but if we cause a fuss here, it will sully Prince Gracius’s name. Let’s withdraw for now and calmly figure out a way to obliterate them.”

I do wish you wouldn’t reel off a word like “obliterate” so casually.

“If possible, I’d like you to attack them mentally rather than physically,” I told him. “Instead of hurting them, strike fear into them in the true style of a brutal, blackhearted military officer. With a riding crop in your hand and a twisted smile on your face, you’ll drive them into a corner from which there’s no escape...” I chuckled darkly.

“If that’s your desire, then that’s what I shall do.”

Though my intent had been to pacify him, I had slipped into the realm of my delusions at some point. Lord Simeon returned to the door, taking me along with him. It seemed we were going to regroup with his men—but before we could even step out into the corridor, they were already rushing toward us.

“Vice Captain! There you are!”

“I see you found Marielle! Thank goodness. I hope she’s all right.”

“Oh, is that your wife? I was certain she was one of the serving staff.”

“I’m a little uncomfortable... Why does that outfit suit her so well? Actually, why is she dressed like that in the first place?”

Lord Simeon silenced his wide-eyed subordinates with his fists, then gave orders. “Explanations can come later. For now, we’ve successfully secured Marielle, so I’ll return home with her. We can’t arrest the culprits here, but I’d like you to keep Prince Gracius safe while—”

“Oh! About that!” one of the men interrupted. Rather than rebuking him, Lord Simeon urged him to continue with a gaze. “Apparently, Prince Gracius is feeling unwell and will return to the palace sooner than planned.”

Lord Simeon’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

I couldn’t keep myself from leaning forward. “He looked fine a few minutes ago! Could he have been...poisoned?!”

“No, it’s not that. Well, we can’t exclude the possibility altogether since he grew lightheaded so suddenly, but he’s hardly drunk a thing and everything that passed his lips was tasted first. Nor did he have any nausea or abdominal pain. Apparently, it seems as though it might be anemia.”

“Anemia, you say?” I was somewhat relieved to hear that, as I’d been imagining the worst. Still, I found it unlikely to be pure coincidence. The men we knew had nefarious intentions had been right next to him. There was a possibility that they’d drugged something for the prince *after* it had been tasted for poison. I couldn’t imagine that the hangers-on meant to kill Prince Gracius, but they might have given him a sedative, as they had me. That would fit with anemia-like symptoms.

“His escorts took him to a room nearby to recover and check on his condition. However, the men around him made a huge fuss, insisting that he see a doctor right away. It was ultimately decided that he should return to the palace, and a carriage is being readied as we speak.”

I looked at Lord Simeon's face and was unsurprised to see a stern expression on it. "Where is the prince now?" he asked his subordinate.

"I'll take you to him, sir."

The guard who had explained all this led us toward the room in question. When we got there, however, we found it deserted. Though we checked the other rooms nearby in case there had been some mistake, there was no sign of Prince Gracius anywhere.

"They must have left already," said one of the knights. "We told them we were going to fetch the Vice Captain."

"We must have just missed them," said another. "I expect we can still catch up, though."

Though the knights seemed unworried, Lord Simeon and I had quite a different reaction. A mere exchange of glances was enough to confirm we were in agreement before we started running.

Lord Simeon's men frantically gave chase. "Vice Captain?" one called.

"We need to go after them right away. The Ortans are the ones who abducted Marielle. They could be plotting something dreadful against Prince Gracius as well. Do *not* let them get away."

"Yes, sir!"

Even without a full explanation, the royal guards responded immediately and followed Lord Simeon's lead. Though this was all quite sudden, they trusted their superior officer and raised no objections. We all hurried off toward the entrance. Lord Simeon kept an arm firmly around my shoulders while the knights surrounded us. When members of Fleur et Papillon's staff caught sight of me, they looked surprised and curious as to what might be happening.

A manager dashed out from among them and addressed Lord Simeon. "Excuse me, is something the matter? Has one of our employees caused some sort of problem? I'd like to know more, so could I ask you to come this way please?" We reflexively stopped moving and looked at the short middle-aged man as he gestured toward a nearby office. "If there's...well...a need to take her in for questioning, could I please ask that you allow me to accompany her? I

doubt she'll feel comfortable talking if she's alone, and I'd like to gain a more thorough understanding of the situation as well, so I'd be much obliged."

What a good manager. He must be terrified, but he still stopped these military officers in their tracks to intervene on behalf of his employee. This must be a wonderful place to work. I wouldn't even mind being hired here. Terribly sorry, though! I don't actually work for you. I just borrowed a uniform without permission. Besides, can you really not tell that when you're this close to me? One of those people behind you should be pointing it out!

Faltering, I started to mutter an apology. However, Simeon stopped me. "Marielle," he said before turning to the manager. He undoubtedly felt as guilty as I did, as he was speaking in an entirely gentle tone. "There's nothing to worry about, let me assure you. This is an entirely unrelated matter. I'm afraid there's no time to explain right now, but you can rest easy. She isn't being taken in for questioning."

"Oh," the manager said, his voice wavering uncertainly. Still unconvinced, he tried to persist. "But—"

"I promise I will come back to explain at a later date. Apologies for causing such a fuss." With that, Lord Simeon ended the conversation firmly enough to brook no further reply.

Then, just as we were about to start walking again, another royal guard came running in from outside. "Vice Captain!" he cried in a tense voice.

Lord Simeon and all of his surrounding subordinates looked at the guard, concern instantly flashing across their faces. It was Second Lieutenant Mirbeau.

"What's wrong?" Lord Simeon asked him.

"It's those men who left with Prince Gracius. We told them you were coming, but they shook us off and departed."

We were just a fraction too late. Lord Simeon's expression grew even more severe. "How was the prince?"

"He looked limp, as though he'd passed out completely. His entourage carried him into the carriage."

“You just watched this happen? You didn’t check on him yourselves?”

“I’m... I’m sorry, sir! We... We did try, I assure you, but... No, there’s no excuse.”

Mirbeau shrank back at the rebuke from his superior officer. When I pictured the faces of the hangers-on, I could imagine what sort of exchange had transpired. Try as the guards might to get closer, the Ortans would have forced them back with some highly rude remarks or other. That shouldn’t have been enough to dissuade the knights, but pressing back too forcefully against men wielding their status would have been difficult without a superior officer present. The knights had no doctor with them either, so checking on Prince Gracius personally would have amounted to little. If he truly needed urgent medical attention, they must have decided backing down was the safest course of action.

However, the more we learned, the more concerning this all became. Lord Simeon continued with his questions. “What about his escort?”

“They accompanied the Ortans, of course. Only I stayed behind to inform you.”

If the knights charged with protecting the prince had followed, we hadn’t lost sight of him after all. Despite the cold, they were on horseback. A carriage would never be able to shake them off and escape.

And yet Lord Simeon fell silent, a troubled look still on his face. After a moment’s thought, he issued orders. “They only just left— isn’t that right? In that case, Lieutenant Joxe, hurry and follow them. No matter what the Ortans try to tell you, stop the carriage and check inside. The rest of you should follow different roads and look for any suspicious carriages. Second Lieutenants Tellier and Mirbeau, aim for the central district. Second Lieutenant Perret, you take the east side...”

He briskly reeled off assignments, assigning his men their separate ways. Surprise and doubt crossed the royal guards’ faces.

“Do you suspect that Prince Gracius isn’t in the carriage?” Mirbeau asked. “I saw them carry him into it. They couldn’t take him out along the way or change course either. Not with Second Major Proust and the others alongside them.”

“I’d like to believe that too, but I can’t help feeling like there’s more to this than meets the eye. It can’t be a coincidence that as soon as we stepped in, they left straight away. And if they’re running, they wouldn’t go back to the palace without something else planned. It would be diving into the hornet’s nest.”

“Because they were involved in your wife’s abduction?”

“Exactly,” Lord Simeon confirmed. “If they ran off without even trying to look innocent, they must know pursuit is unavoidable. Why take the prince with them, then? If they’re merely clinging to him of their own accord, it would have been quicker to escape on their own. They didn’t need any pretext to leave.”

“That’s true...”

Everyone exchanged glances and cocked their heads in puzzlement. As Lord Simeon had said, the Ortans’ actions were quite inscrutable.

“Maybe they’re planning to use him as a shield,” one of the knights suggested.

“Or they planned to abduct him too all along,” said another.

“Is it possible they’re actually opposed to the monarchy’s restoration?” a third asked.

After some consideration, Lord Simeon replied, “I’m doubtful that we can conclude that.” However, he seemed unable to offer any plausible explanation himself. He brought a hand to his chin to think further.

I racked my brain too. What if the hangers-on really were among those opposed to Prince Gracius ascending the throne after all? *Well, I considered, if that were the case, there would surely be no need to invent a scandal about me to win the prince over, would there? The intention behind that had to be to make him lose trust in me and put distance between us. Anti-monarchists would have no reason to do such a thing.* It didn’t make any sense. My mind was a complete jumble.

“They may have support lying in wait somewhere,” Lord Simeon said. “If there’s an ambush, they might be able to shake our escort and make their escape. However, using that carriage as a decoy from the start would be easier.

They could get away at their leisure while we chase down the wrong target.”

“A decoy?” That word set off a spark somewhere in my mind. I hadn’t meant to say anything aloud, but when I did, all eyes fell on me. There was no time to apologize for interrupting. I’d overlooked something very important! “Isaac!” I exclaimed animatedly. “What about Isaac?!”

Mirbeau jerked back slightly. “I-Isaac?”

“Prince Gracius’s closest companion. His attendant who’s always by his side! He’s about thirty, wears glasses, and has a slightly timid air about him.”

“Oh, yes, I know who you mean. What of him?”

“Who was serving as the prince’s food and drink taster? Was it Isaac, by any chance?”

“It was,” Mirbeau replied after a pause. “Yes. They shared a little champagne, and he drank it first.”

“When Prince Gracius was put into the carriage, where was Isaac? Did he get in at the same time?”

Mirbeau hesitated. “I don’t think so. I didn’t see him there. Now that I think, where *did* he go? When we went to the side room, he was with the prince.”

Isaac had vanished at some point. Hearing that, Lord Simeon’s expression darkened.

“If Prince Gracius were suffering from a bout of ill health,” I said, “Isaac wouldn’t have left his side. He’s the only one officially recognized as the prince’s attendant, after all. Someone so devoted to his master abandoning him during such an emergency? It’s unthinkable. No matter how high-handed the hangers-on were behaving, he would do whatever it took to stay by the prince’s side.”

“What explains his disappearance, then?” Mirbeau asked.

“The champagne must indeed have been drugged. Not enough to cause loss of consciousness, but it probably made Isaac feel ill. They took advantage of that.”

There was no need for me to finish my explanation. Understanding exactly

what I was getting at, Lord Simeon instructed his men. “All of you, spread out as I directed a moment ago. It was probably Isaac you saw placed in the carriage. The likelihood is that they’re using him as a decoy to spirit Prince Gracius away. Lieutenant Joxe, your job is to confirm this—and once you do, arrest the Ortans who are present. After that, please join the search if you can. If anyone finds the prince, signal with a whistle.”

“Yes, sir!” the royal guards replied with a salute, their voices sharp as whips. As they all took off running, the Fleur et Papillon employees watched on, dumbfounded.

Once the knights were gone, only Lord Simeon and I were left. “Are you going to wait here on standby?” I asked him.

“No, the search party isn’t large enough for that. I’ll set out too. There’s a chance they haven’t gone far yet, so I’ll search the perimeter.”

As he spoke, he started taking off his coat for some reason. I puzzled over this for a moment—*Isn’t he about to go outside?*—only for him to drape it over my shoulders.

“It’s cold out, so you should wear this.”

I felt myself surrounded by the body heat still lingering in the garment. “What? But—”

“I’m sure you’d rather go straight home and rest, but I don’t have time to escort you. Could I ask you to endure just for a little longer?” He bent down and looked at me with searching eyes.

Without the slightest hesitation, I nodded in agreement. I of course had no desire to go home by myself whatsoever. In fact, I’d been intending to ask him to bring me along. “I’m worried about Lord Lucio too. If you’ll let me, I’ll gladly join you in the search. Won’t I get in the way, though? I’m sure I can find some way to get home, so I don’t mind if you leave me behind.”

“I would mind,” he replied with a hint of a strained smile. He stroked my head. “I only just learned you were safe. Stay by my side. I’ll have peace of mind knowing you’re close enough for me to protect you. Besides, if you’re here, you can help me look for clues. If you notice anything as you did just now, please tell

me.”

Joy and courage welled up in me. “I will!”

He not only wanted to protect me—he also wanted my capabilities. Lord Simeon was here to keep me safe, and moreover, I could be of use to him. I was so ecstatic that all my fatigue was cast aside completely!

We left Fleur et Papillon in a hurry. There was no snow outside, and deathly silent darkness had descended. Ordinary stores and other businesses were long closed at this hour. On the desolate city streets, Fleur et Papillon alone shone brightly, brilliantly, looking like it existed in a world all its own divorced from reality.

The nighttime cold was unrelenting, just as Nicole had predicted earlier upon leaving the house. My ears were painfully numb. The Latour River wasn’t far, lending strength to the chilly winter wind. If it weren’t for the coat Lord Simeon had so kindly lent me, I doubt I’d have survived thirty minutes. The garment was far too large on me, but I was actually grateful under the circumstances that my fingers didn’t poke out from the sleeves.

Lord Simeon, however, was suffering the cold in my stead. Seeing him in nothing but his dazzling white uniform—eye-catching in this darkness—made me more uneasy than anything.

“I can manage without your coat,” I told him. “You must be freezing.”

“You needn’t worry. I’m wearing layers of felt and flannel, so I’m fairly warm despite appearances. Nor are there gaps for drafts to enter, as there tend to be in women’s clothing. Military uniforms are generally designed with outdoor activity in mind, so they’re made to repel the cold.”

He sounded entirely unconcerned, contrary to my worries, yet neither his assurance nor his snappy pace were enough to completely assuage my guilt. Still, I knew he wouldn’t listen if I insisted on returning his coat. The one and only way to resolve this was to find Prince Gracius as quickly as possible. Not only for the prince’s own sake, but for Lord Simeon’s and mine as well—for us to be able to get back to our warm home—I looked around, ready to put my all into the search.

Only, how exactly are we supposed to find anything with only two of us? Wandering around at random would do no good. I suppose we'd better stop and think this through first.

"When you sent everyone off in different directions," I began, "it was under the assumption that the prince's captors took him in a carriage, no?"

"Indeed."

"But if their plan was to draw attention to a decoy whilst they sneaked off, would they really use a carriage? You *would* need a vehicle to transport someone without their consent, but a carriage is quite visible, not to mention loud. If they'd left the party that way while it was still ongoing, people would have noticed, don't you think?"

"That's true," he agreed. Then, as if he'd stumbled across the same thought I'd had, he immediately looked toward the river. "They could be using a boat."

"Exactly," I said, agreeing with him in turn. The Latour was large enough to host a great deal of traffic, including both pleasure cruises and transport ships alike. A getaway in a boat under cover of darkness was entirely plausible. "Is there a wharf anywhere nearby?"

"I'm not sure. But I do know that heading downriver from here will quickly bring you to the port. Their plan might be to board a passenger ship there and take him straight out of the country."

"Back to Orta, you mean?"

"That's one possibility."

While talking, we ran over to the riverside and looked for stairs leading down to a wharf. A lamplit promenade followed the Latour, so it wasn't too dark to see where we were going. If the hangers-on had whisked Prince Gracius away by boat, there *had* to be river access close by.

Lord Simeon decided we should split up to cover more ground. I moved downstream, following the flow of the river. Looking out over its surface, all I could see was pitch black. The city lights didn't shine far beyond the bank. A small boat could have sailed right past me and I might not have been any the wiser.

Regardless, the priority is finding out if there's a wharf around here. Then we can move on to determining if they really used it or not.

I gathered up the collar of Lord Simeon's coat and tucked in my chin to stave off the cold night breeze to press on at a half-run. Just then, I saw a couple of men walking toward me from the opposite direction. Surely no one would be out for a casual stroll at this hour, but the pair appeared to be making their way along the promenade without a care in the world. I stopped moving, hoping they weren't up to no good, and huddled up by a tree on the roadside. *Perhaps they'll walk right past without noticing me. If they do spot me, maybe I'll convince them I'm the ghost of a woman who was betrayed by a man and cast herself into the river.*

As I mused over this admittedly silly idea, I listened to the voices of the approaching men. I had a strange sense that I recognized them—and this made me quite forget to suppress my presence. The pair, who gave off the air of two friends enjoying a night in the city, stopped when they laid eyes on me. One of the men had hair that shone brightly even in the night. In contrast, his skin was almost a deep enough shade to blend in among the darkness. His companion, meanwhile, had black hair and pale skin.

"Marielle?!" came an unmistakably familiar voice. "What in the world are you doing out here?!"

"Truly? Is that you, Marielle?" asked the second man, whose voice I also knew well.

With a sigh of relief, I emerged from the shadows of the tree. "Good evening, you two. What are you up to at this time of night?"

"This really isn't the time for an ordinary hello," said the man with black hair. "You really surprised us. Even scared me a little, to be honest."

"Agreed," said the blond. "The way you were standing there in a daze, I thought you might be the ghost of a woman who was betrayed by a man and cast herself into the river."

"Aha! I knew it. Seeing me in a place like this *would* make you think that."

"That, or perhaps a woman who was being financially exploited by some

good-for-nothing man. After an argument, he killed her and threw her body in the water.”

“Do you *have* to make it so brutal?” the black-haired man objected, silencing us. “Anyway, the reason you’re a ghost isn’t what matters. Would you mind telling us what you’re doing here?”

