



The Chronicles of Platitude, biscuits, bureaucracy & badgers

By the Ancient Geek

Chapter One: In which three foxes patrol crooked streets, badger bandits strike, and a princess with magnificent breastplates arrives amid the flames

The ancient city of Paris drowsed uneasily under the early evening sky, much like a man who'd eaten questionable shellfish and was now wondering if that rumbling was merely digestion or the prelude to something far more dramatic.

Crooked timber-framed buildings leaned over narrow cobbled lanes, their warped beams creaking like old bones—or, more accurately, like old bones that had spent decades in damp conditions and were now being used as percussion instruments by a particularly enthusiastic skeleton.

This district's architecture followed a design philosophy best described as “what if buildings could slouch?”. Some were hunched forward like gossiping old women, while others leaned so far backward they appeared to be avoiding an overly-friendly conversation. The local saying went that these particular streets were laid out by a tipsy goat with an inner ear infection and a vendetta against urban planners.

Clink, clink, clink echoed the footfalls of three foxes in quasi-Roman armour as they patrolled the main thoroughfare. Their bronze breastplates and segmented shoulder guards gleamed with the dull lustre of metal that had been polished just enough to satisfy regulations but not enough to suggest enthusiasm. Each suit had been adapted to fit a fox's lithe frame, complete with convenient slits for bushy tails—a modification that had taken the city's armourer seventeen prototypes and three severely agitated foxes to perfect. The trio cut an unusual figure: like a small squad of legionnaires from a bygone

empire, save for their pointed ears poking through their plumed helmets and the flicker of whiskers above their chin straps. They were the Vulponian Guard, the city's primary line of defence, which said more about the city's defence budget than anyone cared to admit.

"By Jingo's spotty underpants, this armour chafes worse than a wool tunic in a rainstorm while dancing the Fandango," grumbled Crispin, the shortest fox, as he hitched up his belt for the tenth time in as many minutes. He gave his backside a quick scratch where the armour didn't quite cover. His bushy tail, freed by the tail-slit in the backplate, twitched irritably. "I've got chafing in places I didn't even know could chafe."

"Better chafed than skewered," replied Flavius, the youngest of the three, with a good-natured chuckle. He adjusted his own helmet, which was slightly too large and kept threatening to slip down over his eyes. "At least the armour shines. Makes us look distinguished, doesn't it?" He puffed out his chest, causing the polished metal to glint in a way that would have been impressive if a passing pigeon hadn't immediately mistaken it for a convenient target.

Centurion Reynard, marching a pace ahead, allowed himself a wry smile. "Distinguished? Perhaps. Unless the lads at the tavern catch sight of your tail hanging out again. Then we'll never hear the end of it," he said. His tone was dry but not unkind, like a good biscuit. "Remember what happened to Sergeant Russet after the Winter Solstice party? They called him 'Fancy Pants' for three years." Reynard was older, battle-scarred across one ear, and had the confident stride of a fox who had seen it all, done most of it, regretted a fair portion, but

would probably do it again after a few drinks. He carried a curved legionnaire's shield on one arm and kept his paw—well, hand—close to the hilt of his gladius sword, which was less about vigilance and more about preventing the blasted thing from catching between his legs again. The last time that had happened, he'd tumbled down the Magistrate's steps and landed directly in the lap of a visiting dignitary from the Eastern Provinces. Relations with the East were still somewhat frosty.

They passed under a crooked archway where an ancient tavern sign hung precariously. The sign read "The Crooked Mare" and depicted a horse that appeared to be suffering from severe scoliosis, or possibly attempting an advanced yoga position. Indeed, the building looked as though one strong wind might persuade it to collapse, or at least to reconsider its life choices. The foxes' amber eyes scanned doorways and rooftops. Nights in this city often brought trouble, and lately there had been rumours of a band of thieves stalking the streets after dusk. The city council had responded promptly by forming a committee to discuss the potential formation of a subcommittee to investigate the possibility of perhaps eventually doing something about it.

Flavius peered into the lengthening shadows between two warped houses that seemed to be leaning together conspiratorially, like two old gossips sharing particularly juicy rumours. "Centurion, d'you think the rumours are true? About a gang prowling around the merchant quarter?" he asked, voice hushed.

Reynard slowed his step slightly, ears perking beneath his helmet. "Keep your voice low," he murmured. "If they are,

we'd best not announce our presence too loudly. Element of surprise and all that."

"What, the surprise that there are only three of us?" Crispin muttered. "That'll surely strike fear into their hearts." "If a gang of cutpurses does jump us," Crispin continued, still rubbing his backside ruefully, "I hope they're impressed by how shiny we are. Maybe they'll die laughing." He snorted. "Or at least be blinded by the glare from Flavius's over-polished codpiece."

Flavius's ears flattened in embarrassment. "It's not a codpiece, it's a standard-issue protective—"

"Remember your oath, Crispin," Reynard chided lightly. "Legionnaires of the Vulponian Guard do not surrender to laughter. Nor do they comment on another officer's polishing habits, no matter how... enthusiastic they might be."

Crispin rolled his eyes, unseen in the dim light. "Aye, sir. But if this city gets any more crooked, I'll be patrolling sideways. These buildings make me dizzy. Last week I walked past the cobbler's shop and got vertigo." Indeed, the street ahead twisted slightly, following no logical plan. It meandered like the thoughts of a philosopher who'd started pondering the meaning of life and somehow ended up contemplating why soup spoons are shaped the way they are.

They continued in silence for a time, paws padding on uneven stones. A distant shout or burst of laughter from a tavern reminded them they were not alone on the streets, but the lanes immediately around them were quiet. Too quiet, perhaps. The kind of quiet that in adventure stories is inevitably followed by

someone saying “too quiet” just before something unpleasant happens.

Reynard halted abruptly, holding up a gloved paw. The other two foxes stopped, ears alert. A faint scuffling sound came from the shadows up ahead, where the street narrowed between two leaning shops. It sounded like a boot scraping stone—or was it claws?

Reynard narrowed his eyes. “Who’s there? Show yourselves!” he barked, voice firm.

For a moment, nothing. Then, with a rustle of cloth and clink of metal that suggested someone had packed far too many noisy accessories for a stealth operation, figures emerged from the gloom. Half a dozen shapes materialised in a rough semi-circle, blocking the road ahead and behind the foxes.

Flavius sucked in a breath. “Badgers...” he whispered, scarcely believing his eyes.

Indeed, a gang of badger bandits had encircled them. They were stocky creatures, with muscular arms and the distinctive black-and-white striped snouts of their kind. Each wore a motley assortment of clothing clearly meant for skulduggery: battered hats (one had a wide-brimmed leather hat with a feather that had seen better days, another a tattered flat cap that appeared to have been sat on by something large) and dark cloaks draped over broad shoulders. In their paws they brandished an array of rough weapons: dented swords, knobbled clubs, and one even swung a length of chain menacingly, although the menacing effect was somewhat

undermined by the fact that he'd accidentally wrapped it around his own ankle.

The apparent leader stepped forward, boots thudding on the cobbles with all the subtlety of a drunk rhinoceros trying to tiptoe. He was a head taller than the rest, a massive badger with a scar across his blunt snout and a tricorn hat perched jauntily between his small round ears. The hat bore a label still attached to the brim that read "Genuine Pirate Accessory - One Size Fits Most - 2 Copper Pieces - No Refunds." He pointed a rusty cutlass at the foxes. "Well, well," he growled, baring sharp teeth in a grin, "look what the night dragged in, lads. A trio of little foxes playing soldier." The other badgers chuckled darkly and closed in a step. One of them attempted to crack his knuckles menacingly but only succeeded in looking like he was trying to remember how to count to ten.

Crispin and Flavius shifted back-to-back with Reynard, forming a small triangle. Shields up, swords out, their armour clanking like a travelling

kitchenware salesman, the foxes tried to cover all sides.

"Stand aside," Reynard said calmly, though his tail bristled beneath his cloak. "As Centurion of the City Guard, I order you to drop your weapons. This doesn't have to get messy." He paused. "Well, messier than that fellow's hat." He nodded toward a badger wearing what appeared to be a stained tea cozy.

The big badger leader threw back his head and guffawed. "Hear that, boys? The pretty fox in the fancy armour thinks he's in charge!" He swept off his tricorn in an exaggerated bow,

accidentally releasing a moth that had been nesting in the lining. “Beggin’ your pardon, Centurion, but we have business in this here street tonight. How about you and your lads hand over those shiny purses and shiny swords, and maybe we’ll let you scamper off with your tails still attached?”

Flavius tightened his grip on his sword. “We don’t carry purses on patrol,” he whispered to Crispin, nervous.

Crispin gulped. “He’s speaking figuratively, I suspect. Though I did bring a small coin pouch. Mother always said to carry emergency biscuit money.”

Reynard’s amber eyes flickered to count the bandits. Six badgers. Three foxes. Not the best odds, unless you were particularly good at mathematics and could somehow divide the badgers by zero. “If it’s a fight you’re after,” he said aloud, steel in his voice, “then by all means.” He lowered his stance. “Vulponian Guard, stand ready!”

“Oh gods,” muttered Crispin, “he’s using the official battle cry. That means paperwork later.”

The badgers didn’t wait for further invitation. With a collective snarl that suggested they’d rehearsed it (badly), they charged.

The street exploded into chaos. A burly badger in a black cloak lunged at Reynard with a mace. Reynard caught the blow on his shield—the impact rang out with a gong-like clang, nearly numbing his arm and causing a nearby window to shatter. He countered with a thrust of his gladius, but the badger was surprisingly quick on his short legs, stumbling back out of reach and tripping over a convenient loose cobblestone.

Another badger swung his sword at Flavius. The young fox raised his own blade just in time. Steel screeched against steel in a sound not dissimilar to someone dragging a fork across a plate, but much louder and with more potential for dismemberment. Flavius gritted his teeth, ears flat under his helmet as he struggled to hold off the badger's weight bearing down his sword. "I should have listened to mother and become a baker," he wheezed.

Crispin, meanwhile, found himself facing two badgers at once. "Oh crumbs—" he yelped as a club whooshed overhead, barely missing his ears but successfully decapitating a nearby potted geranium. "That was nearly my head!" he protested. "I'm still paying instalments on that head!" Thinking quickly, Crispin grabbed the rim of a conveniently placed barrel on the roadside and yanked it down between him and his attackers. The barrel, full of rainwater (or at least, a liquid that was mostly rainwater, with notes of whatever the upstairs tenant had been emptying out of their window), burst open, dousing the badgers in a sudden wave. They spluttered, momentarily blinded. One pawed at his eyes and wailed, "My mascara! It's not waterproof!"

"Ha! Take that, you soggy lot!" Crispin crowed, but his triumph was short-lived. One of the drenched badgers recovered and lunged, swinging his club low. It caught Crispin right in the shin guard. He went down with a clatter of armour, yelping, "My leg! Watch the leg! I need that for walking and occasional decorative purposes!"

Reynard spared a glance over his shoulder at Crispin's tumble. "Formation, on me!" he shouted. Years of drilled discipline

kicked in; Crispin, despite the pain in his shin, scrambled up and hobbled to Reynard's side, uttering several words that should not be repeated in polite company or impolite company, or indeed any company that wasn't composed entirely of sailors with severe hearing problems. Flavius fell back towards them as well, parrying frantically to keep the badger's sword at bay. "Testudo formation!" barked Reynard.

The foxes closed ranks, shields overlapping overhead and in front as best they could—an attempt at the old Roman tortoise formation. But with only three of them, it was more of a wobbling stool than a proper shield wall. In fact, it bore a striking resemblance to three fox-shaped metal tortillas trying to form a taco.

The badgers were not deterred. The bandit leader snorted in amusement at the foxes crouching under their shields like a tiny turtle. "Break that shell, boys!" he snarled. At his command, two badgers hefted their clubs and brought them down hard on Reynard and Flavius's raised shields. The force knocked all three foxes off-balance, sending Flavius reeling onto his backside. His helmet slid askew over his eyes, rendering him temporarily blind but very stylishly lopsided.

A cacophony of metal and curses echoed in the street as the battle devolved into a scrappy melee. One fox against two badgers here, another fox wrestling with a badger there, the whole scene resembling a very aggressive folk dance performed by participants who actively hated folk dancing. One cloaked bandit grabbed Flavius by the arm, but the young fox sank his teeth into the badger's striped forearm — causing the thug to howl and release him (one does not provoke a fox's bite

and expect otherwise, particularly not when said fox had skipped lunch and was starting to view the opponent as something between “enemy” and “emergency rations”).

“That’s not fair!” wailed the bitten badger. “Biting’s against the rules!”

“What rules?” gasped Flavius, spitting out a tuft of badger fur. “This is a street brawl, not cricket!”

Crispin, cornered near a stack of crates, desperately swung his sword in wide arcs to keep two badgers at bay, knocking over the crates in the process. A shower of cabbages from the toppled crate rolled across the cobbles, creating an impromptu vegetable slalom course.

“Oi! My cabbages!” cried a stray market vendor emerging from a doorway, his eyes wide with horticultural distress. He was a skinny rabbit with spectacles perched on his nose and a ledger clutched to his chest. “Those are prize-winning **Parisian** round-heads! They were going to be in the agricultural fair!” He squeaked and darted back inside as a stray sword swing clipped the doorframe, taking a chunk of wood and his profit margin with it.

The crooked buildings themselves seemed to cringe at the violence; the old timbers of The Crooked Mare tavern creaked ominously as a heavy badger collided with its wall when Reynard shoved him aside. The building shifted slightly, causing several patrons inside to slide unexpectedly to one end of the bar.

Reynard found himself face to face with the badger leader. The scar-nosed brute swung his cutlass with surprising finesse for

someone whose previous career highlights probably included “menacing” and “loitering with occasional stealing.” Reynard parried and countered, the clash of their blades sending sparks into the night air. “You’ve picked the wrong city to rob,” Reynard growled, fending off a flurry of slashes, “and the wrong fox to cross.”

The badger leader just sneered. “Big words for a tin-plated fox running out of friends.” He nodded over Reynard’s shoulder. Through his peripheral vision, Reynard saw Flavius pressed against a wall by two badgers, and Crispin being forced to retreat step by step, his back nearly to a burning brazier lamp on a post. They were being overwhelmed by sheer numbers and brute strength, like a trio of mathematicians trying to win an arm-wrestling competition.

The badger boss feinted left then swiped right; Reynard hissed as the cutlass tip nicked his upper arm. The centurion gritted his teeth. This was not going well. In fact, on a scale of “splendid” to “catastrophic,” it was rapidly approaching “we’ll be lucky if there’s enough left to bury.”

Suddenly, a sharp cry rang out—Flavius had been disarmed, his sword skittering across the stones. A badger raised a spiked club above the young fox’s head, ready to crack down on his skull like a particularly violent egg opener. Flavius threw his arms up to protect himself, eyes wide in impending doom. “I knew I should have written a will!” he squeaked.

“No!” Reynard shouted. Time seemed to slow. He tried to break away from the duel to help Flavius, but the badger leader pressed him relentlessly, cruel glee in his eyes. The club began its descent towards Flavius’s head.

And then—CLANG!

A blur of red and steel interposed itself between Flavius and the falling club. The badger's weapon slammed not into fox skull, but against a gleaming shield embossed with a golden sun. The impact reverberated and the badger staggered back, startled and reassessing his life choices. Flavius peeked through his arms, astonished to be alive and to see someone standing over him.

Through the swirling smoke and confusion, a new figure had joined the fray. A tall woman now stood guard in front of Flavius. She was clad in shining silver armour that caught the firelight, with breastplates so magnificently crafted they appeared to have been personally blessed by the god of metallurgy with extra attention to detail. A crimson cloak billowed from her shoulders, though the dramatic effect was somewhat undermined by the fact that one corner was stuck in her belt, creating an asymmetrical flourish that fashion designers would later claim was intentional. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, though a few loose strands stuck to her sweat-and-soot streaked face, which bore an expression of determined irritation, like someone who had found their carefully planned evening interrupted by inconsiderate violence. In one gauntleted hand she held a banner aloft—its white fabric emblazoned with the image of a golden sunburst—and in the other hand she gripped a long, gleaming sword that looked capable of separating a badger from his will to live with minimal effort.

For a heartbeat, everyone paused in surprise—the foxes, the badgers, even the night itself seemed to hold its breath. The mysterious warrior woman radiated an aura of authority that cut

through the haze of smoke. She looked like a figure out of legend, or a painting on a chapel wall: a saintly knight stepping out of the flames, possibly to collect on overdue tithes.

Flavius scrambled to his feet behind her, retrieving his sword with an embarrassed cough. “I, uh, I had it under control,” he muttered unconvincingly.

Crispin, seeing the newcomer, mumbled in wonder, “Who on earth...?”

The badger leader’s eyes narrowed. “What’s this then? The city hiring sellswords now? This ain’t your business, girl,” he snarled, though there was a quaver in his voice that suggested his bravado was on loan and the interest rates were climbing.

The woman raised her banner and drove its pole into a gap between the cobbles, planting it firmly. The fabric caught a gust of hot wind and unfurled fully—a beacon of white and gold amid the smoky gloom. She tossed her head, and her ponytail swished dramatically.

“I,” she announced with regal displeasure, “am Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, and I do not recall giving you permission to conduct a brawl on my evening constitutional.” Her voice was clear and rang with the kind of aristocratic authority that made even dust motes reconsider their life choices. She lifted her sword and pointed it at the badger leader. The blade reflected the firelight, a line of red and gold along its edge. “Leave these streets,” she said, “or answer to me. And I warn you, I’ve been in a foul mood since my favourite smoking pipe broke this morning.”

The badgers exchanged confused glances. One leaned over to another and whispered, “What’s a constipational?”

Princess Lisa’s eyes narrowed dangerously. She stepped forward, her magnificent breastplates gleaming in the firelight with a radiance that was almost hypnotic. Several badgers found themselves staring, then quickly looking away with guilty expressions.

For a moment, it seemed the badgers might heed the warning. One of the smaller bandits in the back started to slink away into the shadows, muttering something about “not being paid enough for this.” But the leader, humiliated by the interruption and apparently immune to both common sense and self-preservation, would not back down so easily. With a roar that he hoped sounded ferocious rather than marginally hysterical, he rushed at Princess Lisa, slashing his cutlass towards her banner as if to cut it down.

In a flash of motion, she sidestepped, surprisingly nimble in heavy armour that by rights should have limited her to movements slightly less graceful than a drunken tortoise. Metal rang against metal as she parried his strike with her sword. The force of her parry not only halted the cutlass but sent it flying from the badger’s grasp; the rusty blade skittered across the cobbles and clanged against a wall. The leader stumbled forward, suddenly unarmed and off-balance. Princess Lisa brought her sword up under his chin with alarming speed, stopping just shy of actually impaling him. The tip of her blade hovered a hair’s breadth from the soft fur of his throat.

“Do you know,” she said conversationally, “I once became a chess grandmaster at the age of seven. I excel at thinking in

three dimensions simultaneously. Right now, I'm visualizing seventeen different ways this sword could ruin what appears to be a perfectly serviceable neck ruff. It would be a shame to damage such fine neckwear."

The badger froze, eyes wide. A single drop of sweat trickled down the side of his face. Behind him, his companions were suddenly fascinated by the architecture of the nearby buildings, the interesting patterns in the cobblestones, and the general concept of not being impaled.

"It's over," Princess Lisa said quietly. Her gaze bore into the bandit's as the flames behind her reflected in her eyes. "Yield, or I shall be forced to demonstrate upper body strength that has, on occasion, been described as 'unnervingly impressive for someone who looks like they should be at a royal garden party.'"

For a second, the only sound was the crackling of the fire that had begun to spread along the tavern's roof. Then the badger leader gave a jerky nod. "We... we yield," he rasped, raising his paws in surrender and stepping back from the blade.

All at once, the remaining badgers' resolve shattered. Seeing their chief bested by this stranger, and noting that two of their comrades were already groaning on the ground, the rest of the gang decided it was high time to depart. They fled into the night, claws scrabbling on the cobbles, disappearing down dark alleys with remarkable haste for such stocky creatures. A couple of hats were lost in their panic—one battered top hat lay abandoned in a puddle, slowly sinking like the badgers' reputation in the criminal underworld.

Crispin limped towards Reynard, panting, as the centurion approached the surrendering badger leader. Reynard kept his sword pointed at the bandit's chest. Flavius joined them, breathing hard but eyes shining with relief and awe. He couldn't take his gaze off Princess Lisa who had saved him.

"Your armour," Flavius blurted out, then immediately regretted opening his mouth. "I mean, your fighting style. It's magnificent. The armour too. Very... supportive." He winced at his own words.

Princess Lisa arched an eyebrow that could have won awards for disdainful elevation. "Yes, well. When one is constructed as I am," she gestured vaguely at her impressive figure, "one requires specialized equipment. This particular set was crafted by the royal armourer after the previous three attempts resulted in what could only be described as 'metallurgical wardrobe malfunctions.'"

The big badger glared around at the foxes now encircling him and the statuesque princess who still stood poised to strike if needed. Realising the game was up, he sank to his knees with a sullen scowl. "Curse you, and curse this blasted city," he growled under his breath. "A fox I could handle, but who expects a princess? It's not in the Bandit's Handbook."

Reynard flicked his ears, sheathing his sword. "Crispin, rope."

Crispin, still catching his breath, shuffled over and produced a length of cord from his belt. "Right here. Premium quality. I was saving it to hang myself if the patrol got any more exciting, but this seems a worthier cause."

As the firelight flickered across the scene, the two foxes bound the defeated badger's paws behind him. Flames were now openly devouring the upper floor of The Crooked Mare tavern. Sparks rained down onto the street in a display that would have been quite festive if it weren't for the imminent danger of citywide immolation.

Flavius glanced up in alarm at the spreading inferno. "Sir, the fire—!"

Indeed, the blaze, started by that fallen lantern in the fracas, had taken hold with alarming speed. The dry, ancient timbers of the tavern and its next-door bakery (ironically named "The Daily Bread," soon to be "The Thoroughly Toasted") were engulfed in bright orange flames. Thick smoke curled up into the night sky, forming shapes that, if you squinted, looked remarkably like the city treasurer calculating the insurance payout. The heat was growing intense, causing the foxes to back away, dragging their prisoner with them. Even Princess Lisa shielded her face with her arm for a moment, though she appeared more annoyed than concerned, as if the fire were a particularly persistent door-to-door salesman.

"We need to put that out before it takes the whole street," Reynard said, coughing on smoke. He turned to Princess Lisa. "Your Highness—my thanks. We owe you our lives." He gestured urgently towards the blaze. "But now we could use your help saving half the city from burning."

She nodded immediately, no time for formal introductions. "Of course!" In a swift motion, she pulled her banner from where it stood and rolled the fabric tightly around the pole, tucking it out of harm's way on her back. "I've seen worse," she

announced, surveying the growing inferno with a critical eye. “This reminds me of the time I accidentally set fire to the royal library while attempting to light one of my St. Moretitz cigarettes. Father was most displeased. Something about ‘irreplaceable illuminated manuscripts’ and ‘the collected wisdom of centuries,’ but honestly, if wisdom can’t survive a small conflagration, how valuable was it really?” For the first time, a small embroidered emblem on her breastplate was visible: a tiny red dragon. Whatever order or kingdom it symbolized was unknown to the foxes, but there was no time to ask about heraldic fashion choices.