Suddenly, I could hear footsteps coming our way. Having overheard our loud exchange, Lord Simeon was running over. “Marielle!”

The black-haired man pulled a face. “Ack. The Vice Captain appears.”

“Ah, so it was a couple who couldn’t be together and committed a lovers’ suicide,” his companion suggested.

“Certainly not!” I rebutted. “Should anyone have stood in the way of our love, we would have eloped! If we became ghosts, it would only be because we were separated by some cruel twist of fate and both perished full of regret at never reuniting.”

“I must say, if a ghost came rushing at me *that* quickly, I’d be terrified.”

Lord Simeon had arrived quick as a flash and inserted himself between me and the men. Only then did he realize exactly who they were. For a moment, no one seemed to know quite what to say, and we all stared at each other in silence. When I looked around wondering who would open their mouth first, I decided it would have to be me and raised my hand to speak. “Once again, allow me to say good evening. You see, I’m actually a woman who was kidnapped and separated from my husband, then forced to brave it alone. Then, upon our joyous reunion, we discovered that the prince has been abducted, hence we’re in the middle of chasing down the culprits.”

All was silent but a chilly gust rustling past us.

“That’s a lot to take in,” said the black-haired man. “What I really gather here is that you’re a woman who gets herself into some fine messes.”

“Anyway, you can join and assist us! Isn’t that great, Lord Simeon? We have more helping hands now!”

The same man pulled a face again. “We don’t have a choice in the matter?!”

Hold your horses. We don't even really know what's going on here!"

Needless to say, the pair I'd unexpectedly encountered by the river was Ambassador Nigel—a man who was perhaps even mightier than Lord Simeon when it came to a fight—and the mysterious thief Lutin himself, known for his quick-witted resourcefulness. They would be heartening allies indeed.



Chapter Eleven

I'd known for quite some time that Ambassador Nigel and Lutin were on friendly terms. That night was a typical example, they explained; they'd had a drink together, then set out on a stroll to sober up. Our respective parties were equally surprised to have bumped into the other, but given the small size of our search operation, we found it a welcome coincidence.

"Is it truly a coincidence, though?" Lord Simeon asked, withholding any straightforward expression of joy. Instead, he glared at the pair—especially Lutin—with a great deal of suspicion. "I'd have assumed you were following us and knew about this all along."

Not one to back down, Lutin snorted. "I wish I had. Imagine His Highness the Crown Prince's most trusted lapdog letting Prince Gracius be snatched right from under his nose. *That* must have been a sight to behold. I gladly would have taken a ringside seat."

Sparks crackled between their glowering eyes. *Are they incapable of having a normal conversation?*

I barged my way between them. "There's no time to be arguing! You'll have plenty of opportunity for that *after* we resolve our current predicament."

I swear! The longer we spend talking, the farther they carry Prince Gracius away from us!

Under the weight of my glare, Lord Simeon took on an awkward expression. Lutin, meanwhile, shrugged his shoulders in feigned ignorance.

As for Ambassador Nigel, he chuckled and lent me his support. "You raise a good point. While we stand around here, they're getting away. I take it you're assuming they escaped by boat?"

I gave Lord Simeon another strong look, prompting him to reply with a nod. "Potentially. Or a carriage, but I've sent my men to search for him over land. We're short on manpower, however, so we're only able to cover the most

major roads. The Ortans aren't familiar with the area, so I believe the chances of them taking any backstreet routes is low. That said, the likelihood that they're sailing downriver toward the port does seem high."

"Hmm, that would make sense," the ambassador agreed.

Such talk reminded me of our true purpose by the riverside. "That's right! Lord Simeon, did you find a wharf?"

"No, there doesn't appear to be one nearby. It can't be too much farther to the next one, however."

"You're looking for a wharf, are you?" Ambassador Nigel looked at Lutin. "Didn't that staircase a little way back look like it might lead down to one?"

With all eyes on him, Lutin nodded, appearing less than enthusiastic. "Yes, I saw it. There was a boat sailing downstream too."

"Really?" I asked.

"It had no lights, so it would have been easy to miss if you weren't looking closely."

I inadvertently let out a most gormless exclamation, quite forgetting any sense of decorum. Lord Simeon looked rather exasperated all of a sudden. I pressed closer to Lutin. "Why didn't you tell us that sooner?! A boat on the river on a night like this, with no lights, is *obviously* suspicious!"

"I thought it'd be better to hear your explanation first."

He was playing the fool so thoroughly that it *had* to be on purpose. I stamped my foot in frustration. *He must have understood the urgency of the situation!* Lord Simeon was emanating a disturbingly menacing aura, but the carefree Lutin only chuckled.

"No need to be in such a hurry," he said. "Once they're on the water, all they can do is follow the river downstream. They can't turn off into any side roads or hide behind any buildings. And at this hour, with no lights on, they can't sail too fast either. Catching up to them will be a breeze."

"Do you think Prince Gracius was on that boat?"

"Who knows? I have no proof either way. All I'm saying is that I saw a

suspicious boat. Sans-Terre has more than its fair share of shady characters. It could be totally unrelated.”

“But—” I began, but Lord Simeon halted my objection. He stared fixedly at Lutin as if to discern his true intentions, and Lutin looked back at him defiantly. This silent staring match continued for several seconds.

Then Lord Simeon said, “We’ll go after it.” He wasted no time dithering. Having come to a quick decision, he darted back toward where he’d left his horse.

“Ah, you came by horse,” Ambassador Nigel observed. He then turned to his companion. “What shall we do, then?”

“The Vice Captain seems raring to go, so let’s leave this up to—” Interrupted by my glare, Lutin smiled wryly and added, “All right, yes. I’ll see to our needs.”

He set off running, though I didn’t know to where. *See to our needs? How? In what sense?* There was no time to ask before Lord Simeon returned. After he pulled me up onto the horse with him, Ambassador Nigel saw us off with a friendly wave.

“You go on ahead,” he said. “We’ll catch up to you.”

“Please do,” my husband replied with a hint of a nod, then set the horse running.

A blast of air washed over me, even colder than before. I drew as close to Lord Simeon as I could, my arms wrapped around him. Sharing in his body heat was all that made the ride bearable.

There was every chance of overlooking a boat on the pitch-black river if we were galloping at full speed, so we kept to a light canter as we strained our eyes surveying the water. Lord Simeon had to keep looking ahead, so the search mainly fell to me. The night was dark and the river was quite far, making it a tough job for someone with my bad eyesight. I lifted my glasses up slightly and squinted, hoping to spy the silhouette of a boat somewhere on the water.

It was some time and some distance before I finally caught sight of something floating on the surface. “What’s that?” I asked Lord Simeon.

He stopped the horse. "In which direction?"

"There—do you see it? It's just passing in front of the church on the opposite bank."

He stared for a moment. "Indeed, I do."

The boat was sailing down the middle of the wide river, shrouded in darkness and thus almost invisible. There was no snow tonight. The moonlight peering down through the gaps in the clouds glinted on the water. The shadowy blot on the river's surface was the only indication anything was there.

"Could that be the boat Lutin mentioned?" I asked.

"Most likely. There can't be too many without lights."

"True."

Sailing at night was dangerous, so most boats would be moored by this hour. To be out sailing anyway, much less without a single light, was inherently suspicious. Was Prince Gracius aboard, or was this entirely unrelated? Even if we wanted to find out, we were on land, and they were quite far from the bank. That meant coming up with some sort of plan.

Lord Simeon set his horse moving at a pace to match the boat. Lutin and Ambassador Nigel had not yet caught up with us.

"They'll have to dock at the port or close to it, won't they? Maybe we could board them then," I suggested.

"That would be quite tough to manage," Lord Simeon replied, looking ahead with a groan. "We won't be able to follow the river in a straight line. Not with so many obstacles."

Indeed, there were numerous buildings dotted along the bank ahead that would mean taking a detour around them. There was a real risk we'd lose sight of the boat in the process.

"If only it were lighter out," I said. "Then we'd easily be able to find it again even if we did have to take our eyes off it for a moment."

"I'll have to jump down onto it when it goes under the next bridge."

“That sounds dangerous.” The height of the bridge concerned me, and he wouldn’t be aiming for solid ground. Even if he did successfully jump down onto the boat, I wasn’t confident in a safe landing. In the worst case, he could severely injure himself. “Can’t we borrow another boat and sail over to them?”

“We’d need someone to pilot the boat, but there won’t be anyone around at this time of night. And calling someone would take time we don’t have.”

“Hmm. Then what about asking the military to send a boat out? Don’t they have security vessels? And there are police boats too, aren’t there?”

“That would take time as well. Beyond that, we don’t know for sure that Prince Gracius is aboard this boat, only that it looks suspicious. If we’re wrong, there’s a risk that the Ortans will catch wind of the resulting chaos. The only way to stop them quickly and with certainty, without them realizing we’re on their tail, is a surprise attack.”

“But...” I began before noticing the sound of hooves drawing closer. Lutin and Ambassador Nigel had finally reached us. We hailed them and quickly informed them we’d spotted the boat.

“I agree with the Vice Captain,” the ambassador said, true to his rough-and-ready nature. In contrast to his elegant appearance, he was in fact a man of action. “They’re right in front of our eyes, so the quickest way to find out is to descend on them and see for ourselves.”

“Surely that’s far too dangerous,” I insisted.

“No military officer’s going to be afraid of taking a few risks,” Lutin remarked as if the matter had nothing to do with him.

Evidently, I was the only objector. None of the men shared my concerns.

“Don’t worry,” Lord Simeon assured me. “The bridge isn’t excessively tall. I’ll be able to jump down with no major difficulty.”

“And if you aim badly, you’ll just fall in the water. It’s not like you’ll die,” Lutin commented. “You can swim, can’t you, Vice Captain?”

“Of course,” my husband responded, “but it’s a needless worry in any case. My aim will be true.”

“You talk big, but we’ll see if it pays off in practice. Anyway, as long as you can swim.”

Amid this friendly banter, we’d reached an agreement and thus set off without further delay. Our destination was Aurore Bridge, a steel construction made of a series of arches atop stone piers. It was notable for its delicate structure, as the metalwork was arranged in a pattern that made it look like woven fabric. We got off our horses in the middle of the bridge and waited for the boat to approach.

“Are you really going to be able to do this?” When I looked down at the water’s surface, it didn’t look like any short distance to me. Courage was failing me.

Ambassador Nigel leaned over the edge and peered down himself. “It looks like we could get about halfway down by climbing the steel. We could then either hang down above the boat or wait at the boat’s level and jump from one of the piers. Yes, I’m sure that’ll work.”

No sooner had he said that than he handed his beloved sword cane to Lutin, climbed over the guardrail, and vanished. *My, that was quick. Like a monkey.* Lord Simeon, too, removed his glasses and handed them to me.

“If we find Prince Gracius, I’ll blow my whistle. It won’t be a call for help, so there’ll be no need to panic. Please simply stand by here.”

“All right,” I replied, still nervous. “Be careful.”

“I will. Don’t worry.” Smiling, he kissed me on the nose. This did please me to a certain extent, since it was rather cold. *But why my nose? I’d rather he kiss me on the lips.*

He glanced at Lutin for a second but didn’t say another word before climbing over the railing after Ambassador Nigel. When I leaned over as far as I could to look, I spied both men descending the structure and making it look like the safest thing in the world. From where they were now, it did indeed look like they’d be able to jump onto the boat easily.

Lutin came up beside me and tugged at the collar of the coat I was wearing. “If you lean that far, you’ll fall.”

“Aren’t you going too?”

“Better to leave one person behind to deal with any unpleasant surprises, wouldn’t you say?” He leaned his elbow on the guardrail and rested his chin in his hand. Then he held up the ambassador’s sword cane for me to see.

“Besides, I’ve been entrusted with this. That’s a clear sign that I’m supposed to stay here and hold the fort, so I’d better be a good little boy.”

Lord Simeon hadn’t told him that specifically, but he hadn’t asked Lutin to follow either. Perhaps he was right. Did that mean they’d silently communicated and agreed on it? Despite how badly they got along, when push came to shove, they could trust each other and work together. *Men’s relationships with one another are something of a mystery to me, I must say.*

I collected myself and looked for the boat. By now, it had gotten much closer. It probably wouldn’t be long before it passed under the bridge. Holding my breath, I waited for that moment. *Please—this has to work.* As I reflexively brought my hands together in prayer, the vessel slowly sailed right up to the bridge.

There was a noise. I leaned out again and tried to see what, but by then, the boat was under the bridge. I ran to the railing on the opposite side.

“Did it work?!”

“Well, we didn’t hear a splash, so they probably didn’t miss and end up in the drink.”

As I waited, my heart beating out of my chest, the boat finally reappeared beneath us. The same instant, I heard rowdy voices.

“Ah, yes, it’s all happening,” Lutin remarked in a casual tone.

“It’s all happening”? Does that mean they landed safely? It does, doesn’t it? For the time being, at least, I breathed a sigh of relief. That said, I wasn’t sure what we were supposed to do next. The boat was steadily sailing away now. *Should we stay here or follow?*

I gasped as a shrill, high-pitched noise cut through the night air. *It’s Lord Simeon. That’s the signal to say he found Prince Gracius. Yes! We were right! It was that boat!*

“Come on!” I said to Lutin. “Let’s go after them.”

“Really? Weren’t we told to stay put?” He was still leaning on the railing and sounded as though he really couldn’t be bothered.

Twisting my face into a sullen scowl, I pocketed Lord Simeon’s glasses, rolled up the overly long sleeves of his coat to free my hands, and marched back over to the horse.

“What do you think pursuing them is going to achieve? You can’t exactly do much to help.”

“That doesn’t mean I can simply stand here. They might need a liaison, for example. Anyway, I’m going. You can stay if you want to!”

I inserted my foot into the stirrup and threw myself up into the saddle with a cry of exertion. Lord Simeon’s dear horse knew me. When I took the reins, he started moving with no resistance. I navigated back to the riverbank and set the horse running downriver. I had to take a detour here and there, hurrying as I went to make up for lost time. Soon, I was slightly ahead of the boat. Another bridge came into view, so I decided to stop there temporarily and assess the situation.

Close to the bridge, I slowed the horse to a walking pace. With no gloves on, my hands were painfully cold. They were so frozen I couldn’t move them properly. My ears were numb too. Even with a coat, the wind cut right through me. It was almost too much to bear. Still, I knew Lord Simeon had to be worse off since he’d given me his coat to wear. I doubted Prince Gracius had much protection from the cold either. He’d been spirited away straight from the party. How could I whine, thinking about that?

I clutched my collar in an effort to warm my neck, even if slightly, and guard against the wind. That was when I heard a buoyant clapping approaching. Lutin had followed me, leading a horse with no rider behind him.

“So you *did* come.”

“I couldn’t exactly let you go on your own.”

“It’s late to be asking this, but where did you get those horses from, anyway?”

Lutin positioned himself between me and the river, blocking the wind ever so slightly. *Did he do that on purpose to shield me, or am I letting my imagination run away with me?*

“We borrowed them from a police officer on his rounds. The Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights’ good name has some influence, you know. He was only too glad to lend them to us.”

My eyes narrowed. *In other words, he took them by force and pinned the blame on Lord Simeon.*

With laughter, he added, “I also asked the officer to alert the knights who have been running around nearby. If he does his job properly, backup should come soon.”

I paused for a moment, then decided not to press him further. “Let’s hope so.”

Turning my eyes back to the water, I wondered if the boat had caught up to us yet. Clouds had covered the moon, so I’d lost sight of it. The sturdy stone bridge we stood on had a docking area for vessels at its base. And below us was another level of the bank—a fairly expansive area with a number of small boats moored. I stopped my horse right next to the slope leading down to it, then looked out at the water for the boat that would hopefully be arriving.

“Can you see it?” I asked Lutin.

“Hmm.” He paused a moment. “Is that it over there? Look, there’s a tiny light.”

“Oh? Where?” A moment later, I said, “Ah, you’re right!”

It was so small that I still wasn’t entirely sure it was the right thing, but there was definitely a light visible where Lutin was pointing. Some kind of lantern flickered above the pitch-dark river like a fallen star.

“There was no lamplight on before,” I observed.

“Probably the Vice Captain’s doing. I doubt it’d take long for *those two* to take control.”

The light didn’t appear to be headed downstream. Rather, it was approaching

us—very likely to come ashore. Too impatient to stay put, I set the horse moving again and rode down the slope. The boats near the bridge were all tightly packed together with no free space between them. The incoming ship would have to dock farther away. I searched for a good spot, thinking I might be able to help guide the ship in.

Just then, a light flared up very close by. In my surprise, I turned to look. One of the nearby boats had people aboard it. Without particularly meaning to, I stopped my horse. Lutin came to halt beside me too.

“Someone’s there,” I remarked. “Perhaps they heard the noise we were making and thought it suspicious.”

“I don’t think we’ve been making that much noise.”

It wasn’t especially unusual for people to sleep aboard ships overnight. The sound of horse hooves might have awoken someone. *Only, something doesn’t seem right. Oh, yes—the sails are unfurled. Why wouldn’t they have put them up when mooring the boat?*

Curiously, I looked at the vessel only to realize that it was getting farther away, little by little. “It’s moving.” It was about to leave the bank. *On a night like this?* It was all so odd that I couldn’t help harboring doubts.

Lutin tutted, evidently feeling the same. “Not good. They laid an ambush.”

“This ship is working with the culprits, you mean?”

“Hard to imagine there’s no connection at all. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d planned to meet up here all along.” As he spoke, Lutin got down from his horse and dropped Ambassador Nigel’s sword cane. “You stay here. Don’t do anything rash, all right?”