All five of them—Reynard, Crispin, Flavius, Princess Lisa, and even the trussed-up badger bandit (who had nowhere to go anyway)—found themselves staring at the growing conflagration. Shouts were now echoing from further down the street; townsfolk had noticed the fire and were raising the alarm. The city bell began to clang frantically, though the bell-ringer, in his panic, was ringing out a pattern that in the local musical code meant “two-for-one night at the Lusty Badger tavern” rather than “fire.”

“Water! Form a bucket line!” Reynard ordered, slipping seamlessly into the role of a captain fighting a new battle—this one against fire.

The foxes sprang into action. Flavius dashed towards the public well in the square, calling for help from some wide-eyed onlookers who had cautiously emerged from what they had initially assumed was a safe viewing distance. Crispin actually yanked off his dented helmet and thrust it into the badger

prisoner's paws. "Make yourself useful," Crispin snapped. "Fill this with water and pass it along!"

The badger looked down at the helmet, which bore a suspicious dent in the shape of his club. "You want me to help save the city I was just trying to rob?"

"Consider it community service," Crispin replied dryly. "It'll look good on your prison application."

As a makeshift brigade began to form, Princess Lisa moved with purpose and impressive upper body strength. She seized a rain barrel that had survived Crispin's earlier chaos and heaved it towards the flames as if it weighed no more than a bread roll. Water sloshed onto the street, and she directed a burst onto the base of the fire, dampening the doorway of the bakery to slow the spread. "You know," she called out, somehow managing to look regal even while sloshing about in puddles, "in my underground tunnels beneath Paris, I developed an excellent system for dealing with floods. The principles are remarkably similar, just in reverse!"

Reynard and others rushed back and forth with buckets (and helmets) of water. Villagers and off-duty guards were arriving now, turning the tide against the blaze bucket by bucket. It was gruelling, sweaty work, made worse by the smoke that stung their eyes. All the while, sparks flew up into the night and the flames roared, casting a hellish orange glow over everything. The ancient crooked street, moments ago the scene of swordplay, was now a battleground of a different sort. Shadows danced wildly on the walls as people hurried to and fro.

At one point Crispin and the badger prisoner both coughed and spluttered as they tossed yet another helmet-full of water onto the flames. The badger, squinting through the smoke, grumbled, “Never thought I’d be helping a fox save a foxhole of a town...”

Crispin gave him a pat on the shoulder with a sooty paw, “Cheer up, friend. Think of it as penance. And keep scooping! If you do well, I’ll recommend you for time off for good behaviour. Maybe they’ll only hang you a little bit.”

Flavius, face smeared with ash, formed a chain with two frightened bakers’ apprentices, passing buckets hand-to-hand. The young fox was exhausted from battle but refused to rest while his city burned. Plus, he kept sneaking glances at Princess Lisa, who was somehow managing to look magnificent even while covered in soot.

Reynard organized efforts, his voice hoarse but steady as he directed people to douse the adjacent rooftops to stop the fire jumping further. The centurion caught glimpses of the princess through the haze: she was everywhere, urging villagers back from danger, kicking aside burning debris with boots that appeared to be made for both walking and emergency demolition, dousing hot spots with wet blankets. At one moment she even disappeared into the smoking doorway of the tavern, re-emerging with a coughing, soot-covered old innkeeper clinging to her arm like ivy to a particularly sturdy wall. The old man appeared to be equal parts grateful for the rescue and appalled at the state of his establishment.

“My tavern!” he wailed as Princess Lisa deposited him in the street with the gentle care of someone setting down a

particularly fragile vase they didn't particularly like. "My life's work! My secret stash of imported spirits that I definitely paid all the proper taxes on!"

"Your life," Princess Lisa corrected him firmly. "Which you still have, thanks to a princess who had the good sense to check for survivors instead of assuming everyone had evacuated." She turned back to the flames with a determined set to her jaw. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a fire to fight."

"But... but my ale!" the innkeeper moaned. "All my best stock will surely boil off now!"

"I assure you," Princess Lisa said, not bothering to look back as she hefted another bucket, "if your spirits are anything like what I sampled in this town last night, a good boiling might improve them considerably."

It felt like hours, but gradually the bucket line won out over the fire's fury. The flames that had towered over the rooftops dwindled to embers and charred beams, looking rather embarrassed at having been defeated by a motley crew armed with nothing more than buckets, determination, and in Princess Lisa's case, a vocabulary of surprisingly creative curse words that seemed strangely out of place coming from such regal lips. The roof of The Crooked Mare had collapsed inward with a dramatic finality that suggested it had been waiting years for an excuse to do so. The bakery next door was a soggy mess with a partially blackened façade, but the fire was contained. The rest of the city, beyond a lingering haze of smoke and a dreadful smell of wet ash mixed with what was either scorched bread or badly burned rat (the bakery's reputation for pest control being somewhat questionable), was safe.

At last, as the eastern sky began to lighten with the approach of dawn, Reynard called out, “I think that’s done it. Well fought, everyone. The fire’s out!”

A weary cheer went up from the ragged line of townsfolk, guards, and one tired badger tied to a lamppost (Crispin had seen to that once the fellow finished his bucket duty, though he’d been decent enough to position the badger so he could at least see the sunrise if he craned his neck). The adrenaline of the night began to ebb, replaced by sheer exhaustion and the onset of many bruises making themselves known in places that several of the participants hadn’t previously been aware they possessed.

Flavius slumped on an upturned trough, wiping soot from his eyes. “Well,” he said to no one in particular, “that’s one way to spend an evening patrol.”

Crispin plopped down right on the cobbles, too tired to care about his wet hindquarters, and started wringing out his poor singed tail. “If anyone asks why my tail looks like a used chimney brush,” he announced, “I’m telling them it’s a new fashion statement. The ladies love a fox with battle scars.”

Reynard, after ensuring some men would keep watch for any embers flaring up, finally allowed himself to breathe out and sheathe his sword, which he had kept drawn throughout the firefighting just in case the flames tried anything sneaky. But where was Princess Lisa? Reynard looked around, suddenly anxious that she might have been injured or perhaps slipped away unnoticed. He spotted her at the edge of the charred zone, near the fountain in the square. She had removed her helmet (if she’d been wearing one at all—the events of the night were a

bit blurry) and was leaning wearily against the marble rim of the fountain, splashing water on her face and neck with the refined grace of someone who had practiced looking elegant while performing basic hygiene. Her blonde hair, freed from its ponytail, hung in damp, sweaty strands around her high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. The red cloak around her shoulders was now tattered and smudged with black, but she still cut a striking figure in the grey dawn light.

Reynard approached, limping slightly (he now felt that cut on his arm more keenly, and his whole body ached from exertion as if he'd been used as a practice dummy by an enthusiastic but untalented masseur). Flavius, not far behind, hopped over as well, favouring one leg but moving with the energy of youth and what was almost certainly an embarrassing crush. Crispin tried to get up to join them, but after a night of fighting bandits and then fire, the older fox decided he'd rather sit just a moment longer and maybe see if any of that tavern ale had survived to soothe his throat. "Tell Her Highness I'll pay my respects once my tail stops smoking," he called after them.

The centurion cleared his throat gently as he neared Princess Lisa. "Your Highness," he began with a respectful bow of his head.

She turned, and without the dramatic firelight and chaos, Reynard could properly see her face for the first time. Soot smudged one cheek and a bruise was forming just above her left brow. Yet her eyes were a clear, steely blue, and despite obvious exhaustion, she stood upright with a kind of humble dignity that suggested she'd had posture lessons from someone

who considered a stack of books on the head to be “going easy.”

“I never did catch your full title,” he continued. “And you have ours to thank. I’m Reynard, Centurion of the City Guard. This here is Flavius, and that lump over there pretending he hasn’t fallen asleep is Crispin.”

Crispin, at this, raised a paw weakly in greeting from his seat on the cobbles, then let it flop back down with the energy of a particularly lethargic slug.

Princess Lisa managed a small, regal smile. “Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude,” she said, her voice now soft with fatigue but still carrying an unmistakable aristocratic timbre. “Daughter of King Pierre the Fortunate*, though whether the good fortune was his or belonged to the kingdom has been a matter of some debate.” She paused, then added with a hint of defensiveness, “Yes, a proper princess. The lineage is quite legitimate regardless of what certain court gossips might insinuate about my mother’s former occupation.”

Reynard bowed his head slightly, diplomatic enough not to ask what exactly those insinuations might be. “Princess Lisa. You have our deepest gratitude. I daresay without your intervention, this street might have run red with more than just firelight.”

Flavius nodded fervently. “You saved my life,” he blurted out. “That badger would have brained me if you hadn’t come when you did! I—I owe you, truly.” His ears folded back bashfully. “Are you some kind of holy warrior? I mean, you fought like

one. And the way you appeared..." He trailed off, realizing he might be babbling.

Princess Lisa's cheeks actually flushed pink under the soot, embarrassed by the praise despite her regal bearing. "I'm just a traveller with excellent timing," she said, shaking her head. "A traveller with a sword, superior upper body strength, and a concern for those in need, that's all." She hesitated, then added quietly, "I was passing nearby when I saw the glow of the fire... and heard sounds of battle. I couldn't just do nothing. I do have a particular fondness for foxes, you know. Magnificent creatures."

Flavius's tail gave an involuntary happy swish at this, and he tried to stand up straighter.

Reynard exchanged a shrewd glance with Crispin (who had finally ambled over, decidedly sooty and smelling of smoke). Passing by at just the right moment? It sounded almost too convenient. But then again, sometimes fortune favoured the righteous—or perhaps some higher power had sent her their way. Or maybe it was just that sort of story. Reynard decided not to press the issue. The how and why of her arrival could wait. "Well, whatever the reason," Reynard said warmly, "we're in your debt. Paris is in your debt." He gestured towards the charred husk of The Crooked Mare. "It's not every day someone comes leaping out of the darkness to turn the tide. We'll make sure the King hears of your valour, if that's your wish."

Princess Lisa smiled, but there was a touch of sadness or weariness to it. "Thank you, but I don't seek reward or recognition. I've had quite enough of court politics to last

several lifetimes.” Her gaze drifted over the ruined tavern and the smoke curling into the morning sky. “Though I wish I could have prevented so much destruction. I do hate to see buildings burn. Unless it’s a particularly hideous example of modern architecture, in which case sometimes a controlled fire is the only reasonable solution.”

Flavius offered a bright side: “It could have been far worse. Thanks to you, only a couple of buildings were lost, and no lives. We’ll rebuild. Buildings in this city always end up crooked anyway,” he added with a grin, trying to lighten the mood.

Crispin barked a short laugh at that. “Aye, we’ll prop ‘em back up as we always do. By tonight, mark my words, the Crooked Mare’s innkeep will be selling ‘Smoked Ale’ at twice the price, claiming it’s a new flavour created by royal decree.”

That drew a genuine laugh from Princess Lisa, a musical sound that momentarily dispelled the gloom of the aftermath and caused Flavius’s ears to perk up attentively.

As the sky turned from grey to soft pink with the rising sun, the adrenaline of the night subsided fully. Wounded and weary folks started making their way either home or to fetch medics and assess damages. The bound badger leader was carted off by two other guards who had finally shown up (better late than never), and presumably, the city jail would host a grumpy badger guest for a while. His gang, those that escaped, were long gone into the hills beyond, and would likely think twice before troubling Paris again—at least if word of the “princess with the magnificent breastplates” spread, as it surely would, probably with considerable embellishment.

Reynard oversaw the last few tasks of the night: postings of additional guards around the wreckage to ward off looters (even now, some opportunistic ravens were eyeing the shiny nails in the ruined beams), and instructing Crispin to get his leg wound looked at by the apothecary. Flavius was sent to relay a report to headquarters and arrange relief for the tired firefighters.

By the time all was in order, the sun had fully crested the horizon, casting reassuring morning light over the sooty, sodden street. A few townsfolk remained, poking at the ruins or simply gossiping about the night's excitement, with particular attention to the mysterious princess who had appeared from nowhere like something out of a legend. Or at least a good tavern tale.

Princess Lisa found herself standing a little apart, near the city gates now, drawn by the sight of dawn's colours beyond the walls. She had re-donned her red cloak, tattered though it was, and held her banner carefully rolled in one hand, the pole resting against her shoulder. Her armour was no longer shining—ash and grime saw to that—but she carried herself with the same quiet resolve that suggested years of deportment lessons under threat of something unpleasant involving embroidery hoops.

Feeling a tug of intuition, Princess Lisa stepped outside the city gates for a moment, leaving behind the acrid scent of smoke and stepping into the crisp air of morning. Just beyond the walls lay a gentle expanse of countryside—a rolling meadow dotted with wildflowers and framed by the golden-green of

early summer trees. The contrast to the charred street behind her made her pause in wonder.

She walked a few paces into the field, her armour clanking softly with each step. The grass was cool and wet with dew under her boots. A delicate mist clung to the low ground, weaving around clusters of daisies and purple heather, like a veil drawn across the sleeping face of the landscape. Princess Lisa inhaled deeply. The air was fresh, carrying the scent of earth and blossoms, with no hint of soot. A lark trilled somewhere among the trees, greeting the day with song, apparently unimpressed by the night's heroics.

For a moment, Princess Lisa was no longer a princess or knight or saviour or anything so grand. She was just a young woman alone in a peaceful field at sunrise, contemplating the strange twists of fate that had brought her here. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. A breeze, gentle and playful, wafted through, tugging a few loose strands of her blonde hair and rustling the leaves overhead. It felt soothing against her tired limbs and carried the faint scent of wild herbs.

In that tranquillity, images flickered through her mind. She remembered another morning not so long ago, when she had stood at the window of her royal chamber, looking out over the palace gardens and feeling suffocated by the weight of expectations and protocol. That day, she'd made the decision to leave, to seek adventure beyond the stifling walls of court, where people whispered about her parentage and treated her with a deference tinged with doubt. She recalled the network of tunnels beneath Paris where she'd taken refuge, emerging only after dark (unless it was raining—she had standards when it

came to hair maintenance). There, she'd found a kind of freedom among the society of outcasts and misfits who asked no questions about bloodlines.

Her eyes opened slowly. On the horizon, the sun was fully risen now, a bright golden coin in the sky. Its rays reached across the meadow, touching the treetops and making the wildflowers glow in a riot of colours—orange poppies, blue cornflowers, white daisies. Despite the wreckage and conflict of the night, the world still had such beauty.

Behind her, faintly, the sounds of the town beginning to stir drifted out: voices calling orders, hammers beginning to clack as some industrious souls no doubt started boarding up broken windows. Life was moving on in Paris, as it always did, with the resilience of a place that had seen worse and expected to see better, eventually, perhaps after a nap and a strong cup of tea.

Princess Lisa gently planted her banner's pole upright into the soft ground, just enough so the standard stood on its own beside her. The white cloth with its sun emblem unfurled slightly in the breeze like a lazy flag that couldn't be bothered to fully commit to dramatic billowing. She placed her sword down in the grass as well, just for a moment. The blade was nicked and no longer so clean, but it had served well. She knelt down onto one knee, not out of prayer exactly, but to run her gauntleted hand over a cluster of tiny white daisies at her feet. The flowers were open, faces turned to the sun. A few petals brushed off on her metal glove. She smiled faintly. These blooms had slept through the night's chaos and awoken unscathed. There was a simple lesson in that, she thought: no

matter the fire and fury that might rage, no matter how many badgers one had to threaten at sword point, morning still comes and daisies still bloom. It was the sort of profound observation that, had she still been at court, would have been immediately followed by someone asking if she'd like more wine or perhaps a new hat.

A rustle came from behind her. Reynard stood at the edge of the meadow, looking a touch awkward as if unsure whether to intrude on her peace, or perhaps concerned about the protocol of approaching a kneeling princess from behind. Princess Lisa rose from her knee with graceful poise, picking up her sword again before turning to face him. She left the banner planted — a splash of colour in the green field.

“Beg pardon, Your Highness,” Reynard said softly. In the daylight he looked a bit ramshackle; his armour was smeared with black and one of his fox ears was singed at the tip. A bandage now adorned his upper arm where he'd been nicked. Still, he managed a polite nod. “I wanted to ensure... that you were all right.”

“I am,” Princess Lisa assured him. She noticed Flavius and Crispin lingering a few steps behind their centurion, curiosity evident on their furry faces. Clearly the fox guards had followed, perhaps as escort, or perhaps out of their own gratitude towards her. Or in Flavius's case, what appeared to be the beginnings of hero worship tinged with something that would require a cold bath to address.

Reynard walked closer, taking in the serene scene. “It's a beautiful morning, isn't it? Hard to believe only a couple of

hours ago..." He glanced back at the city gate, where wisps of smoke were still faintly visible rising from behind the walls.

Princess Lisa nodded. "The world can change a great deal in a night," she said softly. She retrieved her banner from the ground and rested it on her shoulder once more. "I'm glad this morning is peaceful."

Flavius, unable to contain himself, stepped forward to join them, limping slightly but smiling. "The fire's out, the bandits are gone, and you're safe, Your High—Princess Lisa," he corrected himself, dropping the formality since she seemed to prefer a more direct address. "I'd call that a victory worth celebrating."

"A messy one," Crispin chimed in with a theatrical sigh as he arrived at Princess Lisa's other side. "Half my coat is singed off and I smell like smoked fox, but yes, a victory." He gave Princess Lisa a crooked grin. "Not that I'm complaining. Better a singed tail than none at all, thanks to you."

She laughed lightly. "I'm sorry about your tail," she said. Indeed, Crispin's usually fine brush of a tail was looking quite bedraggled and patchy from the night's adventures, more like a used toilet brush than the fluffy appendage it had once been.

He shrugged. "It'll grow back. Or I'll pretend it's the latest fashion in fur styling. The vixens will love it, I'm sure. 'Battle-scarred hero' has a certain ring to it."

"Better than 'completely dead hero,'" Princess Lisa observed dryly. "Which is what you might have been without my intervention. Not that I'm counting."

That earned a chuckle from Flavius and Reynard. Reynard's expression grew a bit more serious, though still warm.

"Princess Lisa, what will you do now? If you need a place to rest, our city would be honoured to host you. The **King**'s sure to offer you lodging and a reward once he hears of what you've done."

Princess Lisa looked back towards the city a moment, considering. She could see through the gate: people already bustling to clean up, the resilient citizens of this crooked old city putting things right again. A part of her wanted to stay, to help more, maybe to be part of something. "I don't suppose there are any eligible bachelors in this town?" she asked abruptly, then coloured slightly. "Not that I'm looking, of course. It's just that one never knows when one might meet... well, someone interesting."

Flavius's ears perked up so quickly they nearly knocked his helmet off. Crispin elbowed him discreetly.

Reynard coughed politely. "Well, the King has a son, though calling him 'eligible' might be stretching the definition somewhat. Unless one considers an unhealthy obsession with collecting decorative spoons and a tendency to name all his houseplants after distant relatives to be desirable traits in a potential suitor."

Princess Lisa sighed. "Typical. I've yet to meet a noble who doesn't have at least one bizarre quirk. My father collects the nail clippings of visiting dignitaries." She shuddered elegantly. "Thank you, but I think I must continue on." She paused, searching for the right words. "There are others who might need help out there. I was lucky to be here last night, but I feel

my path doesn't end here. Besides, I prefer to emerge from my underground tunnels only after dark. Daylight can be so... revealing."

Flavius looked a little disappointed, ears drooping slightly. "Will we see you again?" he asked, with the hopeful tone of someone who was already composing sonnets in his head.

Princess Lisa smiled and placed a gentle hand on Flavius's shoulder, the metal of her gauntlet clinking softly against his armour. "The world is a strange place, young fox. Who knows? Perhaps our paths will cross when you least expect it." Her eyes twinkled with a bit of the earlier humour, "After all, I do have a habit of turning up in the middle of things. Especially if there's danger, heroism required, or a decent tobacconist nearby."

Reynard offered his arm in the manner of a soldier to a respected comrade. She clasped forearms with him firmly, fox and human, a gesture of mutual respect. "Travel safely, Princess Lisa," he said. "May your banner fly ever in victory and your... er... armour continue to provide adequate support."

Crispin, not to be left out, gave a little salute which looked oddly formal given he was missing a helmet and his fur was in disarray. "The Vulponian Guard salutes you, Princess Lisa. You're a legend in our books now—literally, I'll mention you in my report, with at least two exclamation points and possibly an illuminated capital letter, if I can remember how to do those."

Princess Lisa giggled. “I’m honoured, truly.” She inclined her head to the three foxes. “And thank you, all of you, for your bravery. It was a pleasure to fight alongside you, though next time perhaps we could arrange for something less combustible.”

With that, and a final exchange of smiles, Princess Lisa turned towards the open road beyond the meadow. She slid her sword into the scabbard at her side and unfurled her banner to let it catch the breeze. The golden sun emblem glinted in the morning light as she started walking, her red cloak trailing behind and her armoured figure cutting an impressive silhouette against the pastoral landscape.

The foxes watched as her figure grew smaller against the panorama of green fields and blue sky. After a night of such chaos, the sight was almost dreamlike: a lone heroine heading off into the peaceful dawn, as if plucked from a storybook or possibly an illuminated manuscript that had escaped the royal library fire.

Flavius broke the silence, sighing, “She’s something, isn’t she?”

Crispin nodded, wrapping an arm around the younger fox’s shoulders companionably. “Aye. Reminds me of myself in my younger days,” he quipped, then added hastily at Reynard’s incredulous look, “Well, the heroic part, not the breastplates.”

Reynard chuckled, then gazed once more towards Princess Lisa just as she passed under the boughs of a distant oak tree, golden light spilling all around her. “The world could use more like

her,” he said quietly. “Though perhaps with less flammable cigarettes.”

He straightened his shoulders and turned back towards the city gate. “Come on, lads. Duty calls. There’s a mountain of paperwork waiting on my desk, and someone has to explain to the Quartermaster why one of our helmets smells of badger breath and is slightly... er... dented.” The centurion’s mouth twitched in a grin.

Flavius groaned jokingly at the mention of paperwork. “Can’t we say the helmet was a heroic casualty of war? Gave its life in the service of the city?”

Crispin gave an exaggerated shudder. “Ah, the unsung aftermath of heroics: reports in triplicate. If Princess Lisa knew about the paperwork, she might have let the bandits win.”

Together, with one last fond look at the heroine in the distance, the three foxes made their way back into the crooked streets of **Paris**, where a new day was beginning, complete with all the mundane details that inevitably follow even the most extraordinary nights.