Before I had time to answer, Lutin was bounding away from the riverbank. He landed on a moored boat and ran along it, then jumped nimbly again. With his always-impressive agility, he leaped over to the ship that was still inching away from the shore.

The vessel started moving against the current, making clever use of the wind blowing from downstream. Ahead was the small light that marked the boat Lord Simeon had boarded. *Did this other ship sense something wrong and set*

sail to help, perhaps? Lutin ran across its deck. Noticing the intruder, the figures on board came for him. Now I had another reason to be concerned. *Will he really be all right on his own?*

Unable to do anything else, I watched from the bank, wishing for everyone to make it back in one piece. For nothing else to go wrong.

It would be nice if I could at least put a light on here as a signal. I doubt Lord Simeon and Ambassador Nigel can see much of the shore. Should I see what I can find in the moored boats? Or would it be quicker to go back up the bank and ask for help at one of the buildings that looks like it has people inside?

Fretting, I looked around—and suddenly, the water was aglow. When I turned in shock to see why, I spied bright red flames. Blazing crimson on the dark river was the boat Lord Simeon had boarded. *Fire! The ship is burning! No... What's happening?!*

“Lord Simeon!” My head throbbed with fear and confusion. I dismounted, practically tumbling off of the horse, and ran up the bank. *He's not that far now... He's so close. But he's still so far from shore. I can't get any closer.*

“Lord Simeon! Lord Lucio! Ambassador Nigel!” I cried in a desperate wail. What had happened to them? The two vessels were so close to each other that they looked liable to collide, and now flames were spewing from one of them. *The second ship was in league with the culprits, right?! What on earth is going on—what is Lutin doing? He couldn't also have...*

“Someone!” I yelled as loudly as I could. “Fire! A boat is burning! Please, anyone! Come and help!”

Please. Someone hear me. Help us. Save Lord Simeon!

“Fire!” I exclaimed again, drawing out the sound.

Whether my cries had drawn attention or the fire itself had, I heard flurried voices from the road above. *Please, help us. Come, quickly.*

As people started to appear in twos and threes, I pleaded with them. “There are people on that boat! Please, you have to—”

That was when a tremor ran through the air and a thrumming resonated in

my ears. Screams rose up from the street. The horses whinnied in shock as well. I knew that sensation. That impact. I'd experienced it at close range multiple times now. It was...

Holding my breath, I turned back to the river. Right before my eyes was a boat so blasted to pieces that it barely resembled a ship anymore.

I choked, unable to form words. I couldn't even breathe properly. Convulsive wheezing escaped my throat, and I collapsed to the ground. With my hands on the cold of the man-made bank, I watched as the burning ship sank.

"I... No... This...can't be... Oh, no..." Tears welled forth. The vessel vanished from my distorted field of view. "No, it... It can't... Lord Simeon!"

I couldn't even think anymore. Even though I knew somewhere in my mind that it would do no good, that I shouldn't follow my instinct, I didn't have the power of reason left to stop myself. I had to get over to the boat. I leaned out over the river...

And a sharp whistle sounded.

Just as I was on the verge of diving into the water, the high-pitched noise stopped me in my tracks. As I came to my senses with a gasp, the loud screech reached my ears a second time, then a third. The still-intact ship stopped moving. I could see someone standing on its deck. Large arms were waving—a signal in my direction. The whistle blew again.

Lord Simeon!

Relief shot through my entire body in a unified burst. *You're safe! Oh, Lord Simeon! You're all right!* Tears welled again, and I let out a soft wail. *Thank goodness. He must have switched ships just in the nick of time. Did Lutin help him, maybe? Oh, thank you, God!*

I managed to get to my feet and wave back. *Can he see me from there?* Strength returned to me and I jumped up and down on the spot. "Lord Simeon! I'm over here! I'm right over—"

I stopped short as I let out a yelp. Something cold had suddenly touched my ankle. Shocked anew, I looked down and saw a man crawling out of water, soaking wet, like a monster emerging from the depths. He'd grabbed my leg.

“Damn you,” he grunted in rage, his breathing ragged.

It was one of the criminals. He must have escaped and swam to shore. Panicking, I tried to pull my foot away so I could run—but I couldn’t shake him. Instead, I lost my balance and fell to the ground.

“Get off!” I exclaimed. “Let me go!”

Despite my frantic resistance, he was too strong. He rose up, water audibly dripping off of him, and this time grabbed me by the neck. “We were so close! But you had to get in our way!”

Straining, I replied, “Don’t... Don’t waste your effort! Backup will be here any minute! The police will come running after seeing that explosion too. If you resist, it’ll only make things worse for you. Give up!”

“Shut it, wench! Worthless prattle from a woman!”

Whether he was trying to hit me or shove me away, I wasn’t sure, but his thick arms swept me off my feet again just as I had almost gotten up. The pain and shock made me want to cry, but this was no time to lose heart. I pushed my hands against the ground, determined to find *some* way to escape, and my hand met a thin, cylindrical object. It was Ambassador Nigel’s sword cane—the very one Lutin had discarded earlier.

I picked it up at once. When I tried to stand, however, I stepped on the hem of my skirt and fell back onto my bottom. Still on the ground, I scooted away while grasping the handle and the sheath, then pulled them each in opposite directions. What looked like it should have been one solid cane came apart with a click, and a slim blade appeared from inside the shaft.

The man, who was reaching his hands out toward me again, froze for a moment. But he swiftly started coming at me again, presumably judging that I was no threat to him even with a weapon.

“Don’t waste *your* effort,” he grunted. “Be my hostage like a good little girl. Then I won’t have to hurt you.”

“I refuse!”

I drew out the blade in one swift motion, grasped my skirt, and rose to my

feet. Then I brandished the sword, shaking it in a warning for the man not to come any closer.

He uttered a grunt of frustration. “Why, you...”

“Help, police! This man is working with kidnappers! Save meee!”

I didn’t know if there were any officers nearby, but there were plenty of curious onlookers. Hoping that *someone* would come to my aid if I made enough noise, I kept shouting as I waved the sword about.

“I’m coming, young lady!” an intrepid voice responded. A man emerged from the crowd of bystanders and came barreling down the slope. From his distinctive hat and uniform, I could tell immediately that he was with the police.

Wow, it worked! That’s the value of crying for help!

“It’s all right now!” the fresh-faced officer gallantly exclaimed, still running toward us. “I’m coming, so have no fear!”

The man attacking me stopped moving, wavering as to whether he should escape or not.

“You there!” the officer cried. “Come quietly now, scoundrel!” Without a hint of hesitation, he bravely leaped at the criminal.

However...

“Shut up, you! Out of the way!”

“Gah!”

With a single blow, the criminal easily intercepted and repelled the policeman.

“G-Goodness...”

This sequence of events was all too much. My shoulders slumped. *That’s excessively unimpressive, surely! I know police officers don’t receive the same strict training as military men, but they still have to keep the citizens safe, don’t they? Was I wrong to expect him to fare a little better than that?!*

The policeman toppled over, but he wasn’t ready to admit defeat. He withstood the pain and quickly picked himself up. His will to fight had survived.

“Ngh, curse you! Your resistance is useless!” As he stood, his words alone were strong and forceful.

Useless? I’m not sure that’s how I would have described that punch...

“You’re not getting away!” he continued. “Come quietly and I won’t— Gah!”

As I watched, rather miffed, the officer fell backward with another yelp of pain. Only this time, it wasn’t a punch that had caused it; he still hadn’t gotten close enough for that. Instead, he’d been struck by the hind legs of my horse, which was agitated by all the commotion.

“Ow,” the policeman complained. “Wait, d-don’t bite me! That hurts!” He cried out in pain again.

“Mercure, no!” I exclaimed. “You mustn’t do that! Stop!”

A man of the law beset by a horse was a truly comical sight, but this was no time to be laughing. Being trampled would result in serious injuries, so I stepped in to calm the beast—but in doing so, I carelessly forgot about the danger already right next to me.

A hand roughly yanked me back in a cruel reminder. I let out a short, sharp scream. *Ack! I was supposed to be the one being rescued!* The force had made me drop the sword.

Water still running off the man who’d grabbed me splashed onto me, chilling me to the bone. Hands as cold as ice had seized my arms with strength enough to crush them and were trying to drag me backward. His breathing, akin to that of a wild beast, gave me goosebumps.

“You’re coming with me!”

“No!”

He, too, was desperate to make his escape, I was sure. He was trying to flee without any regard for me as he pulled me along. My feet got tangled and I was about to topple over—but just then, a large shadow jumped in front of us.

There was no time for the man to even cry out. A flurry of blows from a fist met the side of his face with tremendous force. It practically sent him flying. The impact almost knocked me over with him, but a frigid yet firm pair of arms

held me tight. Heavy droplets of water showered me. My savior must have just emerged from the river himself, I realized.

He looked down at me, his breathing ragged. Even in the darkness, we could see each other's faces clearly at this distance. With no glasses and his sodden bangs clinging to his face, he almost looked like a different person altogether.

After a moment, a single word emerged from his well-formed lips, his voice filled with affection. "Marielle."

Oh, my! Delight and relief—and something more passionate—began to well up inside me.

"Are you all right?" he continued. "Are you hurt at all?"

The gentle sound slid into my ears. *This time, all is well. This time, someone I can truly rely on has come to rescue me—and now I know he's safe too.* Those joys comingled explosively, resonating endlessly.

"Lord Simeon!"

The chaotic night had reached a state of calm for the time being. Having heard the summons, the royal guards who'd been sent to chase the carriage finally arrived on the scene. With such a large crowd gathered, including police and a great many onlookers, the shore was probably busier than it was during the day. The whole place was now lit up, illuminating the riverbank.

All cold and fear were dispelled now too. All that mattered was my own personal hero, smiling kindly at me.

Chapter Twelve

In my reverie, I went to embrace Lord Simeon, but for some reason, he rebuffed me. “No!” he said. “Please wait. I can’t.” He pushed out his arms to keep me away, putting a damper on my soaring elation.

“What’s wrong, Lord Simeon?” *Why is he rejecting me?*

When I looked at him sadly, he backed away even farther. “If we embrace while I’m in this state, you’ll get wet too. Don’t get too close.”

I fell silent and took a proper look at him. He was soaked and dripping from head to toe. He was wearing neither his saber nor his boots, having presumably discarded them to make it easier to swim—now leaving him with nothing between his feet and the cold ground on a midwinter night. I couldn’t imagine how chilled he was, soaked and barefoot. Beyond merely “chilled,” I was sure. If it were me, I’d have been shivering so hard I could scarcely move. Though it was too dark to see, he was undoubtedly pale of face too. At this rate, Lord Simeon would freeze to death. That went without saying, even; I wanted to hit myself for only noticing it now.

The very next instant, I was furiously unfastening the coat buttons. I pulled the garment off in a flash and thrust it out toward him. “Put this on! Quickly!”

“There’s no need for that. You should keep wearing it.”

He wouldn’t take the coat. Even now, in this situation, he was trying to put my needs first. *This is not the time!* Standing on tiptoes, I tried to put it on him. “Take it, please! You’ll die if you don’t do *something!*”

“I’m fine, I assure you. I won’t die that easily.”

“You will! I’m begging you, put your coat on! This... This is all my fault. I’m so sorry. Because I was attacked, you did something so reckless... I’m sorry...!”

Even though I didn’t want to cry, even though I *really* didn’t want to be a further burden, I couldn’t hold back the tears. When I tried to swallow, it only made my throat hurt, and I heaved with sobs.

“That’s not true. I jumped into the water while escaping, so I was wet already. In no way is that your fault.”

“But—”

“Don’t cry. I didn’t jump in the water for you to make that face. What pleases me most is seeing you well and cheerful. If you can show me your usual smile, it would blast away any cold.”

He extended a hand out as if to wipe away my tears but stopped just shy of my cheek. Apparently, he was so reluctant to come near me that even *that* gave him pause. He withdrew his outstretched hand; if he’d touched me, it would have been cold.

My husband wanted to protect me no matter how poorly he himself was faring. As happy as that made me feel, it was remarkably irritating in its own way. “I want *you* to be safe as well, I’ll have you know! If I give your coat back to you now, I’m sure I’ll catch a nasty cold. But that’s *nothing* compared to what might happen to you. I don’t want you to suffer. That’s why I’m asking you to at least put your coat on! Why don’t you understand how I’m feeling?!”

In silence, he frowned quite intently, but he still didn’t reach out to accept the coat. “To be honest with you, adding one layer of clothing when I’m in this state wouldn’t make much difference. It would be a waste anyway, so better for you to keep it.”

“Keeping the wind off you will make plenty of difference! I know that much from the time I fell into the river. When you’re sopping wet, one extra layer can make all the difference in the world!”

“Well,” he murmured, “I suppose that’s true...”

But when I insistently tried to push the coat into his hands, he drew back from me, retreating bit by bit as I pushed forward. *Honestly, I swear, this man is ridiculous! He’s stubborn beyond all reason! Someone knock some sense into him!*

Our argument was interrupted by a soft chuckle. “I’m drenched as well, by the way. Must be nice to have a lady who cares so much.”

Both of us turned to look at once. The ship that had gone out onto the river

had since returned. Ambassador Nigel was standing on its bow in the same state as Lord Simeon, just as he'd said. His long, wavy mane—arguably his most distinctive trait—was hanging down in a miserably sloppy state, as if he were a cat just after a bath.

“Oh, Ambassador Nigel. Are you...all right?”

“Yes, apart from being a little cold.”

“And Prince Gracius?”

“He's fine too, but he also got wet. He urgently needs medical care and a change of clothing.”

“He went in the water as well?” I asked, turning my eyes back to Lord Simeon.

My husband nodded gently. “Flames and gunpowder were flying, so we had no choice but to jump into the river. Fortunately, I suppose, he's been asleep due to being drugged, so he hardly swallowed any water.”

Ambassador Nigel jumped down from the boat. Lutin followed, and the pair of them started struggling with how to moor the ship. Just as I was wondering whether I should help, Lord Simeon turned away to join them. In the end, the coat was left firmly in my hands. *Honestly!*

The young policeman, whose existence I'd almost forgotten about, timidly spoke up. “Excuse me, miss...” Being punched and then kicked by a horse had looked quite distressing, but he fortunately appeared to have suffered no serious injury.

“Ah, yes,” I replied. “Thank you for coming over just now.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” he assured me. He then hesitantly asked, “That gentleman just now... Was he your lover perchance?”

Is this an interrogation now? I shook my head. “No, he's not.”

“No?”

“He's not my lover. He's my husband.”

Verifying the identities of those on the scene was only natural for a police officer. However, when I gave the most clear and honest answer that I could,

his young face grew taut for some reason.

When I tilted my head, wondering what the matter could be, he began to laugh loudly and discordantly. “Of course. What else? Your husband. You’re a married woman...”

Even though he should probably have been asking all sorts of other things, the officer stopped his questioning there and tottered unsteadily away. He went over to the man Lord Simeon had knocked out and tied him up with rope. *Yes, I see. That’s the top priority. Even if I didn’t find him as helpful as I’d have liked, he knows his way around police duties after all.* And I was grateful to see it.

People were still streaming down from the road above—police, knights, and an unexpected pair of a boy and a tall woman.

“Master,” the boy called as he ran over to Ambassador Nigel.

“Arthur, Eva, hello there,” he replied. “What brings you here?”

“You didn’t come back,” Eva said. “If we let you run wild, who knows how late you’d be out.”

“You left without a carriage or a horse,” the boy added, “so Eva got worried that someone would need to fetch you. We were nearby when we heard the commotion here, so we came to look.”

“I’m glad to have such kind people in my service. I’d be gladder still if you had a hot drink for me.”

“I’ll go and get one,” Arthur said, turning on the spot and running back the way he’d come.

Taciturnly hiding her embarrassment, Eva took her coat off and held it out. “Anyway, drape this over your shoulders.”

“Thank you.”

Unlike Lord Simeon, Ambassador Nigel obediently took the coat offered to him. He then planted a kiss on Eva’s cheek in a thoroughly natural-looking motion. The next moment, her fist thrust out in a violent burst. With an impressive straight right that I wouldn’t have expected from a woman, she adeptly knocked Ambassador Nigel down.

She really went for him. So when he told me that if he was imprudent enough to court her, she'd punch him, that wasn't an exaggeration.

A few men were escorted off the ship after that. The ones tied up were likely the criminals who'd set the other boat on fire. If they had done so knowing that Prince Gracius was on board, perhaps they were anti-monarchists after all—people who had infiltrated Lagrange with the goal of assassinating Prince Gracius. Except...hadn't the prince's hangers-on been the ones to abduct him from the party at Fleur et Papillon? Had these other men simply taken advantage of the situation? That much remained unclear.

Finally, a limply unconscious man was carried off the ship. It was Prince Gracius, wrapped in several coats that had likely been lent to him by the knights. I rushed over to his side. "Lord Lucio!"

His sodden face didn't move a muscle, and there was no response at all to my call. Scared now, I looked at Lord Simeon, who smiled back to reassure me that everything was fine.

"He's just asleep. His breathing and pulse are steady, so there's no need for concern."

"Urgent transportation has been arranged so he can get medical treatment," said Alain, who had joined us at some point. "Vice Captain, please go with him."

Though Lord Simeon was trying to give orders with a thoroughly unconcerned demeanor, his aide stayed true to his job and did not hesitate to point out his condition. Second Lieutenant Mirbeau and the others present also expressed their concerns—and when I asked them to get my husband into the carriage even if they had to knock him out, they nodded back at me with smiles of agreement. For once, Lord Simeon was left unable to argue.