Princess Lisa, now far along the meadow, paused and looked back over her shoulder. The three fox figures were just visible re-entering the city gates, silhouettes against the dim smoke that still rose from within. She raised her banner slightly in silent salute. She reached into a hidden pocket of her armour and pulled out a small, hand-rolled cigarette. “I earned this,” she murmured to herself, lighting it with a tiny flint and steel that she carried for just such occasions. As she inhaled, she sent a silent prayer that no one would comment on the historical

inaccuracy of her St. Moretitz habit. Then she faced forward again, towards whatever new adventure the road would bring, as the morning sun bathed the world in a hopeful glow. For the first time since the previous night, the city was quiet, and the field was quiet, and all was well — at least for this moment. And in that moment, a gentle peace held sway, with only the faintest echo of clashing swords, the flicker of distant embers, and the soft curl of tobacco smoke to suggest that anything had ever been amiss.

Footnote:

* Royal lineage in Paris is a complex affair, further complicated by the incumbent King Loo-Eee-By-Gum's occasional insistence on using his less formal (and significantly less embarrassing) childhood nickname 'Pierre' in official documents, particularly those dictated after consuming particularly potent cheese or during bouts of intense interpretive diplomacy. This, combined with the Royal Scriveners' notorious tendency to file paternity records under 'P' for 'Possibly' or 'Pending Further Genealogical Investigation (Subject to Availability of Biscuits)', leads to understandable confusion. Princess Lisa herself navigates this ambiguity with weary pragmatism and strategically selective nomenclature.

Chapter Two: In Which our heroes attend a fancy dress ball that tests the limits of both fashion and common sense, identities are concealed behind masks of dubious craftsmanship, badgers demonstrate a remarkable inability to blend in despite their best efforts, royalty proves once again that wealth is no guarantee of taste, and a crown becomes the object of everyone's attention (though for dramatically different reasons)

Two weeks after the Great Tavern Conflagration (an event already being aggressively embroidered into legend by balladeers whose grasp on metre was as shaky as their commitment to factual accuracy), Paris found itself twitching with the particular kind of nervous excitement usually reserved for impending revolutions or the arrival of a particularly controversial cheese. The annual Masquerade Ball at the Palace of Verse-Isle was upon them, an occasion universally acknowledged as the nobility's prime opportunity to prove that vast sums of money could be spectacularly misapplied in the pursuit of looking ridiculous.

The palace itself, perched on its artificial island like a sugared confection daring the Seine to develop diabetes, was a testament to architectural ambition unburdened by restraint. Its gleaming white walls soared towards the heavens, festooned with enough spires, arches, and leering gargoyles (rumoured to

be modelled on unpopular tax inspectors) to give gravity itself a mild headache. Tonight, torches lined the connecting bridge, their flames fluttering like nervous butterflies caught in a society scandal, casting jittery reflections on the dark water below. A procession of carriages, each seemingly attempting to out-ornate the last with excessive gilding and suspension that groaned under the weight of aristocratic self-importance, rumbled across towards the social event horizon.

Within one such carriage – notably less gilded, possessing a distinct list to port suggesting a long and bitter feud with Parisian potholes – sat three individuals enduring various stages of sartorial distress.

"I swear, this collar is actively attempting to garrotte me," grumbled Crispin, wrestling with the stiff, high neck of his doublet. The garment radiated a purple so violent it threatened to violate several bylaws concerning public decency. "And must it be quite so... purple? I feel like a diseased aubergine."

"It's the height of fashion, Crispin," replied Flavius, buffing an already blindingly shiny brass button on his own emerald green ensemble for the seventeenth time that hour. His enthusiasm for the occasion was almost palpable, radiating outwards like heat from a slightly over-eager radiator. "Vibrant hues are terribly *à la mode*. Some nonsense about new dyes from Cathay, or possibly just a collective aristocratic decision to blind the peasantry."

"Well, I resemble a vegetable undergoing severe bruising," Crispin muttered, shifting uncomfortably. The simple black mask perched on his snout, adorned with eyebrows of frankly startling bushiness, did little to improve matters. He peered

through the window as the palace loomed, a monstrous meringue against the twilight sky. "Remind me why, precisely, we're subjecting ourselves to this gathering of overdressed popinjays?"

Reynard, seated opposite, appeared considerably less perturbed by his deep burgundy attire, possibly because it featured fewer life-threatening collar components. His own mask, shaped, with profound lack of imagination, like a fox, rested on his knee. "Because, my dear, complaining Crispin," he explained, his voice dry as a forgotten biscuit, "when one is instrumental in preventing a significant portion of the capital from becoming charcoal, certain social obligations arise. Even for members of the esteemed Vulponian Guard, whose primary social interactions usually involve suspicious alley cats and disgruntled bakers."

"Esteemed?" Crispin scoffed, flicking a glance at Flavius, who was admiring his reflection in the carriage window. "Have you observed young Flavius here? He's been preening like a peacock who's just discovered mirrors."

Flavius's ears flattened beneath his own green mask, a fetching shade somewhere between 'envy' and 'pond scum'. "I was merely ensuring operational readiness! Maintaining standards! This is an official deployment, not a jaunt!"

"Official deployment, my furry backside," Crispin snorted. "We're here because the Captain suspects trouble. Rumours abound – whispers in shadowy places about unsavoury types inquiring after the King's Crown Jewels. We're undercover operatives surrounded by canapés, not guests."

Reynard nodded, the slight movement causing his mask to wobble precariously. "Indeed. The royal trinkets are being flaunted tonight – King Loo-Eee-By-Gum considers it excellent PR, despite his advisors developing nervous tics whenever the subject is raised. An irresistible lure for those with flexible morals and sticky paws."

"Those flexible morals possibly belonging to individuals with distinctive black and white facial markings?" suggested Flavius, adjusting his cuffs with military precision.

"The very same," confirmed Reynard. "Our acquaintances from the merchant quarter fire may harbour lingering ambitions. Our orders: observe, blend, consume miniature foodstuffs discreetly, and ensure the shiny bits remain firmly attached to the kingdom."

The carriage executed a final, bone-jarring lurch, depositing Crispin onto the floor in a heap of purple indignation.

"Splendid," he grumbled, disentangling himself. "An evening of polite conversation and dodging aristocrats whilst scanning for stripy villains. My cup runneth over with joy."

"Chin up," Reynard advised, securing his fox mask with a ribbon that looked suspiciously like it had been repurposed from a confiscated lace undergarment. "Consider it surveillance with superior catering."

Disembarking into the crisp evening air, the three foxes were swept up in the glittering tide flowing towards the palace entrance. The hall beyond was an exercise in calculated grandeur, a symphony of marble, gold leaf, and chandeliers weeping crystal onto floors polished to a mirror sheen.

Footmen in wigs the colour of stale meringue, announced arrivals with varying degrees of phonetic accuracy.

"Announcing... ze honourable gentle... foxes... of ze Vul... Vulpi... oh, bother... ze Guard!" one such functionary declared, abandoning the struggle mid-word and ushering them forward with a gesture that threatened to remove Crispin's left ear.

The ballroom itself was where good taste had clearly thrown in the towel and retired hurt. Mirrors amplified the candlelight into a blinding supernova, reflecting the swirling mass of guests whose costumes ranged from 'historically inaccurate' to 'what was this person thinking?'. The ceiling mural depicted mythological figures engaged in activities that looked suspiciously like tax evasion and competitive cheese sculpting. Music warbled from a raised dais, battling bravely against the roar of polite conversation, the clinking of glassware, and the occasional startled squeak as someone recognised their mother-in-law disguised as a turnip.

"Right," Reynard murmured, his voice muffled slightly by the mask as they navigated the throng. "Eyes peeled. Blend in. Remember our objective—"

"Is that a chocolate fountain?" Crispin interrupted, nostrils quivering, homing in on a refreshment table groaning under the weight of its own opulence. "And are those actual, strawberries?"

Reynard sighed, a sound barely audible above the din. "Yes, Crispin, but our mission—"

"Consider that sector under close surveillance," Crispin announced decisively, already forging a path through a cluster

of duchesses disguised as shepherdesses (complete with jewelled crooks). "Strictly for security assessment purposes, you understand."

Flavius watched him depart with a resigned shake of his head. "I shall mingle amongst the dancers, sir," he volunteered. "Observe hand movements during the quadrille. One might spot tell-tale fur patterns beneath lace cuffs."

Reynard nodded, appreciating the tactical thought, however unlikely its success. "Excellent initiative, Flavius. I shall maintain position near the Crown Jewels display. Rendezvous back here in one hour. Compare notes. Try not to consume all the chocolate, Crispin."

With their assignments vaguely understood, the three foxes melted into the glittering, churning chaos of the masquerade, ready to defend the realm, or at least, its dessert options.

Meanwhile, lurking with intent behind a potted palm that looked suspiciously plastic despite its impressive size, Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude surveyed the ballroom with the weary detachment of a seasoned general observing exceptionally foolish troop manoeuvres. Social functions, in her experience, were battlefields where the weapons were veiled insults and the casualties were usually dignity and common sense.

Her gown, a confection of crimson silk that screamed 'expensive' and possibly 'flammable', was offset by an elaborate hairstyle that seemed to be held together by sheer willpower and possibly concealed structural engineering. Her mask, eschewing the flimsy feathered affairs favoured by most, was a

formidable half-face dragon visage, complete with ruby eyes that precisely matched her dress, hinting at either meticulous planning or a worrying fixation on colour palettes.

She puffed discreetly on an object resembling a cigarette holder but which was, in fact, cunningly carved from a parsnip and wrapped in gold leaf filched from a picture frame – a testament to her ingenuity in the face of the royal tobacconist's recent refusal to extend further credit (the incident involving his prize Angora, a dropped ember, and the subsequent, unscheduled redecoration of his premises remained a sore point).

"Your Highness," a voice murmured, startling a nearby Baron disguised as a particularly anxious teapot. A liveried servant bowed low. "His Majesty sends his compliments and requests your radiant presence beside the throne. The ceremonial unveiling of the Crown Jewels is imminent."

Lisa exhaled a stream of smoke that cleverly avoided singeing the servant's wig. "Convey my filial affections to dear Father, and inform him that I am currently engaged in vital counter-revolutionary surveillance."

The servant blinked. "Surveillance, Your Highness?"

"Indeed." She waved the parsnip holder vaguely towards a cluster of giggling countesses. "One must remain vigilant. The lower orders grow restless. Only this morning, I distinctly heard a fishmonger humming 'La Marseillaise' with entirely too much revolutionary fervour."

"Ah," said the servant, clearly deciding that understanding royalty was above his pay grade. "Be that as it may, Your

Highness, His Majesty was... insistent. Used the Royal 'We' and everything."

Lisa sighed, a sound like silk tearing slowly. "Oh, very well. The crushing burdens of statecraft never cease." She ground out the parsnip against the suspiciously plastic palm pot, eliciting another wince from the servant, and began to sweep towards the dais where her father held court, radiating the effortless grace of someone who could probably kill you with a well-aimed canapé.

Her progress through the glittering throng did not go unnoticed. A certain fox, masked in emerald green and attempting to navigate a reluctant Countess (disguised, bafflingly, as a large cheese grater) through the intricate steps of a minuet, faltered mid-step.

Flavius nearly trod on his own tail. "A thousand pardons, my lady," he stammered, executing a hasty bow that sent the Countess wobbling precariously. "A sudden... urgent... vulpine matter requires my immediate attention!" He retreated rapidly, narrowly avoiding impalement on a passing Duke's ornamental sword cane.

He dodged through the swirling dancers, his eyes fixed on the receding crimson silk. Could it be? The warrior princess? The saviour of the tavern? The star of his increasingly elaborate and embarrassing daydreams? (Daydreams his mother would undoubtedly attribute to 'insufficient roughage in the diet'.)

Across the ballroom, Reynard had assumed his position, blending into the shadows near the glass display case containing the royal family's more ostentatious bling. The

guards, two Musketeers whose primary qualification seemed to be an ability to stand very still while looking impressive, flanked the case. Centre stage, nestled on velvet that had probably cost more than Reynard's annual salary, sat the Crown of Loo-Eee-By-Gum. It was less a piece of regal headwear and more a glittering explosion in a jewellery factory, seemingly designed by a magpie with a gold card and absolutely no sense of restraint.

Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and several large, unidentifiable purple stones jostled for space amidst gold filigree that writhed like gilded spaghetti. Perched atop this glorious monstrosity, like a misplaced celestial teardrop, was the legendary Moon's Tear diamond – allegedly fallen from the heavens, more probably acquired during a particularly high-stakes game of Go Fish.

Reynard's keen eyes swept the crowd. Aristocrats preened, diplomats lurked, servants scurried. And there – yes. A 'Duchess' whose shoulders seemed suspiciously broad, whose curtsy looked more like a wrestler's crouch, and whose white gloves failed entirely to conceal the tell-tale black and white fur beneath.

His suspicion solidified as the 'Duchess' was joined by a 'Count' attempting, unsuccessfully, to hide a striped snout behind a feathered fan, and a 'Baron' whose elegant buckled shoes looked deeply uncomfortable on paws more accustomed to digging. The badgers. Here. As predicted.

Just as Reynard subtly shifted his weight, preparing to alert the guards, a flourish of trumpets (slightly flat, as usual) announced the grand entrance of King Loo-Eee-By-Gum himself. The

monarch processed into the ballroom with the careful tread of a man aware that his crown, currently perched precariously on his thinning hair, possessed the aerodynamic properties of a startled brick.

His Majesty was a man built for comfort rather than speed, upholstered in robes embroidered with enough gold thread to knit a medium-sized battleship. His beard, a magnificent silver cascade, served multiple functions: framing his face, catching stray crumbs, and occasionally concealing small, strategically important documents.

"My loyal subjects! My esteemed guests! My creditors!" he boomed, spreading his arms wide enough to endanger several nearby chandeliers. "Welcome! Fáilte! Bienvenue! Tonight, we revel! We celebrate the continued existence of our glorious kingdom, the astonishing resilience of our tax revenues, and the fact that the royal pastry chef has surpassed himself with éclairs so divine they might actually justify the subsequent gout!"

A wave of dutiful laughter washed through the ballroom.

"As is our cherished tradition," the King continued, gesturing towards the glittering display case, "we exhibit a small selection of the royal knick-knacks! A testament to our realm's enduring solvency and my ancestors' remarkable talent for acquiring shiny things through means fair or," he winked broadly, "creatively advantageous! Ambassador Chumley of Albion," he nodded towards a stiff-looking man in diplomatic attire, "do pay particular attention to the Moon's Tear diamond. The one your government keeps insisting was merely 'on loan'. Preposterous!"

The Ambassador coughed into his handkerchief, looking deeply uncomfortable.

"And now!" declared Loo-Eee-By-Gum, clearly enjoying himself immensely. "Let the jollity recommence! Strike up the band! Drain the wine barrels! Dance as if your feudal obligations depend upon it!"

The orchestra, relieved, launched into something upbeat and vaguely danceable. The crowd surged back towards the dance floor and the refreshment tables. Reynard, however, remained focused, his gaze locked on the trio of disguised badgers now subtly, but undeniably, converging on the momentarily less-guarded jewel display.

Across the room, Crispin had successfully defended his territory near the chocolate fountain and was engaged in deep reconnaissance of a platter piled high with miniature quiches. He popped one into his mouth, savouring the explosion of cheese and bacon, only to have the moment shattered by a familiar, dry voice at his elbow.

"One trusts the structural integrity of the pastry meets with the Guard's approval?"

Crispin spluttered, nearly inhaling a piece of lardoon. He spun around to find Princess Lisa regarding him, her dragon mask tilted quizzically.

"Your... Your Highness!" he managed, hastily attempting to conceal the remaining quiche behind his back. "A surprise! We were unaware of your attendance!"

"Clearly," Lisa replied, her eyes crinkling slightly behind the mask. "Though the presence of Paris's heroic vulpine defenders at such a glittering affair is hardly astonishing. One assumes you are not merely here for the miniature foodstuffs, however tempting they may be." She leaned closer, her voice dropping. "Unless my strategic assessment is flawed, there appear to be several individuals disguised with criminal incompetence circling the crown jewels."

Crispin abandoned all pretence of nonchalance. "You've spotted them? The badgers?"

"Indeed," Lisa confirmed. "Their attempts at aristocratic disguise are frankly insulting to the concept of espionage. The one attempting to pass as a Dowager Countess seems to have confused 'powdered wig' with 'attacked by a flock of confused sheep'. Appallingly executed."

"Reynard's watching them," Crispin reported, reluctantly abandoning his quiche surveillance. "I should alert Flavius and—"

"Unnecessary," Lisa interrupted, nodding towards the dance floor. "Your younger colleague seems to be navigating the swirling couples with the determination of a salmon heading upstream. I suspect he may have identified my crimson gown."

As if summoned, Flavius arrived, slightly breathless, executing a bow that was both deep and slightly wobbly. "Your Highness! Truly! An honour! I merely wished to express my profound gratitude for your intervention during the... the previous unpleasantness involving stripes and arson!"

Lisa inclined her head, a gesture that managed to be both regal and faintly amused. "Entirely unnecessary, Guardsman. Confronting ruffians is merely applied physics combined with a disregard for personal safety. Though," she glanced down at her silk gown, "I confess, formal attire offers significantly less protection against sudden blows than properly tempered steel. An oversight I intend to address with my seamstress. Perhaps reinforced boning?"

Flavius nodded vigorously, his eyes momentarily drawn to the area under discussion before snapping back to her face with the speed of a startled rabbit. "Absolutely, Your Highness! The tactical limitations of evening wear are a sadly neglected field of study! Support structures are critical!"

Crispin sighed audibly. "If you two have quite finished redesigning the battlefield applications of undergarments, might I remind you that several large, disguised rodents are preparing to commit grand larceny?"

"Quite right," Lisa agreed briskly. "And given their previous track record, their plan is likely to be audacious, ill-conceived, and doomed to fail in a spectacularly messy fashion. We should confer with Centurion Reynard."

"No need," Reynard's voice murmured as he appeared beside them with the unnerving silence of a well-oiled shadow (or a fox who was very good at avoiding squeaky floorboards).

"The situation," he informed them quietly, "is developing precisely as anticipated. The badgers are moving into position. I predict an attempt coinciding with the King's ceremonial

toast. His Majesty approaches the display, the guards focus on the chalice, the case is momentarily vulnerable."

"How many this time?" asked Lisa, her hand instinctively reaching for a non-existent sword hilt and encountering only silk and a small, decorative perfume bottle shaped like a surprised hedgehog.

"The same six," Reynard confirmed. "Including Scarface, their leader. He appears to be impersonating a Field Marshal, judging by the sheer weight of unearned medals adorning his chest."

"Persistent devils," muttered Crispin. "Didn't learn their lesson after the fire."

"Some require more intensive tutoring," Lisa observed, her eyes gleaming behind the dragon mask. "The question is, how do we administer the lesson without disrupting the King's party?"

Reynard glanced towards the dais. King Loo-Eee-By-Gum was now enthusiastically explaining the merits of competitive snail racing to a horrified-looking ambassador. "The toast is imminent. We need to intercept cleanly. No explosions, no mass panic. The King remains sensitive about public disturbances, particularly those involving performing primates, ever since the Gibbon Incident at last year's summer fête."

"I shall cover the east flank," Flavius volunteered eagerly, adjusting his green mask.

"West side for me," Crispin sighed, casting a final, longing look towards the chocolate fountain.

"And I," declared Lisa, adjusting her dragon mask with a predatory air, "shall provide a diversion, should circumstances warrant. I find that a sudden, unexpected application of chaos theory can be remarkably effective in disrupting criminal enterprises. At finishing school, my diversion involving three escaped geese and a vat of marmalade effectively prevented the theft of the headmistress's prize-winning marrow."

Reynard nodded, accepting this peculiar anecdote as tactical planning. "Very well. I remain near the jewels. On their move, we act. Coordinated, quiet, and try," he added, looking pointedly at Lisa, "to keep property damage to a minimum this time."

With grim nods and perhaps a silent prayer to the patron saint of undercover operations involving pastry, the four dispersed, melting back into the glittering, oblivious crowd, taking up their positions for the inevitable collision of ambition, incompetence, and vigilant vulpines. The pavane played on, stately and unaware, as the stage was set for the second act of the Badger Follies.

Just as Reynard had predicted, the King soon clapped his hands, silencing the orchestra mid-phrase. Servants circulated with trays of champagne, the bubbles rising expectantly.

"My lords, ladies, esteemed guests, and hangers-on!" Loo-Eee-By-Gum announced jovially. "A toast! Before the champagne goes flat or Crispin drinks it all!" (Crispin bristled behind his mask). "To our fair city, Paris! May its streets remain crooked, its gargoyles grumpy, and its cheese mongers forever argumentative!"

A ripple of polite amusement went through the crowd.

"And," the King continued, his voice taking on a slightly more serious tone, "to those who guard our peace! The stalwart City Watch, the brave Musketeers, and our surprisingly effective Vulponian Guard!" He beamed towards where he vaguely thought the foxes might be.

"Now," he declared, turning towards the glittering display case, "as custom dictates, I shall raise the Royal Chalice – forged, legend says, from the melted-down hubris of a thousand failed alchemists – and drink to our collective prosperity!"

This was it. As the King moved towards the case, the guards flanking it shifted their attention, focusing on His Majesty and the jewel-encrusted goblet. The disguised badgers, moving with surprising coordination for creatures whose natural habitat was underground, began their final approach.

The leader, his fake medals clanking softly, feigned a stumble, lurching towards the King. "Your Majesty! Overcome! Such radiance!" he exclaimed, using the King as a momentary brace while his accomplice, the 'Duchess' in the alarming pink gown, produced a slim, wicked-looking glass cutter from her reticule.

In that instant, the ballroom held its breath. And then, the carefully laid plans of both badgers and foxes collided with reality.

Reynard moved like a shadow, his paw closing around the 'Duchess's' wrist with deceptive gentleness just as the glass cutter touched the display case. "Dropping something, Madame?" he inquired politely, his grip tightening until she squeaked.

Flavius, intercepting a badger attempting to provide backup, engaged him in what appeared to be a sudden, passionate tango, spinning him away from the jewels and directly into a large floral arrangement.

Crispin, demonstrating agility fuelled by weeks of pent-up frustration (and possibly sugar), executed a slide across the polished floor worthy of a professional ice dancer, arriving perfectly positioned to trip a badger 'Baron' who was aiming a miniature, jewel-encrusted catapult (presumably for launching stolen gems towards an escape route) from beneath his cloak.

And Princess Lisa, judging the situation sufficiently chaotic, approached the towering ice sculpture of the King with thoughtful determination. With a grunt of effort that spoke volumes about her upper body strength, she gave the frozen monarch a firm, calculated shove. The sculpture hesitated, seemed to consider its options, then surrendered to gravity, toppling forward with majestic slowness before shattering upon the dance floor in a spectacular explosion of ice shards and aristocratic panic.

The ballroom erupted. Shrieks echoed off the painted ceiling. Dukes collided with Duchesses. The orchestra, utterly bewildered, defaulted to playing the Can-Can at triple speed.

The real King, clutching his chalice, watched his icy doppelgänger disintegrate, spluttering indignantly. "Good heavens! My likeness! Assaulted! Seize those responsible! And someone fetch a mop!"