The flurry of activity wasn't yet over. Prince Gracius's abductors had also escaped into the river after their boat exploded. None had drowned—each one of them was now determinedly swimming toward the bank. Only to be arrested upon reaching it, of course. I watched the authorities cart them away, thinking that was at least a preferable fate to sinking in the cold water.

Since I'd been left with Lord Simeon's coat, I draped it over my shoulders again. As I was leaning closely against the horse for warmth, Lutin came over to

me. He was the only man still dry, since he hadn't entered the water at any point.

"Whew. Talk about overtime." Even after the grand scuffle, he retained his usual carefree demeanor, smiling and talking as if this were no more than a late night at the office for him.

"I appreciate you putting in the work," I replied. "Who knows what would have happened if you hadn't been here? Thank you."

He copied me in trying to lean against the horse, only to face threatening reluctance on the horse's part. "I've been quite a do-gooder lately, haven't I, running around helping everyone with no pay? Don't you feel sorry for me?"

Hmm. Is he about to demand his recompense? I'd quite forgotten, but I did promise to take his request seriously. Perhaps that's where he's going with this.

"Did you fulfill your orders from Prince Liberto?" I asked.

At that, he looked away and didn't answer. I found it odd that he was still delinquent on the matter, knowing that he couldn't go home until he did. In truth, his helping us despite that *did* make me feel sorry for him—he had me on that point. *That settles it. Whatever he asks for, I'll have to do my utmost.*

"About your repayment as we discussed the other day... Have you decided what you want to ask for?"

He paused a moment, then looked back at me and gave a straightforward nod. "Yes." His usual sardonic smile had vanished. For once, he seemed oddly meek.

"Now's the perfect time, so why don't you tell me? I'd like to know what I'm in for."

"W-Well," he began, faltering most unexpectedly. My impression was not that he was trying to dodge the question, but rather that he found it difficult to give voice to the answer.

"Don't be shy. I'll do my best to grant your wish."

"Really? You will?"

His face, seeking my true intentions, looked like that of a young boy about to

confess a secret. One of an age when he'd harbor pure dreams and aspirations—quite unlike the mysterious thief Lutin I knew. In truth, though, he wasn't that far removed in age from Prince Gracius. He acted older than his years, boasting cosmopolitan knowledge of all the ins and outs of the world, but perhaps *this* was his true nature. The notion was rather adorable.

"Of course. Go on."

At my urging, Lutin averted his eyes again, then let out a puff of laughter. "The Vice Captain's glaring at me."

"Oh?"

Following his gaze, I saw Lord Simeon watching us from a distance. I waved a hand to reassure him that he had no need to worry.

"A name."

Distracted by Lord Simeon, I didn't quite catch Lutin's brief utterance. "What was that?" I turned back, urging him to come again.

He still had the same boyish look on his face. "I want a name. I want you to give me one, just as I told you once before," he confessed.

This stunned me into silence. He'd broached the topic of his real name, which I'd always wanted to know. In our prior conversations on the subject, I'd assumed he was simply being evasive. Now, however, I realized it went deeper. In all likelihood, he had no name from his parents. He'd never said as much. Rather, I'd suspected it after speaking with Prince Liberto, and now I was convinced.

There are all sorts of reasons parents might abandon their child. If Lutin had been separated from his before he could even remember and grown up not knowing what they'd named him, I could understand his reluctance to share that. Prince Liberto had told me that he'd raised Lutin and Dario, however, and I couldn't believe that he'd taken in two orphaned children without giving them names.

After a pause, I asked, "Didn't Prince Liberto give you one? A name specific to you, not one for your work."

With a faint smile, he confirmed that the prince had indeed named him and his brother. “But I want a name from you. There’s no harm in having another, is there? Noël may be over, but I’d like to get a present for once.”

That was his wish. As repayment for his hard work, it seemed too trifling. As a present, it was awfully heartrending.

When I asked him for his real name back then, I wonder what went through his mind. Though I didn’t know it, I said something rather insensitive. However, rather than getting annoyed, he suggested that I give him a new name. I don’t know if that’s really sufficient payment now...but if it’s what he wants, I’ll do my best.

“All right,” I agreed. “Only, I’d like to think about it properly, so can you give me a little more time?”

“Absolutely.” He nodded with a touch of bashfulness. “I’ll leave you to it.”

This is all right, isn’t it, Lord Simeon? You might sulk a bit, but I’m sure you won’t object. After all, even if the two of you are always at each other’s throats, you acknowledge each other when needed and help each other when the time comes. You wouldn’t coldly shun him.

“These horses seem to hate me, you know,” Lutin said suddenly. “It’s rude for them to cuddle up to you and ignore me.”

“They must know what a villainous rascal you are.”

“I didn’t do anything this time! I was nothing but kind and helpful.”

As I continued to wait for Lord Simeon and engage in such frivolous chatter with Lutin, a man approached. For a moment I thought it might be a newspaper reporter or some such, but when I saw who it actually was, my whole body tensed.

“Good evening, Mrs. Flaubert,” called a voice that sounded refined, yet altogether haughty and arrogant.

He’d recognized me—in spite of my present predicament. I was wearing a borrowed uniform coat and was clearly not dressed as a noble lady underneath it, but he’d addressed me by name as if it were the most obvious thing in the

world. He was approaching with full knowledge of who I was.

“Lord Yugin,” I finally brought myself to respond.

Looking like he’d merely happened upon me while out for a stroll, the visitor from a northern land came to a stop in front of me. “I see you’ve been through quite an ordeal. Are you all right?” That was his first question, rather than any inquiry as to what was going on here. He took a glance at Lutin, who quickly turned his head away, appearing uninterested.

With some hesitation, I replied, “What are you doing here?”

Fleur et Papillon was quite some distance from the bank where we stood. Not even the sound of the explosion should have reached that far. Mr. Yugin couldn’t possibly justify his presence by saying he’d overheard the commotion and come to take a gander. So what *was* he doing here? *From his expression, he knows all about the situation...which means I need to be on my guard.*

He undoubtedly sensed my tense reaction to him, yet he showed no sign of concern. “I was on my way home from a party an acquaintance had invited me to when I saw this large crowd making a fuss, and I got curious. From what I’ve overheard, there was some sort of kidnapping?”

After a pause, I guardedly replied, “That’s right.”

“From your appearance, would I be right in guessing that you were the one abducted?”

How was I to answer that? How much did he already know? Thinking back on my impression of him at Fleur et Papillon, I couldn’t conceive he was an uninvolved bystander. Still, I had my doubts that he was collaborating with the criminals. While the Ortans were running around trying to find me after I slipped through their fingers, he’d looked at them with mockery in his eyes. Now, too, he betrayed no sign of frustration over the plan being foiled. He didn’t seem to be a member of the other party either—the group who’d blown up the boat and tried to kill everyone on board. Their plan had failed every bit as much, yet he showed no annoyance or worry.

So what *was* he up to?

“I was inadvertently caught up in the matter, that’s all,” I said at last. “Though

you don't need any explanation from me. Do you, Lord Yugin?"

"What do you mean?"

My attempt to lead him into a confession didn't work. He still gave no insight into his true motives, merely shrugging with a look of amusement. *But I'm wise to him. This man really does know everything.*

Trusting in my intuition, I smiled. "You have very good eyes and a very good memory. I don't have many distinguishing characteristics, as you can see, and I'm often told that it's difficult to remember my face. On top of that, I'm dressed as a maid right now. It's quite impressive that you could pick me out in the dark when you simply happened to come by and look. Almost as if you knew I was here."

He said nothing, but his smile did grow deeper. *Does that mean he doesn't seriously intend to keep it a secret?* The bank was awash with noisy onlookers and the policemen and knights dealing with the aftermath. Amid all this tumult, only we were surrounded by a tense quiet.

I kept my eyes focused on him and a smile on my face, and he soon let out a breath that was nearly a laugh. "From the tales I've heard, you lead a remarkably exciting life, so I wondered what sort of a brave heroine you were. When I finally met you, however, you were disappointingly ordinary. I wondered if it had all been exaggerated." There was neither deception nor menace in his words, merely interest and amusement. "All my expectations seemed doomed to end in the disappointment of typical mediocrity...or so I thought. In the end, I enjoyed myself after all, I suppose."



He promptly turned his back on me with a mere wave of his hand, as if he'd concluded whatever business he'd come to carry out. "You did well today. Go home and rest before you catch a cold."

Those words, practically thrown at me without even a glance back, were the closest I got to a goodbye. The young foreigner went on his way in a maddeningly self-involved manner. Lord Simeon appeared ahead, his penetrating gaze fixed on Mr. Yugin, who returned his gaze. Their eyes met, but they didn't exchange a word. Nor did the Slavian man stop. He walked right past Lord Simeon.

After watching him return to the road above and disappear among the crowd, Lord Simeon came over to me. He still had nothing to layer over his wet uniform, but he had at least put some boots on. Remembering his glasses, I retrieved them from his coat pocket and handed them to him. Standing next to me now, he took them and put them back on, brushing his waterlogged bangs out of the way.

"What did he say to you?" he asked.

"It's rather complicated." After a moment's pondering, I shook my head. "It will be easier to explain later, when we're not among all this. Nothing worth worrying about, in any case."

"I see," he replied, though not immediately.

We were both exhausted at that point. Lord Simeon urgently needed to warm up and change his clothes, so I wanted to avoid getting embroiled in a long conversation while we were still out of doors. The preparations to withdraw had all been made, so I imagined he'd come to fetch me. I turned, intending to say goodbye to Lutin, only to find him looking up toward the bystanders on the road with an oddly stern expression.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Was he looking at Mr. Yugin, perhaps? The Slavian had long since disappeared, but it was as if Lutin could still see him.

My words prompted him to turn back. Shaking his head, he regained his usual demeanor. "Nothing. I'm just getting tired, so I'll be heading off. Goodbye for now, and I look forward to hearing what you come up with. Don't catch a cold,

Vice Captain.”

With those words, spoken in an easygoing tone, he departed as if he had no time to lose. Seeing him adopt an attitude just like Mr. Yugin’s left me feeling dissatisfied. I wondered what had happened.

“What did he mean about ‘what you come up with’?”

“It’s about his repayment.”

Lord Simeon ushered me to start walking, and I did so, our horse in tow. *We can probably leave the horse Lutin “acquired” with the nearby police officers, I suppose. It’ll make it home safely, I’m sure!*

“Oh yes, *that*. What did he request?”

“Don’t worry. All he wanted was a present. A very small one, but a precious one. I have to think of something that will bring him joy.”

As I’d predicted, a look appeared on Lord Simeon’s face that said he wasn’t pleased at all. *Please just accept it for now, though. I’ll explain properly later. When you learn the reason, I’m sure it will make sense to you.*

The long night was finally drawing to a close. There were still plenty of details I’d yet to sort out, so I didn’t feel as though everything had truly been resolved, but relief filled our hearts for the time being. *Now, let’s go home and warm ourselves up so that we can keep going strong tomorrow. So that we can face our ongoing problems with renewed vigor.*

The moon shining in the winter night sky looked down dispassionately on the clamor below. A particularly strong gust of wind blew past. When I shivered, Lord Simeon put his arms around me out of habit. He hurriedly pulled away, but a sneeze burst forth from him, and he made an awkward face.

It was a slovenly display unlike anything I ever saw from him, and seeing it, I erupted into laughter. This time, I successfully gave him back his coat.

Chapter Thirteen

After being transported to Ventvert Palace, Prince Gracius apparently regained consciousness quite quickly. I say “apparently” because I wasn’t able to see for myself; I was chilled to the bone and exhausted beyond measure, so I was sent straight home, where Joanna and Nicole cried tears of joy before throwing me into a bath. Once I was sufficiently warm, I sated my hunger with a late dinner, then was inevitably overcome with intense drowsiness. Even without being drugged this time, I fell fast asleep practically as soon as I entered my bedroom.

After seeing me home, Lord Simeon went to the palace and didn’t come back for an entire day. Out of worry that he might have collapsed, I visited without an invitation, only to find him working away like always.

“If you were all right, I wish you’d have come home,” I told him.

“I’ve had to question the men we arrested.”

The Royal Order of Knights’ headquarters had bathing facilities and spare uniforms, he explained, so he’d stayed there and devoted himself to his work. *Yes, I realize you’re busy, but... Honestly, this man! I swear!*

It was now New Year’s Eve. When I asked my husband if he could at least come home for a short time, Prince Severin peered in. “Marielle, it’s been rather a while, so why don’t you come and have some tea? I got my paws on some rare sweets. I’ll let you try them.”

“Oh, goodness. Thank you. Can I take some home as well?”

“You are *awfully* rude to me, you know. I’m trying to be nice to you because you’ve been to hell and back.”

Lord Simeon lightly poked my head. In the end, the three of us made our way to His Highness’s chambers and enjoyed tea and sweets together.

“How is Prince Gracius?” I asked. “Would I be able to see him?”

The sweets imported from an eastern land looked like sugar candy at first glance. They were small enough to pick up with your fingertips and came in various shapes, such as flowers and leaves, making them almost pretty little sculptures. Each was its own pale color, and they were so darling that I'd gladly have left them out for ornamentation.

"He's stable, but he has something of a fever. Just to be on the safe side, I'd ask you not to for today."

When I tried one of the confections, it wasn't as sweet as I'd expected. *What's it made of? It's already crumbling and melting in my mouth.* The flavor was restrained and elegant in a way that made it seem lacking at first, but it could also be described as just understated enough. These were sweets enjoyable for their overall aesthetic—a feast for the eyes *and* the tongue.

"Is that an aftereffect of the sedative?" I asked.

"No, the doctor said he caught a cold. Hardly a great surprise after jumping into a river in the dead of winter."

As he spoke, His Highness's eyes drifted toward Lord Simeon. I stared intently at my husband as well. *That's right—you'd normally expect a fever at the very least. Admittedly, I've heard that Ambassador Nigel is in rude health, but let's say he's a special case.*

Lord Simeon frowned, appearing puzzled. "Why are you looking at me?"

"I'm told he'll be right as rain in a day or three," His Highness said to me, ignoring my husband, "so you can see him after that."

"Understood." I did want Prince Gracius to get the rest he needed, after all. "Can you bid him get well soon on my behalf, please?"

I still had many unanswered questions about the situation that had arisen and how it had come to be. When I asked His Highness to fill me in, he was kind enough to explain without any argument.

The party on the night of the incident was a gathering of influential figures from the private sector, and Prince Gracius had apparently attended as part of his studies. Then the hangers-on, who didn't let him go without them, laced his drink with a sedative and he lost consciousness. Isaac had been similarly

afflicted, just as I'd suspected, so the hangers-on swapped their clothes and took them away separately—Isaac in the carriage used as a decoy and Prince Gracius in the boat we followed. The decoy team had apparently intended to disappear amidst the confusion after reaching the palace.

“What was their motive, ultimately?” I asked. “Why concoct such a plan?”

“If you put all the facts in order, there's nothing terribly complex about it,” said Lord Simeon. “As you surmised, they were trying to curry favor with Prince Gracius and plant themselves at the heart of the country's power. More specifically, they meant to make a puppet out of him and seize real power for themselves.”

“Well, that's about what I suspected, I suppose...”

“They drew close to the lonely Prince Gracius, pretending to be kind to him in an attempt to build rapport. However, the prince isn't one to give his trust to any old fellow who comes along. Even if they're his fellow countrymen, they're still strangers who appeared out of nowhere. He didn't readily open his heart to them.”

“Of course not.”

That was so obvious it practically went without saying. It was true Prince Gracius needed Ortan connections, but he had to choose his associates carefully. He was in a precarious position, which meant finding the right balance. Even when dealing with such blatantly suspicious power-seekers, he had to avoid raising their ire.

A truly shrewd—and terrifying—person would have hidden their ill intentions and made Prince Gracius believe they were a trustworthy ally. They'd have treated not only the prince, but also all those around him with perfect poise so as to lower their guards. If that had been the hangers-on's plan, they'd failed quite miserably at it. They'd been nakedly confrontational toward us and invited a great deal of scorn. How could they have expected to win anyone's trust that way? The very thought was incomprehensible.

His Highness took over the explanation again. “They believed him to be swayed, which they blamed on us, and thus they made it their first priority to separate him from us. They apparently found you to be a particular fly in the

ointment. Their take was that Lagrange was using a woman to wrap the prince around their little finger with her womanly wiles. That awful rumor was their doing.”

Stunned, I drank a sip of tea, then heaved a huge sigh. “I considered that at one point, but I decided it couldn’t possibly be the case. I’m shocked it actually was. If you *did* have that intention, you’d obviously have used someone with more feminine charm, wouldn’t you? They surely can’t believe I was employing any ‘womanly wiles.’”

“Well, you see, that is to say...” Remaining noncommittal in his words, His Highness turned his eyes away.

In his place, Lord Simeon interjected on an only somewhat relevant note. “I’d ask you to stop describing yourself as lacking in charm and the like. You are an entirely lovely and charming lady. Naturally, all that about you using your wiles is baseless nonsense, but there’s nothing far-fetched about the possibility. You are a wonderful, radiant woman who cannot help captivating others. If you so wished, you could *most certainly* ensnare a man. You’ve already attracted quite a number of—”

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I replied, “but if there’s one thing I’ve learned from all this, it’s that those aspiring hangers-on are fools indeed.”

I *had* to forcibly bring the conversation back on track, interrupting my husband as he began a bout of over-serious praise of the sort only a besotted husband could muster. *Don’t you see His Highness is turning pale? I’m thrilled to be praised so, but there is absolutely no chance that the world at large shares that opinion. You’re the one and only person who sees me in such a light, Lord Simeon!* Though I tried to present myself as though it merely washed over me, my face grew hot.