Amidst the pandemonium, the badger leader saw his chance. Ignoring Reynard grappling with the 'Duchess', he lunged past

the distracted King towards the open display case, his paw snatching at the glittering Crown of Loo-Eee-By-Gum. He grasped it, a triumphant snarl twisting his snout.

But Reynard, disengaging from the now-subdued 'Duchess', launched himself at the leader's legs. They crashed to the floor in a flurry of burgundy velvet and badger fur. The crown flew upwards, spinning end over end, arcing gracefully towards a large, ornate tureen brimming with lobster bisque.

"My crown!" wailed the King, momentarily forgetting the ice puddle spreading across his velvet slippers.

Faster than a striking adder, quicker than a courtier spotting free champagne, Princess Lisa moved. Vaulting over a table laden with rapidly melting swan-shaped sorbets, she dove through the air, arm outstretched. Her fingers closed around the cold metal and sharp points of the crown scant inches before it met a creamy, crustacean-flavoured doom.

She landed somewhat inelegantly amidst the wreckage of the buffet table, clutching the crown triumphantly. "Secure, Father!" she called out, attempting to disentangle herself from what appeared to be an overly friendly aspic mould. "Though it might benefit from a light polish. Possibly smells faintly of seafood."

By now, the Musketeers, recovering from their initial shock, had swarmed the remaining badgers, subduing them with commendable efficiency and only minimal damage to the surrounding tapestries. The leader, pinned beneath Reynard, glared venomously. "This isn't finished, fox! Or you, Princess!"

"Oh, I rather think it is," Reynard replied calmly, retrieving his mask which had gone slightly askew during the tackle. "The Bastille awaits. I hear the turnip soup is particularly dreadful this time of year."

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum bustled over, his initial shock replaced by relief and burgeoning royal gratitude. "Lisa! My dear! And you foxes! Magnificent! Saved the crown! Prevented... well, whatever dreadful things badgers do with crowns! Though," he surveyed the chaos – the shattered ice, the scattered food, the floral arrangement currently containing a disgruntled badger, the Marquis de Foiegras attempting to extricate himself from beneath a large chunk of frozen royal nose – "a trifle messy, perhaps?"

Lisa, finally freeing herself from the aspic, executed a curtsy that managed to convey both respect and extreme exasperation. "The Crown Jewels remain in the Treasury's possession, Father. A small price to pay for national security, wouldn't you agree?"

The King retrieved the crown gingerly, inspecting it for bisque residue before handing it to a trembling attendant. "Indeed! Indeed! And these brave vulpines!" He peered at the assembled foxes, who had managed to regain some semblance of formation despite looking like they'd wrestled a particularly aggressive salad bar.

"The Vulponian Guard, Your Majesty," Reynard confirmed, bowing. "Ever vigilant."

"Splendid! Truly splendid!" the King declared. "Medals are definitely in order! Perhaps small statues! We have far too

much marble cluttering up the west wing anyway. Excellent work!"

As the guards efficiently removed the subdued and complaining badger bandits, and servants began the Herculean task of restoring order to the ballroom, the four heroes found a moment's respite near the now-empty jewel display case, partially screened by a wilting potted fern.

"Well," Crispin puffed, brushing ice fragments off his purple doublet. "That certainly livened up the evening. Beats chasing pickpockets near the fish market, I suppose."

"Marginally," Reynard conceded. "Though the subsequent report-writing promises levels of tedium previously unknown to foxkind."

Flavius, however, seemed oblivious to paperwork concerns. His gaze was fixed on Princess Lisa, who was attempting to discreetly scrape lobster bisque off her silk gown with the edge of her dragon mask. "Your Highness," he began, his voice slightly breathless. "That was... astonishing! The dive! The catch! Truly heroic!"

"Yes, yes, competence under pressure is one of my few socially acceptable talents," Lisa waved dismissively, abandoning the bisque removal as a lost cause. "More concerning is the leader's parting remark. 'This isn't finished'. They seemed remarkably confident for individuals facing lengthy incarceration."

Reynard's brow furrowed beneath his mask. "A pertinent observation. Their determination feels... disproportionate. Perhaps they have patrons? Or a larger plan?"

"A mystery," Lisa mused, her eyes regaining their familiar analytical gleam. "Intriguing. My life has been rather dull since I concluded my research into the migratory patterns of sentient cheese. A proper conspiracy would be quite stimulating."

Their strategic discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the royal page, bowing low. "Your Highness, Messieurs. His Majesty requires your presence on the dais. He wishes to publicly laud your heroic deeds."

As they walked towards the throne, navigating puddles of melted ice king and scattered canapés, Flavius found himself beside Lisa once more.

"Your Highness," he said softly, emboldened perhaps by the adrenaline of the recent skirmish. "Since our first meeting... during the fire... I've hoped for an opportunity to speak with you again."

Lisa glanced sideways, the ruby eyes of her dragon mask seeming to appraise him. "Indeed, Guardsman Flavius? How... diligent of you."

"Your courage," Flavius pressed on, feeling his ears grow warm, "and your... your uniqueness... are quite remarkable. Unlike anyone I've ever encountered."

"High praise," Lisa murmured, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. "I am, as has been noted, frequently unique. Often inconveniently so."

"I find it... admirable," Flavius finished, relieved to have gotten the words out without tripping over his own feet or spontaneously combusting from embarrassment.

"Perhaps," Lisa replied, her tone softening almost imperceptibly, "our paths might cross again in the course of our duties, Guardsman. This city seems determined to provide ample opportunities for... intervention."

Ahead, Reynard and Crispin exchanged a silent, knowing look. The evening's chaos had yielded captured badgers, a secured crown, considerable damage to palace property, and the tentative beginnings of something potentially even more complicated.

As they reached the dais to receive the King's effusive, if slightly confused, praise, the ballroom slowly returned to a semblance of normality. The music resumed, couples returned to the dance floor (carefully avoiding the damp patches), and servants circulated with fresh trays of champagne. For the moment, the crisis was averted.

But Reynard knew Paris. He knew the shadows held more secrets, more plots, more absurdity waiting to pounce. The badgers were merely pawns. The real game, he suspected, had yet to truly begin. And it would undoubtedly require the combined skills of his foxes, the unpredictable brilliance of the princess, and possibly a reinforced supply of headache remedies.

Chapter 3: In which the streets of Paris become host to a congregation of enterprising squirrels with dubious pharmaceutical ambitions, the finest opera house in Europe witnesses performances not listed in any program, our vulpine heroes discover the challenges of maintaining dignity while pursuing rodents through chandeliers, Princess Lisa reveals unexpected talents in theatrical improvisation, and the King inadvertently becomes the most avant-garde patron of the arts in royal history

Spring had descended upon Paris with its customary blend of renewal and revelry. The Seine sparkled with newfound vigor, street vendors hawked the season's first blooms from colourful carts, and the city's inhabitants emerged from the gloom of winter with the collective relief of prisoners granted unexpected parole.

Three weeks had passed since the Masquerade Ball Incident, and the Vulponian Guard had settled back into their regular patrols—though Reynard couldn't help noticing that the nobility now regarded them with

a mixture of respect and apprehension that hadn't existed before. There was something about foiling a royal heist that elevated one's status, even among those who considered fox-kind to be several rungs below them on the social ladder.

In their modest headquarters near the Seine, Centurion Reynard was reviewing the morning reports when the door burst open, admitting a breathless messenger in the livery of the Royal Opera.

"Centurion," panted the young rabbit, his formal jacket askew, "your presence is urgently requested at the Grand Palais de l'Opéra! Something most disturbing has occurred!"

Reynard set down his quill with a resigned sigh. "Disturbing in what way, precisely? Paris experiences seventeen different varieties of 'disturbing' before breakfast on an average day."

The messenger's whiskers twitched nervously. "Patrons... behaving strangely. Very strangely. Dancing in the aisles. Claiming to see colours in the music. The soprano believing she could fly and attempting to prove it from the top of a set piece. And..." he lowered his voice dramatically, "the Director found unusual red berries scattered throughout the refreshment area."

Reynard's ears perked up at this last detail. "Red berries? Like strawberries?"

"Exactly like strawberries, sir. But with an odd sheen to them. And an unusual scent."

Reynard exchanged glances with Crispin, who had been drowsing in a patch of sunlight by the window but was now fully alert, his interest piqued by any discussion involving edible items.

"We'll investigate immediately," Reynard decided, reaching for his uniform jacket. "Crispin, find Flavius. He should be patrolling the market district."

"No need," came Flavius's voice as he appeared in the doorway behind the messenger, his expression suggesting he had news of his own. "I was already on my way back. There's something you need to know about the market district—"

"Let me guess," interrupted Reynard. "People behaving strangely? Hallucinations? Unusual strawberries involved?"

Flavius blinked in surprise. "Yes! How did you—"

"It seems we have a citywide situation developing," Reynard explained, grabbing his sword belt. "And the Opera House appears to be the latest site affected. Come along, both of you. Whatever is happening, it requires immediate attention."

The Grand Palais de l'Opéra was the crown jewel of Parisian cultural life—a magnificent structure of marble, gold, and sweeping staircases where the elite gathered not only to witness performances, but to perform themselves the elaborate social rituals of aristocratic society. Opera nights were as much about being seen in the correct box, wearing the latest fashion, and exchanging gossip between acts as they were about the music itself.

Today, however, the usual dignified atmosphere had been replaced by something resembling a carnival designed by someone with a questionable grasp on reality.

As the three foxes entered the grand foyer, they were greeted by the sight of the normally austere Opera Director—a porcupine of advanced years whose quills had grayed with dignity—spinning in circles while describing in elaborate detail the patterns his quills were making in the air.

Nearby, a quartet of elegantly dressed patrons had formed a conga line and were snaking their way up the grand staircase, singing what appeared to be impromptu lyrics about the mystical properties of chandelier crystals.

“This is worse than I imagined,” murmured Reynard, surveying the chaos with professional dismay.

Crispin, meanwhile, had already homed in on the refreshment table, where several discarded strawberries lay with suspicious prominence among more conventional offerings.

“Same as the market,” confirmed Flavius, examining one of the berries without touching it. “Unusually bright colour. Almost glossy. The vendors in the market district said they were being sold by a group of squirrels who set up a stall near the fountain yesterday morning.”

“Squirrels?” Reynard’s brow furrowed. This was a new development.

“Yes, travelers according to the cheese merchant. They claimed to be selling ‘nature’s perfect fruit, enhanced by ancient squirrel wisdom.’ They were doing a brisk business until patrons began experiencing... effects. By the time I was called to the scene, the squirrels had vanished, leaving only affected customers behind.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the Ballet Master—a severe crane who ran his dance corps with military precision—now inexplicably wearing his wig backwards and attempting to teach a potted palm the finer points of the pas de deux.

“Monsieur Reynard!” he exclaimed upon noticing them. “Thank the heavens you’ve arrived! We are experiencing a most peculiar artistic revolution! The dancers are interpreting emotions I wasn’t aware existed! The third violinist believes he’s invented a new colour! And I myself have achieved unprecedented spiritual harmony with the architectural elements of the building!” He gestured expansively at the ceiling. “The cherubs! They critique my choreography with such insight!”

Reynard nodded with the practiced patience of one accustomed to humoring the temporarily deranged. “Indeed. Most illuminating. Perhaps you could tell us when these...insights...began?”

“After the mid-rehearsal refreshments,” the crane replied, his attention already drifting back to the potted plant. “The generous gift from our new patron—the Count of Whispering Pines. Such exquisite strawberries!”

“And this Count,” inquired Reynard carefully. “Was he by any chance...”

“A squirrel!” confirmed the Ballet Master.

“Distinguished fellow. Most elegant tail. Spoke with a charming eastern accent. Said he was new to the city and wished to introduce himself to Parisian cultural society through patronage.”