His Highness, too, was looking ever more unhappy. “I wasn’t able to spend Noël with Julianne, nor will we be together tonight for New Year’s Eve. Meanwhile, *you two...*”

“You went out on the town just the other day, didn’t you? And I’ve heard you typically spend New Year’s Eve in a gathering of gentlemen— isn’t that right?”

“A gathering of *single* gentlemen. Simeon’s not the only bloke who’s been

kicked out—the affair gets lonelier by the year. Now even *I’m* on the verge of tying the knot. As of this year, our party is no more.”

Though this did make sense, part of me worried about the remaining single men and how they’d fare. *I hope they all find romantic connections of their own.* “Julianne’s been looking forward to New Year’s Eve with her parents and brother, so you’ll have to hold on a little longer. Having said that, spending it by yourself sounds absolutely wretched. Why don’t you come to our house?”

“You might hold back *a little*, Marielle. I must be the only crown prince to ever be described as ‘wretched.’ Anyway, I appreciate the invitation, but I have a great deal of work to do in the aftermath of this incident. I don’t know if I’ll have time.”

He plans to work on the night when all the world is astir with celebration? Now that is truly sad. It also stoked my concern for the man beside me. “What does that mean for you, Lord Simeon?” I asked with a pointed glance.

He frowned awkwardly. “Well, I...*should* be able to come back this evening, I believe... Though there are preparations to be made for the palace’s New Year’s party as well...”

His words weren’t especially convincing. When I put on the sulkiest face I could possibly manage, I nearly managed to wring a promise out of him to be home within the day.

After popping another sweet into my mouth, I regained my composure and got back to the topic at hand. “The world certainly has no shortage of people who try to cozy up to the famous and influential for their own benefit, but they also try not to rock the boat, don’t they? They lack the nerve or capability to do anything too audacious, so they try to get a share of someone else’s success instead. Even in their plotting, they don’t stray into the realm of serious harm. In this instance, the hangers-on tried to sully my name by manufacturing a secret rendezvous—and if they’d stopped there, that would have been that. But kidnapping Prince Gracius would have caused an international incident, with severe punishment for the culprits, of course. Even if they assumed Lagrange wouldn’t be able to touch them once they returned to Orta, there’s no way they would have been able to escape any consequences in their homeland. Anyone,

no matter how foolish, must *surely* understand that.”

There had been two incidents—two schemes. Untying all the overlapping, tangled threads, I could start to see that the ends of both threads were tied together. Just as Lord Simeon had said, if you put all the facts in order, there was nothing terribly complex about it.

“In other words,” I went on, “they must have backing enough to reassure them that they *wouldn’t* suffer any punishment—or be convinced they wouldn’t, at least. It’s possible that the arrangements to outwit our security and spirit away Prince Gracius weren’t their invention, but rather planted in their heads. In essence, they were skillfully enticed, then used as disposable pawns. Perhaps that was the reality all along.”

When I really dug into it, it no longer seemed such a mystery at all. Given Orta’s current situation, it would have seemed stranger for such skullduggery *not* to occur.

His Highness folded his arms with a satisfied look. “When explaining to you, I hardly have to say a word. Yes, that’s about the long and short of it. Prince Gracius’s hangers-on thought they were running the show themselves, but they were actually dancing on someone else’s puppet strings. This gives us some cause for regret as well. We sensed some movement in Orta and were vigilant against it, but when this group appeared, we wrote them off as piffling small fry who could barely tie their own shoelaces. We were caught off guard in more ways than one.”

In more ways than one indeed—I could sympathize entirely. Frustrated as those irritating men had made us, we’d been mistaken about the *nature* of the threat they posed, leaving us wary of the wrong eventuality. The conclusion had seemed so obvious: They wanted to use Prince Gracius, so if he died, it would be to their disadvantage. They wouldn’t cause him any harm. That meant they were an entirely separate concern from those opposed to the Ortan monarchy. All because they were such garden-variety villains causing such a base problem.

If the one pulling the strings—whoever had masterminded the assassination attempt—was wise enough to anticipate all that and choose the lineup with it in mind, they had a frightful degree of insight. *Does Orta still house such*

dangerous figures? Or was this instigated by another nation?

A certain gentleman floated into my mind—Mr. Yugin. What exactly was his involvement? It would have been easy to assume he was aligned with the true ringleader...but that felt too straightforward to fit the facts. My impression had been that he was *aware* of the plan, not that he was directly implicated. Perhaps he really had been merely watching it all unfold for his personal amusement. If he knew what was going on, that suggested he had some connection to whomever had orchestrated it, but not that he was their ally as such.

When I brought up Mr. Yugin, both Lord Simeon and His Highness frowned uncertainly. My question as to whether they knew anything was met with headshakes.

“Nothing concrete,” His Highness replied. “Even his familial relationship to the Slavian ambassador isn’t a recent one. It goes back several generations, I’m told. One of the ambassador’s forebears was adopted from Mr. Yugin’s house, or some such. I’m also not aware that their families are particularly close. Mr. Yugin was largely a stranger to the ambassador, who only had a faint idea of their relation. In other words, although Mr. Yugin apparently came to Lagrange to visit the ambassador, they didn’t know each other before that.”

“Oh, I see.”

“We’ll investigate, however, to see if we can find out anything concrete,” Lord Simeon assured me.

Since Mr. Yugin had shown an interest in me personally, that made my husband especially alert. I, too, had some lingering anxiety that something else might yet happen to me. *Hopefully his curiosity is sated and that really is the end of it.*

“The worst outcome was avoided, at any rate,” His Highness added. “Even *thinking* of the consequences if we’d failed to prevent the kidnapping makes my blood run cold. You dealt with the circumstances admirably yourself. I tip my figurative hat to you.” His upbeat praise felt like an attempt to brush away the somewhat heavy atmosphere that had developed.

I’ll try not to think about it too much either. It doesn’t hurt to be cautious, but

there's no point of cowering in fear over something that hasn't actually happened. All I can do is ask for them to investigate as needed while celebrating the fact that everything's been resolved safely for now.

Our discussion ended without further incident, and I stood to say my goodbyes. "If your schedule will allow it, you are more than welcome to come to our house tonight, Your Highness. And you, Lord Simeon—don't go out of your way to finish work that could be put off until later. Come home instead."

It took a moment for him to reply, "All right."

Despite finding his reply entirely too dubious, I didn't say another word on the subject before going home. That evening, guests arrived and a delightful party began, but as expected, Lord Simeon still did not return.

"He promised he'd come back before the day was done," I said to Lord Noel. "I wonder if he'll actually make it before midnight when the date changes."

"Who can say?" he replied. "You know Simeon. He could end up pulling an all-nighter by accident."

This year, the youngest Flaubert was allowed to stay up late to enjoy the festivities, so he was pleased as punch (though when he'd tried to follow the adults by sneaking an alcoholic drink, his mother had upbraided him for it). I was quite jubilant myself, as my grandmother and grandfather were in attendance. That gave me a chance to have a proper chat with them for the first time in a while. All in all, it was an easygoing evening where we could make merry to our heart's content without worrying about any stuffy formalities. The Flaubert manor was celebrating the culmination of another year with aplomb.

Still, I couldn't deny that I felt a little lonely. Even as I was happily chatting away, I kept stealing glances at the door, wondering if he'd finally be back soon.

After a while, my grandfather and father-in-law grew engrossed in conversation with one another—likewise with my grandmother and mother-in-law. Thus finding a moment to myself, I stepped out onto the balcony. Although I wrapped a thick shawl closely around my shoulders to stave off the chill, the night air's touch was still cold. A light snowfall was settling on the balcony railing.

In contrast to the celebratory bustle inside, it was very quiet outdoors. Listening closely, I could hear something in the distance. *Was that the gate opening? Are the servants going to meet a new arrival, perhaps?*

My husband truly is a workaholic to an absurd degree. Naturally, I understood that he was busy. The royal guard couldn't rest on their laurels with the New Year's party at the palace two days hence. I knew that we should be grateful to those who worked while everyone was having fun. *But I still feel lonely without him. I do hope he's home soon.*

After wiping some snow off the railing and leaning on it, I looked up at the sky, my breath forming a mist in the air. The moon was hidden behind clouds, only revealing its location with a hazy circle of light.

"If you stand out here dressed like that, you'll catch a chill," came a voice from behind me.

"Hmm?" I answered vaguely—taking a few seconds to realize that it was neither a family member nor a guest. No, this was a voice I knew well by now. When I turned to look, indeed, Lutin was standing in a corner of the balcony where he half blended in with the darkness. "When did you... No, *how* did you get here?"

My surprise prompted a chuckle from him. He was the very picture of a young whelp reveling in a successful prank. I shrugged, realizing there wasn't much point being surprised at his every action anymore.

"Good evening," I greeted instead, starting anew. "I could ask what you're doing outside on such a cold night. Oh, did you perhaps feel lonely ringing in the new year by yourself, so you decided to drop by? Would you like to come inside?"

"No, not really. I don't actually care much about New Year's."

"That's no fun. You're not working, are you? While you're here, you might as well warm yourself up inside." No one would particularly mind one more guest, even one they didn't know. I could tell them he was an acquaintance of Lord Simeon's and they wouldn't bat an eyelid.

However, my invitation was met with a strained smile rather than movement

toward the door. "I'm grateful to hear you say that, but I'll have to decline. I wouldn't feel comfortable in a place like this."

"Oh," I replied after a moment. Admittedly, I could see it being awkward to attend a party filled with strangers. Rather than forcing the matter, I turned around. "Wait here a moment. I'll be right back."

Leaving Lutin on the balcony, I hurried back to the party. There, I collected some baked sweets and other food items that could be eaten by hand and bundled them up in a napkin, then ran back out to the balcony. Some people looked at me, puzzled as to what I was doing, but no one stopped me. This was a night of unrestrained fun; everyone was waiting for the new year to arrive in their own preferred manner.

I offered the food I'd gathered to the man who was idly gazing down at the increasingly snowy garden. "Here. A late-night snack for you."

He made a perplexed face, but he did take the parcel after a moment. "Thank you." I thought he'd make some sort of sardonic remark, but he held the package carefully and said nothing more.

Sensing that his blue eyes, looking toward me, were seeking something else, I remembered the promise I'd made to him. "Did you come to find out what name I chose?" I asked.

When I thought about it, I could come up with no other reason for his visit. Naturally, I hadn't shirked my duty in any respect. I'd thought long and hard about a name. However, I hadn't known when I'd see him again, so I was glad that he'd come to me.

"I suppose," he said. "Did you decide on one?"

"Yes. It's late for a Noël present, but I'll gift it to you with best wishes for both Noël and New Year's." With a deep breath, I girded my loins. Somehow, I felt more awkward and nervous than I would if I were giving a physical present. I recalled Ambassador Nigel telling me that Lutin had been born in winter, so it seemed especially fitting to give his gift with Noël felicitations as well. But since I didn't know if he'd be happy to hear that, I decided to get straight to telling him the name. "I only hope you like it. What do you think about Ange?"

His eyes widened. He spent a moment looking thoroughly stunned. “What?”

To be fair, I hadn’t expected a response of joy or straightforward acceptance. I didn’t need him to tell me that a name meaning “angel” was at odds with his typical nature. Like his namesake, the lutin, he was a mischievous goblin and at times could even be more like a devil. Nonetheless, I thought Ange was the best name for him.

“It’s a prayer for the light of God to always be with you,” I explained. “You claim to have no trust in God, but it’s *because* you never give up that I want you to believe in the light. Believing doesn’t mean expecting miracles to happen. It’s actually knowing that everyone is being watched over—that everyone has light shining on them. You are absolutely not walking in darkness. If you can recognize the light, you can perceive the world differently. May your life be filled with it from now on.”



The expression vanished from his face and he stared at me in silence. *Is that something he'll ever be able to accept, I wonder? Even if you believe in God, you can still experience misfortune, suffering, and sadness. No one is guaranteed a good life. I don't believe that praying alone is enough to ensure all will be well. Still, people need hope—and hope is the strength to keep walking. Faith enables that.*

Even in winter, when everything is frozen over and laden with snow and the north wind chills us to the bone, there is light. With the right outlook, you can find excitement in the dead of winter too. Then, when the ice finally melts, flowers bloom with the coming of spring. Summer follows, filled with the vividness of life. Everything repeats in a cycle. If you can always find the light, you'll never lose hope or courage, and times of good fortune are sure to come. At least, that's what I think.

“Oh yes,” I added, “the Lavian equivalent would be Angelo, wouldn't it? Let's change it to Angelo, then. Nice to meet you afresh, Angelo. I'm glad that you were born and that I met you.”

Even after I finished, he remained silent for quite some time. I had to hope he wasn't angry with me. Did he think I was playing some cruel, ironic joke on him? Or was he merely exasperated, convinced that faith was of no use to him whatsoever?

The situation gradually became more and more uncomfortable. Just as I was considering whether I ought to say something, Lutin suddenly burst out laughing.

“Pfft... Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

This left me quite confounded. “What's so funny?”

He doubled over, uproarious peals of laughter exploding from him. From what I could tell, he wasn't putting on a show by any means. He truly was that amused.

“Ha ha ha... How can you possibly have... Ha ha ha ha ha!”

He laughed so hard that he was out of breath and tears welled in the corners of his eyes. I was glad to know he wasn't annoyed, but I couldn't fathom why he

was so entertained. Had I really said something so silly? Was he laughing at me?

Wheezing, he straightened himself. “Both of you are simply...too much.” His eyes, now focused on me again, held no displeasure or mockery. Rather, his handsome face had an ease about it, as if he’d broken through some barrier.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That name.”

I was still puzzled. “What of it?”

“It’s *my* name,” he said with a shrug of the shoulders. “Prince Liberto said exactly the same thing.”

“What?” I paused, dumbfounded. “*What?!*”

“About the light of God. All I can do is laugh, though. If there is a God, how can there be children abandoned by their parents? How could I have been left starving and beaten in the darkest depths of the slums, clinging to life by eating scraps of moldy bread? But when I asked that, he told me that was precisely the reason.”

I looked back at him, unsure what to say.

“He said that the light of God is what keeps us from being dragged down by despair. That it’s what gives us the hope and strength to live on. I didn’t really understand. It went in one ear and out the other.”

Prince Liberto said the same sort of thing to him—and called him Angelo as well? We both gave him the same name? No wonder he started laughing...

“It was all a young kid’s sermonizing, I say. God doesn’t do anything. The only way to find hope and strength is to work hard for them yourself. Of course, Prince Liberto wasn’t even fifteen years old at the time.”

Hmm. Is he saying that my way of thinking is childish? I didn’t detect any such spite on Lutin’s face, however. He was smiling wryly, but he looked happy—or was that nothing but my own hope?

Lutin—or should I call him Angelo now?—exhaled loudly and straightened himself again. “I never would have expected you to give me the same name. Maybe it’s a sign from God that I should give up and accept it. Honestly, I was

hoping you'd come up with something a bit more fitting for me."

"I chose it because I think it does fit you. I'm sure Prince Liberto felt the same."

"I wonder about that." His words came with a soft chuckle, and he turned away as he spoke. "By the way, I should say thank you. Now I can finally go home."

Is it my imagination, or have his ears reddened a touch? Is it just the cold? I can't see too well in this darkness. I suppose I'd better pretend not to notice. Pointing it out would be rude.

As I kept the urge to laugh to myself, Lutin changed his tone quite markedly. "To show my gratitude, I'll tell you one thing. It's about that haughty man who came over to speak to you. Did you call him 'Yugin'?"

I froze for a second. "What about him?"

Standing by the railing, Lutin turned only his head to look back at me. "It's a lie. That's not his name."

"You know that man?"

I could certainly believe he did. It made all the sense in the world. His real line of work was espionage, digging up secrets about other countries. I knew he'd even traveled to faraway lands like Slavia. *Frankly, I should have asked him about Mr. Yugin in the first place—not that I would have been guaranteed an honest answer.* All that said, however, for Lutin to have information on this man, he couldn't be one of the vast crowd. Lutin knew his face. That meant he must be of a notable position or rank.

"Who is he?" I asked, my unease overtaking my anticipation. My heart began to pound.

"Leonid Georgievic Pimenov. Grandson of a former Slavian emperor—not the last one, but the one before that."

My breath caught in my throat as I turned over the words I'd just heard. The name "Pimenov" was familiar even to me. It was the name of the Slavian imperial dynasty. *Mr. Yugin is the grandson of an emperor? He's an imperial*

prince, in other words? I can't believe it. A thought suddenly occurred to me. Wait... Why describe it in such a convoluted manner? Doesn't that make him a cousin of the current emperor?

But when I asked this, Lutin shook his head. "Slavia is a little complicated. The direct lineal descendant didn't inherit the throne. In terms of blood ties, Leonid is closer than the current emperor, but circumstances led to another outcome. I'll let you investigate that for yourself. Only, as I said, he's still the direct descendant of a former emperor, so it's possible he'll become the next emperor. He's a strong candidate."

"Oh," I said, somewhat hesitant.

Sensing my concern, Lutin took on a brighter tone again. "I don't think he was directly involved in this latest incident, though. Slavia wants to avoid any direct confrontation with our countries at the moment. It would cause economic problems, and the collapse of Orta's military regime has already had quite an impact. Not to mention that if they *did* mean to attack, they wouldn't send an imperial prince as a spy. They'd send in a real expert."

That was a verdict I could trust, certainly. Lutin was a real expert himself, after all—his opinion held great weight on that front. *And indeed, that would be no job for an imperial prince.*

As relief washed over me, Lutin smiled gently, then looked away. He wasn't looking at me now, but past me. Before I could even turn to see why, he said, "It's very possible that Leonid has a personal interest in Marielle. Protect her well to ensure no troublesome men lay their hands on her. If you're not up to the task, Vice Captain, I'll step in to save her, but for now, I'm heading back to Lavia."

The sliding door leading to the balcony was open only a crack, and Lord Simeon was standing beyond it. He was still in his uniform with his saber at his belt, which meant he'd only just gotten home. I wanted to go and express my joy at his return, but the murderous aura surrounding him made me shrink back. Even though I knew his anger wasn't directed at me, it was still scary.

Noticing my trembling, Lord Simeon hurriedly softened his expression. When he slid the door open and stepped out, I almost ran over to him in relief.

Behind me, there was a hint of a noise. When I looked, Lutin had disappeared. The only sign of his departure was a small patch of cleared snow on the railing, indicating he'd jumped over it.

As I gazed at it absentmindedly, Lord Simeon came over to me. "Still scampering about even on the last night of the year," he huffed in his usual peevish tone. This was out of habit by now, though; I didn't sense any genuine anger. His rage moments ago had been directed at a different target as well, I suspected.

"He came to get the present I promised him. Actually, in large part, he might have come to provide the information he just gave me."

Lord Simeon sighed, a complicated expression on his face. The fact that his breath didn't form a cloud was proof that he was chilled through. He hadn't taken the time to warm himself up after entering the house. He'd rushed straight to me instead.

I nestled against his cold body. "Welcome home. You just barely made it in time."

"Apologies for being so late."

He wrapped an arm around me, bent down, and gave me a kiss. His lips were chilly against mine, but my heart grew warmer in an instant. We embraced more deeply and kissed each other over and over.

"A Slavian imperial prince?" he said afterward.

"Yes. What a surprise! So his study abroad is a secret excursion too. The ambassador must have been up to quite a lot."

"Moreover, he tried to make an advance on you?" he remarked indignantly, his arm around me growing more forceful.

I stood on tiptoes and pressed the palm of my hand against his cold cheek. "Us, rather, I think. You and His Highness as well. He's been watching everyone involved with great amusement. Not that I can say it was in good faith, exactly."

"So the turmoil in Orta is mere spectacle to him as well? He's like Lutin and Ambassador Nigel were added together and boiled down to the essence."

Not divided by two, then? The loathing in his voice made me burst into laughter.

“It’s been an eventful year, hasn’t it?” I said. “With such a sizable event to cap it off. I truly never get bored.”

“I wish you *could* be left bored sometimes. Hopefully next year will be slightly less... No, I don’t want to say it. I’d only be tempting fate.”

Shaking his head, Lord Simeon ushered me indoors. The snow had grown heavier. Better to be warm inside the house, where we could ring in the new year with those close to us. *May next year be another good one, filled with endless fun and joy. May my friends who aren’t here tonight have a year full of good fortune as well. May both my husband—who came home alone in the cold—and his master be able to greet the new year warmly.*

Light shines down upon everyone. I’m sure there are wonderful days to come.

“You rotten *curs*!” a voice exclaimed inside. “How long do you intend to ignore me?!”

“Oh, Your Highness, you made it after all. I’m glad you could take the time away from work. Are you at all hungry?”

Prince Severin was there, sulking magnificently. Lord Simeon’s parents were used to his presence and did not express any fearful deference, merely leaving him to his own devices. I quickly distributed some food to the ill-tempered prince and my husband.

“Simeon, have a drink tonight. Surely on New Year’s Eve you can break your abstinence.”

“No, thank you. Are you ordering me to disgrace myself in front of guests?”

“There’s nothing disgraceful about it,” I insisted. “You’re thoroughly adorable in that state. Go on—don’t hold back.”

“You too? I’ve already had a glass of sparkling water, and that’s enough for me.”

Then Lord Noel piped up, “Simeon! I mixed some booze in with that earlier!”

My husband’s face contorted as he let out a strained yelp.

Somewhere outside, fireworks boomed. The hour hand was pointing directly upward. Cheers of “Happy New Year!” rose up from all present as the curtain opened on a new year. I could faintly hear the servants making merry downstairs as well.

Thoroughly inebriated now, Lord Simeon lifted me off my feet and spun me around, making me scream with laughter. Everyone watching laughed too. *If we’re welcoming a new year with such cheerful smiles, happy days are sure to await us. As long as these strong arms are here to hold me, I can believe that everything will be fine.*

“How many men do you have to captivate before you’re satisfied?” he complained. “Please, I’m begging you, be *my* goddess and mine alone.”

“Obviously, I’m your wife and no one else’s, you adorable man. You’re serious and purehearted and awkward, and yet your appearance is so very, very blackhearted! No one can possibly make me fangirl as hard as you.”

“Exactly. *I’m* the one you fangirl over. If you wished it, I would hold a riding crop or anything you want. Just don’t let your eyes wander no matter what. Look only at me, please.”

“Great! I’ll take that as a promise! Just don’t forget you said that once you’ve sobered up!”

“Simeon,” His Highness murmured, “what have you done...?”

When my husband awoke the next day, a pain other than a hangover left him cradling his head in his hands—but that’s another story.

Chapter Fourteen

All the merriment left everyone thoroughly exhausted, so we began the new year by sleeping in. We spent New Year's Day in leisurely relaxation, then attended the palace party the next day.

Since plenty of folks had gone to visit their families in more distant regions, the party wasn't quite as grand in scale as the summer ball. Nonetheless, a vast number of guests were in attendance, and the sight of them all gathered together was nothing short of spectacular. Among the crowd were ambassadors of various nations, which of course included Slavia.

However, I saw no sign of Mr. Yugin—or rather, Prince Leonid. I obliquely asked the Slavian ambassador about him after a quick hello and was told that he'd left the country. Had he fled because he suspected his true identity was uncovered? Or, more likely, was he satisfied that he'd done what he came here to do? Either way, I would have felt on edge knowing that such an important figure was present, so I was glad he was gone for my own sake.

Barely a handful of days had passed since that awful rumor about me had begun spreading. When I took a glance around, curious gazes beheld me from all directions. And yet, I no longer detected any open derisive sneering—certainly due to Princess Henriette and the others who advocated for me. I had no doubt that people were still talking about me behind closed doors, but there was no point in being timid. That would only invite further ridicule. With Lord Simeon by my side, I wore a bold smile as I circulated and greeted other guests.

To go along with my white gown adorned by gold embroidery—perfect for a New Year's bash—I wore the coral and pearl parure that Lord Simeon had given me for Noël. Upon beholding me dressed up and ready to go out earlier, he'd expressed regret over not ordering a headpiece for me. I informed him that I already had something with pearls, but I suspected I'd be receiving an additional present in the coming days.

Rather than ostentatious, my outfit was suitably charming, and that

invigorated my spirits. This was a New Year's celebration, after all. Today of all days, it wouldn't do for me to hide in a corner. Better to stand out somewhat.

Prince Gracius was also present. "Marielle, Vice Captain," he greeted us without a hint of ill pallor in his face. This was the first time I'd seen him since that fateful night, so I was relieved to find him in such good shape.

"Happy New Year," I replied. "Are you well again?"

"Yes. I wasn't so bad off to begin with, and I recovered quickly. Sorry that I'm late in thanking you." Perhaps because his pesky hangers-on were gone now, his expression was considerably brightened. "You saved my life again. I'm truly grateful. You two are the reason I'm still alive. Nothing I can do would ever be enough to thank you."

"When a friend is in danger, helping them is only natural, isn't it? I'm overjoyed that you're still here with us, in such good health, and that I can enjoy a conversation with you again."

After a moment, he replied, "Thank you."

Beside him stood Isaac, as always, but also another man I didn't recognize. Isaac looked very dapper indeed, with a mustard-colored scarf just peeking out from below the collar of his jacket.

"Good day to you as well, Isaac," I said.

"Happy New Year," he replied.

"That scarf..."

When I drew attention to it, his face reddened just a touch. He then nodded happily. "Yes. It was a gift from my prince. He gave it to me along with those sweets."

Prince Gracius wore a similar expression. Both master and vassal were now donning thoroughly genuine smiles. *You're clearly very important to one another, so there's absolutely no need for you to feel useless, Isaac. Having someone you can mutually rely on is cause for celebration.*

The other man stepped forward. In slightly accented Lagrangian, he said, "Allow me to thank you as well, Mr. and Mrs. Flaubert." He looked to be in his

sixties, but he stood with good posture and carried himself with an abundantly stately bearing. His deeply lined face was austere and the lack of even a slight grin made him somewhat intimidating, but I could sense a warmth in his eyes.

“As a retainer of the Ortan royal family, I must express my deepest, most heartfelt gratitude,” he continued. “Not only have you protected Prince Gracius on more than one occasion, but you went beyond that to teach him the joys of life as his friends. It’s most wonderful.” With a hand on his heart, he bowed politely.

We returned his bow and I shot a questioning glance at Prince Gracius. With a nod, he introduced us. “We spoke about him briefly before—do you remember? This is Marquess Tortajada. He rushed over from Orta.”

“The one who’s at the center of the restoration?” I asked.

“The very same,” the prince replied. “The man who served my father long ago.”

“That makes you a loyal retainer indeed, doesn’t it?” I said, turning to the marquess.

His reply came with a measure of self-deprecation. “When I incurred King Humberto’s displeasure, I was banished to the countryside. The revolution occurred while I was there, so at the crucial moment, I was of no use at all.”

After Isaac translated this, Prince Gracius shook his head. “I think the revolution was inevitable with or without interference, to be honest. Your distance from my father is probably what saved you from the revolutionary army. If you’d still been at the center of Ortan politics, you undoubtedly would have been killed or exiled.”

Lord Simeon picked up where Prince Gracius left off. “I’ve heard that many people supported you, Marquess Tortajada, despite your criticism of the royal family. If the rebels had dared to make a move on you when you were already displaced from the king, even those in favor of the revolution would have turned against the cause. General Mengibar wanted to seize power and solidify his foothold quickly, so—as I understand it—he couldn’t openly act against you no matter how much that vexed him.”

My husband appeared well versed in the circumstances surrounding the revolution. Under his gaze, the marquess let out a puff of air that might have been a laugh. “Less openly, they still harassed me a great deal. If I’d risen to it and things had exploded, it would have given them a pretext for a purge, so I kept my head down as much as possible and hid myself away. Even after I heard that His and Her Majesty had died in faraway Linden, I couldn’t do a thing. The brilliant new era our people dreamed of did not come to be, and conditions rapidly worsened, yet I still merely watched it all from a distance. I knew that many had greater expectations of me, but I protected my own safety in the countryside and nothing more.” It sounded almost like a confession. He continued, “For twenty long years—”

But there, Prince Gracius interrupted him. “It was the right thing to do.”

It was an unusually firm statement from the typically mild-mannered prince. Unshakable resolve appeared on the face of this young man who’d similarly been forced to bide his entire life. Though the marquess lamented his own behavior, the prince took a different stance.

“Because of you,” he insisted, “Orta is now saved. You’re alive and well, Marquess, which has given the people cause to rally. They believe that they can end this chaos, restore peace, and rebuild. Your presence is heartening to me as well.”

Marquess Tortajada merely looked on, lost for words.

“You held on,” Prince Gracius continued, “waiting patiently for the right chance. That’s why you can lend me your strength now. You did very well to endure for twenty years. Thank you.”

The marquess lowered his head and smiled. After a moment, he replied, “Your words are far too generous.”

The prince then turned to us. “I’ve faced a great deal of my own woes, but I’ve come to see it as all part of a cycle. Even when torrential rain damages people’s livelihoods, the water still enriches and nourishes the earth. The good and the bad are not distinct, but connected.”

“Lord Lucio...” I murmured.

“Driven out of my homeland, I felt like I had nowhere I belonged—but if I’d grown up happily without any problems, I wouldn’t have known what it means to feel pain. I wouldn’t have understood the plight of the sad and helpless. Even after becoming king, I wouldn’t have had any sympathy for the people. I might have been just like my father.”

A look of surprise crossed Isaac’s face, while Marquess Tortajada appeared to nod very slightly.

“Coming to Lagrange wasn’t by choice,” the prince went on, “but it gave me the chance to meet you two. To make memories I’ll never forget my whole life long. Everything is connected. Depending on my outlook, even negative experiences can nourish me. Watching you has convinced me of that.”

“Me?” I asked.

His smile deepening, the prince nodded. “You taught me that there are different ways of looking at the world, didn’t you? That the same circumstances can be looked at in a completely different light. True to your word, you always seem to be enjoying yourself. When bad things happen, you don’t let them overwhelm you—you search for the good in them. It made me wonder if I could do the same. If my experiences so far might help me grow.”

Reflexively, I folded my arms and nodded several times. *Yes, exactly! If you have hope and hold your head high, paths will surely reveal themselves. It will bring forth a bountiful, colorful harvest.*

Moved to tears, Isaac nodded deeply. Prince Gracius’s words must have struck a chord with him too. *The good and the bad are not distinct, but connected... I’ll have to be mindful of that as well.*

“Here I am trying to sound like I know what I’m talking about when I’m still living off the goodwill of others and always being rescued. Vice Captain, I keep dragging you into danger even though I’m not even your fellow countryman.” As he finished speaking, Prince Gracius knitted his brow slightly.

Lord Simeon replied, “That is my duty. Our country has decided to support you, so my role as a military officer is to protect you to the utmost of my ability. Seeing Orta restored is a key matter for all its surrounding countries, Lagrange not least of all.”

“Right,” the prince said after a pause.

My husband had spoken the truth, but in such a way that it came across as cold and businesslike. However, just as I was wondering if there might not have been a *slightly* more personal way to phrase it, he added, “Moreover, assisting a friend in need is a matter of course. When a friend needs rescuing, nationality has nothing to do with it. All that counts is how we feel about each other—wouldn’t you agree?”

When the prince said nothing, my husband further added, “Should you ever need help again, don’t hesitate to call upon me. I don’t care about the danger. That’s what I train for, day in, day out. A military officer is always looking for a chance to demonstrate the results of his training. To put it as Marielle might...” He stole a glance at me. “It’s an excellent chance to show off.”

What a thing to say with such a straight face!

Caught off guard, Prince Gracius began to shake with laughter. “To show off...?”

“All my efforts and experience have allowed me to help a friend. Is there anyone who wouldn’t relish a chance for their skill to be of such benefit?”

The laughing Prince Gracius was brought to tears as well—though it was obvious to anyone looking at him that these were not tears of sadness. “Thank you,” he said at last. “I’ll strive to feel that way as well. I’ll fight with a different kind of strength from yours, Vice Captain.”

With a countenance that appeared to have matured by at least two degrees, Prince Gracius made this declaration and departed with a promise that we’d see each other again. I nestled close to Lord Simeon, and we went on our way as well.

When I remained silent, he stopped and peered down at me with a look of concern. “What’s wrong? You’re being unusually well-mannered. Is there something on your mind?”

“I think I’m well-mannered all the time,” I objected.

He silently shrugged.

What is that face supposed to mean? I'm not that loud and boisterous the rest of the time, am I?

Still pouting, I replied, "It's nothing much. I was only thinking about how Lord Lucio has grown in such a short span of time. He's walking his own path now."

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Of course not. It's very much a good thing. I'm impressed at such a marked change in a few short months." I paused. "Meanwhile, I haven't grown in the slightest."

Sighing, I leaned against Lord Simeon's arm. As joyous as it was that a friend I felt the need to protect was getting stronger, I couldn't help feeling a certain frustration, as though I was being left behind.



“I can’t call myself much of a wife, can I? I’m an eccentric who’s constantly acting recklessly.”

“So you’ve become aware of that, have you?”

“I may be aware of it, but I can do nothing to change it.”

Without another word for the moment, Lord Simeon took me over to a less crowded side of the room and sat me down.

“I’ve been doing what I can to try and improve on my faults, you know. Still, I can’t discard my hobby or my work, and when trouble does arise, I can’t turn a blind eye to it. I’ll probably be this sort of person until the day I die,” I told him.

Rather than taking a seat for himself, he stood in front of me and looked down at me. “I accepted that long ago.”

“I’m trying to be a good wife at least, but it’s no use. All I ever do is take advantage of your kindness. You provide me a life of luxury beyond anything I could ever deserve, and I can’t even begin to repay you for it.”

When I cast my eyes down at my hands in my lap, I caught sight of the coral and pearl bracelet. Both my dress and jewelry could be considered necessities for a nobleman’s wife, but was I truly worthy of them?

“I keep causing you problems and making you worry, Lord Simeon. I’m so sorry that I’m such a bad wife.” As I spoke, I started feeling down again and sighed once more.

From above me, I heard a soft burst of laughter. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but *that* surprised me. A bad wife? You? You’re an author—don’t you know the meaning of those words?” He put his fist to his mouth and began to chuckle.

If he’d taken the opportunity to complain, I’d only have felt even worse. But could this all be laughed off so casually, I wondered?

“You take proper care of matters at home, and you get on well with my family. You don’t shy away from socializing, you participate in society, and you’re considerate of my relatives too. You have yet to forget that extravagance isn’t a good thing. Does any of that sound like a bad wife?”

“But that all goes without saying, doesn’t it? It’s the everyday and nothing more. There’s nothing special about anything I do.”

“Do you believe there’s no value in preserving the peacefulness of the everyday? That the little things you do on a daily basis aren’t deserving of thanks?”

“No, but...”

“Life is made up of the everyday repeating again and again. ‘Special’ is so called because it occurs so rarely. If every day were special, it would quickly grow tiresome.”

“W-Well...” I began, unsure of quite what to say next. *Come to think of it, he might be right... But I’m not sure. Is the everyday really enough? If “special” became the norm, then I suppose it would be the new everyday. Or is that somewhat beside the point? Hmm...*

Lord Simeon quietly got down on one knee. Just like when he’d proposed to me, he lifted both my hands and looked up at me with kind eyes. “You had a warm pair of gloves made for me out of concern for my well-being, and that made me very happy. You treat everyone in the family with great consideration—my parents, my brothers, even the servants. Because you are as you are, everyone loves you, and you can live a harmonious life with them. That’s a joyous gift unto itself. I’m constantly grateful to be blessed with such a good wife.”

I still didn’t know what to say.

“The reason our families and all your friends were able to laugh off that rumor about you—the reason nobody believed it—is that we all know you and your nature. No one who does would ever say an unkind word about you. That is the sort of admiration you yourself inspire in others, Marielle.”

His light blue eyes contained a gentle smile and beheld me as if embracing me. I felt the lingering unease in my heart melting away. *Can I really take what he’s saying at face value? Can I be sure it’s not him being a doting husband as usual? Am I really allowed to believe that I’m doing a good job?*

“Of course,” he added, “I have severely mixed feelings about your ever-

increasing number of devotees.”

These words, delivered with a wry smile, certainly *were* those of a doting husband. *Devotees? It's not as though I'm Lady Aurelia. Nonetheless, I had better be careful to avoid any misunderstandings that would make my husband uneasy.*

“Are you certain I’m not useless?” I asked him. “You’re always having to rescue me.”

“And you’re always helping me in return. You’re the one who said that being a couple means helping one another.”

“I did say that, but on reflection, I don’t feel I’m holding up my end of the bargain.”

“What makes you think so? You often laugh at me for being too serious, but you seem to have an overly grave opinion of yourself.”

He clasped my fingertips in both hands and gently kissed them. Where his lips touched me, I could feel his warmth and affection flow into me. I could feel how much he loved me.

Unable to hold back, I threw my arms around his neck. Such childish behavior in public would invite laughter and embarrassing looks, but I told myself a little was all right. Feelings too strong to subdue were rising in me. Lord Simeon embraced me in return. His large hand softly patted my back as if he were soothing a child.

“I caused you tremendous worry and trouble this time,” I said. “Didn’t you get fed up with me?”

“I never get fed up, no matter how much trouble there is. If I begrudged you for it, I wouldn’t have married you.”

His hand moved up from my back and stroked my head now. Concern for my carefully arranged hairstyle briefly flashed through my mind, but the comfort I felt was far greater.

“You continually surprise me, cause me trouble, leave me exasperated, and—on occasion—make me quite annoyed, but it’s always enjoyable to watch you.

I've had my eyes on you ever since I met you. Sometimes I wonder what in the world you're doing, but I always have fun. Even now. You make me so happy."

"My days are filled with a similar enjoyment, all because you're with me. My heart never ceases to race." I looked up and smiled at the blue eyes right in front of me. Naturally, inevitably, our lips met, and our glasses collided as they always did.

Even if I can't do anything special, maybe I can safeguard our happiness just by treasuring the unremarkable days. Will my husband and his family always smile at me? Will they always like me?

God's light shines down on everyone. I never want to forget these feelings. I want to cherish everyone and make my everyday life into a never-ending cycle of happiness. I pray to always live with a smile on my face. To be with you forever.

A teasing voice broke us out of our reverie. "Simeon! Miss Marielle! Sorry to interrupt, but you've become the center of attention."

We hurriedly pulled ourselves apart. People were staring at us all around. *Oh dear! I quite forgot where we were!*

Countess Estelle looked half-stunned. "I suppose that's one way to demonstrate the strength of your marriage, though. I'm sure there are some who propagated the rumor because they thought they could swoop in if you got divorced."

"Yes, serves them right!" said Earl Maximilian with an uncharacteristically dark smile. "Keep going! Don't hold back!"

What? Has my affable, laid-back father-in-law always had this side to him? This unexpected darkness is simply marvelous! The brutal, blackhearted military officer inherited some of it from his father after all!

"Speaking of which," Noel teased, "I just caught sight of someone over there with an incredible look on their face. Maybe I'll go and stir the pot a little. That would be good fun."

"Noel! You wait right there!"

May the new year have a blessed start. From the bottom of my heart, I hope these days keep going without end. I wonder what kinds of things will happen this year. All sorts of chaos awaits, no doubt. We'll be rushed off our feet, given reason for worry, and maybe even argue too. Still, I'm sure that plenty of excitement is ahead. My life with you will no doubt be brilliant.

Congratulations and happy New Year. To you and to our family, thank you.

The Behind-the-Scenes of Marielle Clarac

About a month before all the chaos, when the end of the year felt like it was approaching and tension was beginning to fill the air...

As Simeon went to leave the Royal Order of Knights' headquarters one day, his aide, Lieutenant Alain Lisnard, came running after him while putting his arms into his coat sleeves. "Vice Captain, I'll see you home."

A great deal of burdensome work had accumulated that day, and night had crept on as the men finished it. Most of the city was already in bed at this hour. It had grown bitterly cold, and all was dark and silent outside. Alain was concerned for his superior officer, who would be returning home alone via the desolate streets.

"No need," Simeon refused curtly. "There's no point in both of us getting cold."

This indifferent statement from his superior officer's sternly handsome face produced a hint of a wry smile on Alain's but had no further effect. It was the exact response he'd expected. Simeon wasn't actually dismissing his offer as worthless, but rather expressing thoughtful concern for a subordinate's well-being. Simeon's curse was that it never *seemed* that way.

Fastening up the front of his coat, Alain caught up and insistently walked alongside Simeon. "Don't say that. Please allow me to accompany you so that I can have a nightcap and sleep soundly without worry."

Since Simeon's home was close to the palace and he liked to come and go as he pleased, he didn't use a carriage. He always traveled alone with no escort. Those close to him didn't think highly of the practice. For a man who was both the heir to a prestigious earldom and the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he faced a far greater risk of danger than any ordinary citizen. He was also subject to jealousy and irrational hostility—he'd been snared in unseemly plots before. There was plenty of cause for concern, in other words. Though his family fretted for him, they *did* also have to wonder if anyone was truly capable

of bringing harm to him. As a result, the matter was still unsettled and Simeon was left to his own devices.

“Not that I think anything will happen to you,” Alain continued. “The hour is late—that’s all. You never know what might be lurking out there in the empty city streets at night.”

“I’m not a woman. I’m shocked to find that I need a chaperone to escort me home.”

“Just so you’re aware, hardly anyone else would commute alone like you do. Government ministers and other military higher-ups all take guards with them. The Captain is a damned strong old brute, and even he brings an escort along. He knows it’s only proper.”

Alain was entirely correct, so Simeon couldn’t raise any meaningful objections. Instead, after a moment, he replied, “Don’t use such foul language on the palace grounds.”

Receiving no more than this perfunctory caution, Alain understood that his superior *was* allowing him to accompany him, so the two of them headed out together.

Outside the building, a bone-chilling gust blew and white specks whirled down from the pitch-black sky. The men’s breath formed clouds that drifted off on the wind, and their noses were chilled in an instant. They mounted their favorite horses and addressed the gate guard, who was melting some cheese on a stove in the guard post. This really should have warranted disciplinary measures, but given the cold, both Simeon and Alain understood. They let it slide, only confiscating the alcohol he had with him.

The route to the Flaubert estate took less than thirty minutes to travel even at a slow pace. The two men chatted along the way, approaching their destination before they knew it.

“I can’t believe it’s nearly December already. The years seem to go by so quickly these days. Your house’s Noël celebration will be a lavish affair, I bet—won’t it, Vice Captain? Have you already bought all your gifts and such?”

“I ordered them in advance since it will take time to make it all. In particular,

my youngest brother is getting something excessively large. I fear I may have asked the impossible of the craftsman.”

“All your gifts will be custom made?” Alain raised his eyebrows. “I suppose that’s not such a surprise for a man of your status.”

Though jovial Alain was the main driver of the chatter, Simeon readily participated. As curt as he could be, he wasn’t one to refuse conversation.

“Chouchou’s the only one I’m not sure about. I’m still puzzling over what to get her.”

“Chouchou? Who’s that?” Though Alain had heard the name once before, there had been such a fuss at the time that all he could remember was the woman at the center of it all—Simeon’s wife. He recalled her behaving just as wildly as usual, but he’d quite forgotten the name of the white fluffball she’d held in her arms.

“Our little one. She’s about four years old.”

“What?! When did you... Wait, if she’s four, then she was born *before* you got married, no?!”

“Yes, quite right. Marielle brought her with her into the house when we married. I don’t want to be cruel, however. I try to treat her as my own, but she just doesn’t seem to like me. I don’t know what to do.”

Alain let out a truly baffled exclamation. “Marielle has a little one?! If she’s four, then Marielle must have been...fifteen?!”

“I felt the same, but Marielle had no choice about taking her in. Chouchou’s mother died in an accident, and Marielle found the poor thing by her corpse. She couldn’t simply look the other way.”

“This tale only grows more shocking!”

Failing to realize they were hardly on the same page, the two men continued their mismatched conversation. With the streets bereft of people at this late hour, there was no one to point out their folly. Only the horses accompanied them, clopping down the otherwise silent streets.

“W-Well, let me think,” Alain said. “If she’s four, perhaps a stuffed toy would

do?”

“A stuffed toy? Yes, that could work. I’ll consider it as an option.”

As the men spoke, they moved away from the palace and toward even darker roads. They were now passing a series of particularly splendid manors, even for the noble district. Residential location was intricately linked with status; the closer a house was to the palace, the more prestige. The lower-ranking, less affluent families lived further south, close to the business district. House Clarac, the family Marielle hailed from, was almost exactly in the middle. For them to be positioned so middle of the road in all respects felt as though it had to be intentional.

It was only a little farther now to the Flaubert manor. For Simeon, they’d entered the familiar grounds of his neighborhood, and even Alain—who had taken it upon himself to serve as his superior’s escort—began to relax at the thought of seeing his charge safely home. He’d only come along on the off chance that something should happen. He’d never expected that it actually would...

Simeon noticed it first.

“Vice Captain?”

Though Simeon had been engaging with Alain’s trivial conversation, he had suddenly fallen silent. Quickly realizing something was wrong, Alain did the same. At a glance, nothing had changed about Simeon’s demeanor, but Alain’s honed senses picked up on the change in his aura.

Wondering what was amiss, Alain surveyed their surroundings. They were just passing by a manor surrounded by a tall fence. There was no sign of anyone around—or so he thought.

“Above us?!” he gasped, realizing and looking up just as a black shadow descended from the fence.

The shadowy figure immediately went for Simeon, jumping down onto his horse’s back right behind him and attacking before the surprised beast had time to rear up. There was no time to even call out. It was all over in a second—and Simeon had moved first. Before the assailant’s fist could connect, Simeon’s

elbow had shot back. He struck while turning around with a blow that landed perfectly, sending the assailant plummeting from the horse.

It appeared, however, that the ambusher had done more than merely punch Simeon, who started lurching sideways too. Deciding it would be better to dismount rather than struggle to stay on horseback, Simeon didn't resist and released the reins. The two fallen men immediately sprang up. The assailant kicked off the ground and came again for Simeon, who leaped backward to dodge. It all unfolded unbelievably fast. Simeon delivered a firm kick to the ambusher while Alain was still dismounting his horse.

The assailant went flying but broke his fall in an agile fashion and picked himself up once more. He was a stubborn opponent. Alain, finally down from his horse now, ran over to his superior officer.

That was when a second figure jumped down. Suddenly aware of his negligence in allowing the first attacker to distract him, Alain evaded a blow aimed at him. He reached for the saber at his hip, but his opponent moved with such shocking speed that they were upon him before he could draw.

"Standard techniques won't be enough!" Simeon declared in warning to his comrade while contending with the first attacker.

Indeed, textbook swordsmanship couldn't keep up with these two assailants. Alain withdrew his hand from his hip and interlocked it with his other hand, then swung up toward the jaw of his swiftly approaching foe. He didn't quite hit his mark, but he did get a response. Without leaving any time for a counterattack, he unleashed a kick at the slightly stumbling assailant. The enemy in turn jumped back to get some distance from Alain.

Just then, there was a similar pause in Simeon's game of attack and defense with his own opponent. They were now standing some ways away, glaring at each other to gauge one another's next move.

The stare-down lasted but another moment, as both assailants exchanged a quick glance and turned to flee.

"Huh?" Alain uttered. They had cut and run so quickly that he couldn't contain his shock. He'd steeled himself for an intense face-off, and now this? It was as if they'd suddenly been purged of their hostility and simply run like

scared rabbits.

When he looked to his superior officer, wondering whether they should give chase, Simeon sighed softly and shook his head. “Best not to follow them.”

“Yes... I suppose.”

Pursuing could mean playing into the enemy’s hands. With a nod, Alain went back to his horse. The well-trained military steeds had stayed in place, not running off despite the sudden outburst of violence.

When Alain casually looked back at Simeon, he noticed something was wrong. “Vice Captain. Look.”

Simeon’s sleeve was torn, his skin exposed, suggesting the enemy’s blade had caught him. His glove appeared to be ripped as well.

“Are you all right?” Alain inquired, hurrying over to take a closer look.

Fortunately, it was not a serious wound, but Simeon was indeed injured. A red stripe ran along the back of his hand. “A superficial cut,” he insisted, his voice calm.

This, however, was not enough to reassure Alain, who was aware of his superior officer’s most unhelpful tendencies. “If you’re hurt, please don’t hold back. Even if the wound is only a shallow one, that blade could have been poisoned. That would be disastrous.”

“I don’t have that impression. I’d be suffering severe pain or numbness.”

Simeon moved his hand and looked it over. His breathing was steady, as was his heartbeat. Blood welled in the wound, but not enough to form a trickle.

Convinced now that it truly was nothing serious, Alain let out a sigh of relief. “I wonder who was behind this. Do you have any guesses?”

“Too many to narrow it down.”

This flat reply left Alain with no response but to laugh and say, “That’s fair.”

Simeon was a man with countless potential enemies. That was exactly why Alain hadn’t wanted to let him go home alone. And he was glad he’d insisted, for even Simeon would have struggled to take on two of them at once.

Again under the premise of “just in case,” Simeon insisted that Alain stay overnight at the Flaubert manor. Alain lived on the palace grounds in the bachelor quarters, and it would have been less than ideal to go straight back there, so he was quite grateful for the accommodations. He decided he could leave early the next morning to change his clothes.

He was told not to breathe a word of the incident to anyone in the household, who all showed him excellent hospitality. During his stay, he finally learned the truth about Marielle’s mysterious four-year-old. He forgot, however, to retract his earlier gift suggestion—thus leading to the commission of a stuffed toy fish.

After reporting the attack the following day, Simeon quickly received a summons from the crown prince. When he arrived, not only were Captain Poisson and Prince Severin present, but also the ambassadors from Easdale and Linden. Much to Simeon’s chagrin, the common criminal from Lavia was there too. Simeon wanted to ask why he hadn’t gone home already, but he had to hold back in front of his two bosses.

“Sounds like you had quite an evening, Vice Captain. Not too badly wounded, are you, I hope?” This question came from Nigel, who had apparently already heard the story.

Simeon passed it off as nothing to worry about. “The tip of a blade merely nicked me. I wouldn’t even call it a wound.”

“Thank goodness it wasn’t poisoned,” a certain man shot sardonically. “Normally, even a nick from an assassin’s blade is enough to kill.”

At Severin’s urging, Simeon sat down. Taking in the array of attendees, he asked, “I take it this summons isn’t related to last night’s incident, then?”

Captain Poisson answered, “I’m afraid it is indeed related.”

“Don’t tell me you were attacked as well,” Simeon remarked, receiving nods from both Nigel and the Lindenese ambassador.

“Not directly, I’ll note,” Nigel added. “The attacks occurred in our homelands. In Easdale’s case, I’m told someone was stupid enough to try targeting my uncle, Duke Shannon. Even without me there, my knights protected him, of course. Only, they couldn’t catch the culprits. They ran off too quickly.”

“I, too, received news of an attack,” Ambassador Heinemann of Linden added. “Our chief of staff was targeted. His guards were with him, of course, so the attempt was thwarted. However, these culprits ran away as well, and the guards were unable to apprehend them.”

Simeon nodded, then finally turned to the hateful Lavian.

A dauntless smile in his blue eyes, he explained indifferently, “Ours was a financial bureaucrat. Apparently when he was attacked, he screamed and fell to the ground, unable to get up. Everyone nearby rushed over to him, but he didn’t have any guards there, so if the attackers really *were* trying to kill him, they had plenty of opportunity to do so. And yet, they fled the scene as fast as they could.”

Simeon considered this in silence as the Lavian further explained that everyone present, including the target himself, had taken the assault for an attempted robbery. It was common enough for such criminals to panic and run off when a fuss was made. However, Prince Liberto had sensed something odd in the news when he heard of it. He’d thus started an investigation into the matter, including sending word back to the subordinate he’d left in Lagrange.

Simeon’s expression hardened as he looked to Prince Severin, who nodded back. “Individually, they’re perfectly ordinary incidents. Nothing to speak of. But they have a strange common factor. In all cases, the assailants were clearly very skilled, yet easily foiled and quick to retreat.”

“In other words, they had no intention of killing their targets in the first place,” Simeon concluded without needing to hear the rest. He received a confirmatory look.

This theory checked out against Simeon’s own experience. His attackers the prior night had been skilled indeed. Even he hadn’t been able to immediately subdue them. The frightening speed with which they wielded their knives had given Simeon a sense of *déjà vu*. He’d once faced a man who fought exactly the same way—a man that had recently been executed. He was dead and gone now. However, knowing that he’d been a covert operative for his homeland aroused reasonable suspicion that others in the same profession received similar training.

Simeon looked around again at the other men present. There was something all of them had in common.

“Is this Orta’s doing?” he asked, and his words provoked no surprise. Everyone had considered that same possibility.

“A warning, perhaps,” Nigel said, playing with his long hair. “I received word from Easdale right after hearing about what happened in Lavia. Out of curiosity, I asked Ambassador Heinemann, and he informed me there’d been a similar occurrence in Linden too.”

“And then your report came in,” the crown prince added. “These attacks happened in such a short span of time that it’s virtually inconceivable they’re unrelated. We probably should take it as a warning sign to the allied nations.”

The men in the room all belonged to countries that had joined hands to take down the military regime ruling Orta, siding with Smerda in their war with Orta. Even now, they still had security forces stationed in Orta and were assisting with the restoration of the Ortan monarchy.

“These weren’t serious assassination attempts, but the message they send is clear—if they *really* wanted to, they *could* do so at any time. It’s like they’re likely saying, ‘Back off!’”

Internally, Orta was still in a state of turmoil. There were those opposed to the restoration of the crown, namely those who’d been involved in the military regime. For them to regain power, they’d first have to drive off the countries giving support from the outside. They didn’t have the strength for a head-on confrontation, so they were intimating that they might use more underhanded tactics.

At least, that was a plausible reading of the situation. Yet Simeon knitted his brow, not entirely satisfied. Was that *really* the cause behind the attacks? “I understand Duke Shannon and a chief of staff, but why a financial bureaucrat?” he murmured to himself.

The detestable Lavian who was more or less filling the role of a diplomat replied, “I understand your reservation, but remember that we haven’t sent any military forces. Our support has been purely financial, so it’s not so strange that the man overseeing the funding was attacked.”

That was reasonably convincing. It made sense for a small country like Lavia. However, the final target didn't make sense to Simeon no matter how much he thought about it. While he'd personally been deeply involved with Orta, he failed to see why *he* was targeted if the goal had been to attack a key figure from each country. The Captain would have made more sense, at least—but far more obvious would have been the chief of staff or minister of war. Someone of that level.

"Is it possible this was someone else's handiwork and they merely tried to make it *look* like Orta's doing?" Simeon asked.

The other men exchanged looks.

"We can't rule it out, I suppose," Severin replied.

"It could also be a futile effort from the cornered anti-monarchists," Poisson added, "but that would be pointless since this kind of threat has no real effect."

The two ambassadors frowned as well. Only one present—the self-styled Lavian diplomat—looked as though the matter didn't concern him. As he held his tongue, his attitude almost seemed to suggest he knew the truth and was amused by it all. The temperature of Simeon's gaze dropped and, noticing this, the man in question shrugged. "If I knew anything, I'd tell you. I don't have any reason to lie about this."

Though Simeon wanted to point out that such a statement could itself be a lie, he was keenly aware of the situation and held his tongue. His personal resentment aside, he knew he could believe the Lavian. Simeon only wished he would *act* in a way that was believable rather than always being so misleading.

As the pair glared daggers at each other, Severin lightly pounded on the table to draw the attention to himself. "Do you have any grounds for believing it was someone else?"

Schooling his face back to seriousness, Simeon answered his liege. "It was the way they fought last night. Their movements were identical to those of the Ortan operative known as the Silver Fox."

"The one with a grudge against you who wouldn't stop giving you grief?"

"Yes. It was as if he'd come back to life before my very eyes. The assailants

had clearly undergone the same training.”

“Doesn’t that suggest they are truly from the Ortan anti-monarchist faction?” Nigel interjected.

“At face value, you’d be right,” Simeon explained. “But it was too perfect. Instigating similar attacks in different countries to make them seem connected, but then coming after me? I don’t like it. It’s too much like a conscious attempt to make it *look* like Orta’s doing.”

Nigel paused for a moment’s thought. “You mean they were assuming you, Vice Captain, would be able to identify the origin of that fighting style? Hmm, I wonder. You might be reading too much into things.”

“I’ve no doubt they expected Vice Captain Flaubert would recognize it,” Heinemann offered. “Whatever their goal, they wanted to ensure that we sniffed out the assailants’ origins. That would explain why the Vice Captain was attacked, which leads me to believe his assessment of the situation is quite correct. Only, I currently have no way to determine who was really behind it.”

This left everyone scratching their heads once again. They had too little information to go off of. They were stuck.

“We should contact our forces stationed in Orta and have them investigate whether there’s any unusual activity,” Severin concluded. It wasn’t a particularly active response, but it was all they could do at present.

They couldn’t rule out further attacks, so the men agreed to increased security and rigorous cooperation between them. With that, their meeting came to a close.

In the weeks that followed, Lord Simeon was plagued with a vexed feeling that he couldn’t shake. They had too little information—that was undeniable. In light of that, they had to account for all possibilities and pay close attention to Prince Gracius’s safety. The prince had been kidnapped, after all. Simeon had helped to foil the plan and rescue him, but he wished it had never happened at all. He couldn’t brook such a catastrophe under his watch.

Watching the Ortans who had strolled in as if they owned the place, Poisson

asked, “Do you think there’s any connection to those attacks?”

“I wonder.” Severin cocked his head. “It would be convenient for us if so, but these men don’t look like they have enough brain cells between them for that.”

“Good point. There are people capable of toying with other countries and subtly making us aware of their presence...and then there are people like this.”

The hangers-on hounding Prince Gracius were the least likely suspects in the orchestration of the attacks. In retrospect, the mastermind had no doubt hoped someone would pin the crimes on them. Looking at them, the hangers-on seemed to be small fry; it was hard to think they’d had anything to do with the plan. In truth, they likely had no knowledge of what had transpired. They had been tactically used as pawns by the real mastermind, and had come to meddle in Lagrange’s affairs while none the wiser about the bigger picture. They were a mere distraction that had afforded the real mastermind a chance to strike.

It was tremendously frustrating. Given how events had unfolded, there was nothing he could have done, but Simeon was still annoyed with himself for not seeing it in advance. As he grew lost in thoughts about it again, a soft voice brought him back to the present.

“Lord Simeon?” When he looked down, Marielle was wearing a worried expression. When he asked her what was wrong, she informed him that was precisely what *she* wanted to know. “You had a thunderous look on your face. What were you thinking about?”

Simeon hadn’t realized he was letting it show. Putting on a smile, he shook his head. “Nothing much. A number of work-related matters. I happened to be thinking about security.”

The palace New Year’s party was unfolding all around them. Though it was an affair thrown by the king, it nonetheless had a relaxed atmosphere. Such a severe expression was undoubtedly out of place.

Simeon’s very official-sounding excuse put a dry grin on Marielle’s face. “I can’t blame you given what we’ve just been through, but surely you can put away that grim look on such a celebratory occasion. The royal guards are at their posts and keeping a vigilant watch.”

“You’re right. My apologies.”

As Marielle had said, the knights were standing guard both inside and outside the ballroom. They were all rigidly focused on ensuring that nothing like the recent events occurred again, their eyes sharp and merciless. Still, no one could say when or where evil might creep in. No matter how conscious the knights were about security, they couldn’t fully guarantee that all was safe.

As if sensing that her husband was harboring such a concern, Marielle added with a pointed gaze, “For now...or at least for today...I don’t think anything else will happen. Call it intuition, but I doubt the mastermind behind the plot against Lord Lucio even cared all that much that it failed.”

Simeon frowned. “What makes you say that?”

Her eyes were looking elsewhere—at the Slavian ambassador.

The ultimate conclusion was that the recent incident had indeed been an assassination attempt by the anti-monarchists. Marielle, however, didn’t entirely agree. “I wonder if the aspiring hangers-on were really the only ones being used. I have a feeling the anti-monarchists planning the assassination might have been manipulated as well.”

“By Slavia, you mean?” Simeon asked, suspecting what she was hinting at.

With a small nod, Marielle replied, “After what Lutin said, I asked my grandfather to tell me more about Slavia. I had the somewhat frightening impression of it as a large country with a strong military force, but it seems it has all sorts of hardships of its own.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“It’s a nation that was formed by numerous tribes joining together, integrating more and more to take the shape of an empire. With different ethnic groups and religions coexisting, even achieving unity within the country is quite a struggle, I gather.”

“That’s true. It’s rather different from our country and those around it. Though its territory is vast, a great amount of its land is frozen earth, so not all of it is fruitful. The country appears to be rich in resources, but they lack the equipment and technical skill to mine and capitalize on them. That’s why

they're always dispatching people here to study."

Marielle looked at her husband again and smiled. "Lutin hinted at economic difficulties as well. The reason they didn't intervene in the conflict between Orta and Smerda is because they didn't have the means to, isn't it? Of course, they must have ambitions to expand their territory and grow as a country, but they don't have the strength to do anything significant right now. Meanwhile, the western nations are rapidly developing. The problem Slavia is facing is that it might be left behind."

Simeon's eyes widened at his young wife's sagacious words. A little information about the country's history and internal affairs had given her such understanding. Such insight was nothing new, but she amazed him every time.

As if enjoying her husband's reaction, Marielle added, "Though they didn't actually manage to kill Lord Lucio, they at least caused some chaos and turmoil for us. That was enough for them, most likely. They've delayed the restoration in Orta and caused unrest in the allied countries. I think their real goal was to stir trouble, whatever form it happened to take."

Simeon heaved a sigh, then shrugged as an exasperated chuckle escaped his lips. "Whatever form, you say?"

"If you look at it that way, it all makes sense. Mr. Yugin—Prince Leonid, that is—was just watching with amusement from start to finish, after all."

Marielle shrugged, then nestled against Simeon's arm. They walked along together, approached at every turn. Distinguished nobles, the princess, and the queen herself greeted Marielle in a familiar manner. Even their political opponents from the reformist faction softened their expressions when speaking to her. As a result, Simeon was now able to have some measure of a conversation with those who'd greeted him with nothing but barbed sarcasm before.

The wallflower hiding in the shadows that no one remembered had at some point made herself rather well known. Marielle said that she was merely benefiting from her attachment to Simeon, but he knew that wasn't the entire truth—not by a long shot. These people hadn't merely become passing acquaintances; they all trusted her and viewed her with favor.

Simeon asserted that this was only natural. If anyone didn't trust Marielle, who was always so frank, there was something wrong with *them*. She expressed her feelings honestly, and it drew others' hearts toward her. When one came to know her kind, sunny nature, it was impossible not to be charmed.

"Ah, the happy couple," a man said as he approached.

"Goodness! Hello, Ambassador Van Leer," Marielle replied. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year. I'm glad to see you two looking as harmonious as ever."

Marielle giggled. "Thank you. You and Lady Greetje appear as impassioned as ever yourselves."

When talking to people from foreign countries, Marielle used their language wherever possible. This was highly regarded as well. Not only were her language skills admired, but so was her respect and consideration for her conversation partners. She never resorted to false flattery or trying to curry favor for her own benefit. For Marielle, she simply enjoyed conversation with the people she'd come to know. That was why she was so loved. There was nothing artificial about it. Her own natural charm drew people to her.

Simeon wondered if he should tell her that. She'd been feeling blue of late, fretting that she was of no use. This didn't make any sense to him, especially when she'd made so many connections to so many major figures lately. That sort of networking was what everyone worked so hard for in society, wasn't it? No one could have expected Marielle to be *this* capable as a wife, including Simeon.

And yet, he didn't want to tell her. Her behavior was so scintillating *because* it was natural. If he drew attention to it, it might make unnecessary waves in Marielle's heart and cause her more worry. Then she might not be able to chat with the people she'd become so close to with the same candor as before.

He wanted Marielle to keep following her heart. That was Simeon's wish. Seeing her chase after what she wanted was what had drawn his eye and made him fall in love with her. Even now that they were married, no matter how much time passed, he wanted her to keep shining the same way she had when they first met.

Marielle did get herself into trouble from time to time, but that was also a part of her charm. There was no small number of occasions when she left Simeon baffled, sighing, and in despair. And what bothered him most of all was the ever-increasing number of pests buzzing around her.

“I have to at least drive off that *poisonous* insect.”

Marielle turned to him, having heard his muttering. “Excuse me?”

Simeon smiled and avoided answering by giving her a gentle kiss. Conscious of all the eyes around them, his wife blushed too adorably for him to bear. Lending her a gentlemanly arm wasn’t enough. He wrapped his arm around her tiny waist, not leaving room for the slightest opening. He was making it clear to everyone that no one else was to lay a hand on her.

If the Slavian prince was truly motivated by nothing more than idle curiosity and he was now satisfied, then all was well and good. But if there was more to it than that...

As he elegantly swam through the party exchanging smiles with other guests, flames blazed up in Simeon’s stomach. The sight of him was beautiful in a thoroughly aristocratic way, and the eyes he directed at his wife were sweet as honey. His subordinates, watching from a distance, felt an unspeakable chill and subtly averted their gazes.

Afterword

Haruka Momo here, saying hello in the eventful period from Christmas to New Year. It's the season when lovers get really excited! Marielle and Simeon are leading an exciting life too, albeit in a slightly different way.

Although this story is based on historical Europe, it only takes inspiration—it definitely has nothing to do with any real countries. What does this mean for religion, then? How should I handle that? I discussed with my editor whether I should clearly state the name of the holiday featured in this book. The conclusion was that since the country names are all made up, we should avoid using the real names related to religious beliefs as well. I did come very close, of course, mentioning the “Marchés de Noël” and such. However, it is indeed fictional, so please take it that way. Please see Marielle's story as no more than her specific point of view as well.

I've read beginner's guides to Christianity and such, but in the end, it was clear to me that I'd need to study it in more depth to understand it properly. I think that if you live your life in a society like that, the concept of religion naturally embeds itself in you. So it might conversely be difficult for monotheistic people to understand Japanese people's seemingly unrestrained view of religion and belief in all kinds of different deities.

On a different note, this book featured a large cast of international characters, which made it feel tangled even for me, the author. The language used in public settings is primarily Lagrangian—except when Prince Gracius is present, in which case it switches to Lindenese. However, when people are meeting personally, there are even greater options. I can't go into the details every time, so I often omit them, but there are times when characters speak freely with one another in their own mother tongues. This is something else that's different from Japan, an island nation. Fundamentally, the barrier to other languages is lower. I'm actually quite jealous.

As a new year dawns amidst great commotion, has Marielle also grown up

very slightly, I wonder? Even if she has, I'm sure the next year will be much like the last one. Good luck, Simeon!

Maro's illustrations are always wonderful, but the cover this time might just be my favorite ever depiction of our couple. Winter love is so romantic, isn't it? The illustrations inside the book are a smorgasbord of delights as well. This time we get a slightly different side of *him*, looking quite badass. I'm truly thankful.

I also want to thank the many people who made this book possible, including my editor. And to the readers who have accompanied me so far, I hope you enjoyed it. I'm grateful to you all from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you, and happy New Year.

—Haruka Momo

January 2022

Bonus Short Story

Marielle

I'd taken a great deal of time to select the yarn. It was the highest quality cashmere and dyed a deep blue like the night sky. It was marvelous. The problem was my own skill—or lack thereof.

"I was so sure I was using the same tension, so *how* did it end up looking so uneven? Oh no, I dropped a stitch at some point! When on earth did that happen?"

Under the tutelage of a maid who was good at knitting, I ultimately did manage to make a robe. However, it was in no way fit to serve as a gift. *And I so wanted it to be a Noël present for Lord Simeon...*

I gave up on the idea and made an order with a glove craftsman instead. To assuage my disheartened spirits, I at least arranged to do the embroidery myself.

Then, one day, my husband walked in the door wearing a navy blue robe that looked all too familiar.

"Lord Simeon!" I spluttered. "But...why? How?!"

I thought I'd stashed the ill-made piece away in a corner of my dressing room, never to be seen again—so what was it doing on my husband?

He met my confusion with a big smile. "It was delivered to my study. You knitted it for me, didn't you? Thank you."

"It was *what*?!"

But I understood the answer the very moment I exclaimed the question. It had to have been the work of the maid who'd taught me. After all, she had said I shouldn't waste the garment after all the effort I'd put into making it.

But...but...but...!

“It’s a clumsily made failure,” I objected, cradling my head in my hands. “You deserve far better, Lord Simeon.”

My husband looked rather bemused. “Honestly, it’s nowhere near worthy of being deemed a failure. It’s meant to be worn inside the house, anyway, so why even worry? It’s remarkably soft and comfortable. That’s what counts.”

Well, that I couldn’t deny. The materials were of the highest quality, after all.

“The beauty of cashmere is that it’s light, yet warm,” he added. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

As he spoke, he took the item he was holding in his hands and gently draped it over my shoulders. It was a thinly woven shawl in a soft beige color made of cashmere, the feel of which was second to none.

“I thought of you when I saw this,” he said, “but of course, it can’t measure up to a hand-knitted gift.”

After a pause for thought, I replied, “The very thought of you knitting is enough to send me plummeting to the ground in a fangirl frenzy.”

We sat down on chairs next to each other. The cat came cheerfully bounding over and jumped up into the chair with me, making my lap as warm as my shoulders.

“It’s so light, I could forget I’m wearing it,” I told Lord Simeon. “It will be perfect for writing in. Thank you.”

“Thank you too. For a robe, it’s surprisingly light. I appreciate you taking the time to knit it when you were already so busy.”

It seemed we’d both had the same thought: *I want your work to go more easily during the winter.* We chuckled to ourselves, huddled against one another, and closed our eyes.

Though the north wind beat against the windowpanes and blew the faded leaves from the trees, it was as warm and cozy as could be indoors. Feeling my husband’s large body and the softness of the yarn against my cheek, I dozed off in a moment of happiness.



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Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by Megan Denton

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2022