The three foxes exchanged meaningful glances. A squirrel calling himself the Count of Whispering Pines, distributing unusual strawberries throughout the city's cultural center.

“Did he mention where he was staying?” asked Flavius.

“The Grand Hôtel de Noisette, I believe,” replied the Ballet Master, who was now attempting to demonstrate a pirouette to the increasingly inanimate plant. “Said something about a cultural delegation taking residence there.”

Reynard was about to ask further questions when a commotion from the main auditorium drew their attention—shrieks and gasps, followed by raucous applause.

“That doesn't sound like standard operatic appreciation,” remarked Crispin, already moving toward the sound.

They hurried through the ornate doors into the auditorium, a vast space of red velvet and gold leaf, dominated by a magnificent chandelier that hung like a crystalline sun over the tiered seating.

The scene that greeted them defied easy categorization.

On the stage, amidst elaborate set pieces depicting what appeared to be an Ancient Roman garden, the opera's principal soprano was engaged in what could

generously be described as interpretive dance, though “random flailing while vocalizing at glass-shattering frequencies” might have been more accurate. Beside her, the tenor had abandoned conventional singing in favor of what seemed to be an attempt to communicate with spirits through a combination of falsetto trills and dramatic posing.

The orchestra, instead of providing musical accompaniment, had dissolved into individual explorations of their instruments’ capabilities. The first violinist was attempting to play his instrument like a guitar, while the timpanist had created what appeared to be a hat from his sheet music and was wearing it with evident pride.

Most concerning, however, was the activity in the upper boxes, where several patrons were balanced precariously on the railings, apparently convinced they could enhance their experience by achieving greater proximity to the chandelier.

“We need to secure those patrons before they fall,” decided Reynard instantly. “Flavius, take the left side. Crispin, the right. I’ll address the situation on stage.”

As his colleagues hurried to prevent aristocratic defenestration, Reynard made his way toward the stage, skirting the edges of the auditorium where additional patrons sat in various states of berry-induced euphoria.

He had nearly reached the orchestra pit when a flash of golden fur caught his attention. In the royal box—the most prominent in the house, reserved exclusively for the king and his family—sat Princess Lisa, watching the proceedings with an expression that mingled alarm, fascination, and poorly suppressed amusement.

Their eyes met across the auditorium, and Lisa gestured urgently for him to join her. Given that she was possibly the only completely lucid person in the room besides himself and his colleagues, Reynard adjusted his course accordingly.

“Centurion Reynard,” Lisa greeted him as he entered the royal box, her voice pitched low beneath the cacophony emanating from the stage. “I see the Vulponian Guard is already on the scene. Excellent. I was concerned I might need to intervene personally, which would inevitably lead to another lecture from Father about ‘appropriate princess behavior’ and ‘the diplomatic implications of drop-kicking the Duke of Pomegranate.’”

“Your Highness,” Reynard bowed briefly. “You appear unaffected by the...situation.”

“A lifetime at court develops one’s suspicion of unexpected treats,” she replied with a wry smile. “Particularly when delivered by unknown benefactors with excessive enthusiasm about their generosity. Also,” she added, “I happened to be in the market

district yesterday when your colleague was investigating similar incidents. Most illuminating.”

“Then you’re aware of the squirrels?”

“Indeed. Though I didn’t connect them to this particular situation until I observed the distinctive strawberries being distributed among the boxes.” She gestured to where an usher was still making rounds with a silver tray. “I was about to intervene when you arrived.”

Before Reynard could respond, a commotion from above drew their attention. Crispin had successfully corralled several hallucinating nobles from the edge of their box, but in doing so, had backed himself precariously close to the railing.

“Careful, Crispin!” called Reynard, but his warning came too late.

With a yelp of surprise, Crispin toppled backward over the railing. His fall was brief but dramatic, ending with him crashing directly onto the stage’s Roman garden set piece, collapsing what appeared to be the Colosseum and sending the soprano shrieking into the wings.

“Well,” remarked Lisa dryly, “that’s one way to end a performance.”

The disruption created a momentary pause in the chaos—a breath of clarity in the berry-induced bedlam. Into this pause stepped a figure from the wings who had not been there previously.

He was a squirrel of distinguished bearing, impeccably dressed in formal attire that marked him as nobility—or at least as someone with aspirations in that direction. His russet fur was groomed to perfection, his whiskers waxed to elegant points, and a monocle perched upon his right eye with practiced precision. Most notably, his tail—luxuriously full and brushed to a shine—was draped over his arm like an expensive fur stole.

“My dear friends!” he announced in a mellifluous voice that carried throughout the auditorium. “What a magnificent artistic expression! Truly, Parisian culture is every bit as avant-garde as I had heard!”

“The Count of Whispering Pines, I presume,” murmured Lisa, her eyes narrowing. “How convenient that he should appear precisely when the chaos reaches its peak.”

“Suspicious timing indeed,” agreed Reynard, watching as the self-proclaimed count began to make his way through the audience, offering effusive compliments on their “artistic liberation” while simultaneously edging toward the nearest exit.

“He’s making his escape,” Lisa observed, rising from her seat with the fluid grace of someone accustomed to action rather than observation. “I believe an introduction is in order, don’t you?”

Without waiting for Reynard’s response, she swept out of the royal box, somehow managing to convey both regal authority and predatory intent in the same movement.

Reynard followed close behind, signaling to Flavius—who had successfully prevented three dowagers from attempting a synchronized diving routine off the balcony—to cover the alternate exit.

The count, meanwhile, had reached the grand foyer and was accelerating toward the main doors when Princess Lisa stepped directly into his path, assuming the perfect posture of aristocratic intercept—a stance that has been employed by nobility for centuries to prevent social inferiors from exiting conversations prematurely.

“Count of Whispering Pines,” she proclaimed, her voice carrying the weight of royal command. “What a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, and I simply must know more about these delightful strawberries you’ve been distributing throughout Paris.”

The count froze, his exit strategy thwarted by the unexpected appearance of royalty. With the

adaptability that marks true confidence artists, he shifted immediately into elaborate deference.

“Your Royal Highness!” he exclaimed, executing a bow so deep his whiskers nearly brushed the marble floor. “What an honour! What an unexpected delight! I am indeed Count Thaddeus Acornswallow the Third, of the Eastern Forest Whispering Pines. A humble visitor to your magnificent city, merely sharing the botanical specialties of my humble homeland.”

“How generous,” replied Lisa, her smile carrying all the warmth of a midwinter blizzard. “And these ‘botanical specialties’—they wouldn’t happen to cause hallucinations, delusions, and a complete departure from conventional behavior, would they?”

The count’s whiskers twitched almost imperceptibly—the squirrel equivalent of a nervous swallow.

“Hallucinations? Goodness me, what a suggestion! Merely a mild euphoric effect, Your Highness. A gentle enhancement to the artistic experience. The eastern strawberry has been used in my homeland for centuries to... elevate cultural appreciation.”

“Fascinating,” said Lisa, taking a step closer. “I’m particularly interested in the chemical process. You see, as princess, I have a deep interest in... agricultural innovations. Perhaps you could share the details of how these strawberries are enhanced?”

Behind the count, Reynard had positioned himself to block any potential retreat, while Flavius now stood guard at the side entrance. The squirrel's eyes darted between them, recognizing the tactical disadvantage but maintaining his aristocratic facade.

"A proprietary technique, I'm afraid," he demurred, adjusting his monocle with affected nonchalance.

"Ancient squirrel wisdom passed down through generations of my noble family. Not something I could share without consulting the Squirrel High Council."

"The Squirrel High Council," repeated Lisa flatly. "Of course. How remiss of me not to consider the diplomatic implications."

Before the conversation could continue, the doors to the auditorium burst open, disgorging a flood of berry-affected patrons. Leading the procession was Crispin, who had somehow acquired a Roman centurion helmet from the stage props and was wearing it at a jaunty angle while directing the crowd like a peculiar Pied Piper.

"The music demands movement!" announced a viscountess who had abandoned her traditional reserve in favor of experimental dance techniques. "We must process through the streets and share the revelation!"

"Capital idea!" agreed the Duke of Pomegranate, his wig askew and his expression that of someone who has

recently discovered the universe's grand secrets written in the pattern of parquet flooring. "A cultural revolution! Art freed from convention!"

The count's expression shifted from concern to calculation as he observed the growing crowd of enthusiastic, uninhibited nobles. "Indeed!" he proclaimed, smoothly integrating himself back into the throng. "Let us bring enlightenment to all of Paris! A grand procession of artistic truth!"

Lisa shot Reynard an alarmed glance. "If they take this... display... into the streets..."

Reynard didn't need her to finish the thought. The public spectacle of Paris's elite prancing through the city in a state of hallucinogenic euphoria would be more than a mere scandal—it would be a security nightmare, a diplomatic incident, and possibly the spark for the revolution that the king's advisors were constantly warning was just one aristocratic excess away from ignition.

"We need to contain this," he decided. "Immediately."

But how to stop a mob of berry-addled nobles, led by an opportunistic squirrel with a talent for evading responsibility, from flooding onto the streets of Paris?

The answer came from an unexpected direction.

From the grand staircase descended a figure of imposing presence, resplendent in royal regalia that had been accessorized with what appeared to be the theater's prop crown from last season's production of "The Tyrannical Turnip King" (a controversial opera that had closed after three performances and a strongly worded letter from the Vegetable Growers' Association).

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum had arrived, and judging by his slightly unfocused gaze and the unusually jaunty angle of his prop crown, he too had partaken of the enhanced refreshments.

"My loyal subjects!" he boomed, spreading his arms in a gesture that nearly dislodged both crown and several nearby opera patrons. "What a magnificent cultural event! Truly, Paris leads the world in artistic innovation!"

The crowd turned toward their monarch with expressions of berry-enhanced adoration.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed the count, seizing the opportunity to align himself with the highest authority present. "You honour us with your royal presence! I was just leading your subjects in a celebration of this new artistic movement—a procession through the streets to share our enlightenment!"

The king's face lit up with enthusiasm that bordered on the manic. "A procession? Marvelous! But why limit ourselves to mere streets?" He gestured grandly, nearly removing an elderly countess's wig in the process. "If we are to truly elevate this artistic revelation, we must utilize the grandest stage in Paris!"

"The streets are rather grand, Your Majesty," suggested the count, clearly anxious to escape the confines of the opera house.

"Nonsense!" declared the king. "I refer, of course, to the palace! The Royal Ballroom, with its superior acoustics and extensive refreshment capabilities! There, we shall host the most avant-garde performance in the history of monarchy!"

A cheer erupted from the crowd, who found the prospect of continued revelry in royal surroundings even more appealing than a street procession. The count's whiskers drooped slightly as his escape route dissolved.

Princess Lisa, demonstrating the quick strategic thinking that had made her both the terror and secret pride of her royal tutors, immediately seized the opportunity.

"A brilliant suggestion, Father!" she exclaimed, stepping forward to take the king's arm. "And as the royal family's contribution to this unprecedented

cultural event, I've arranged for special transport! Royal carriages, waiting at the rear entrance, to convey all participants directly to the palace!"

Reynard caught her eye, understanding immediately. The rear entrance to the opera house opened onto a small courtyard that could be easily controlled. If they could funnel the entire hallucinogenic procession through that route instead of the main doors...

"Centurion Reynard," Lisa continued smoothly, "perhaps the Vulponian Guard would be so kind as to escort our distinguished guests to their transportation? Including, of course, our honoured visitor, the Count of Whispering Pines."

The count's expression cycled rapidly through calculation, alarm, and finally a fixed smile of someone recognizing that immediate escape was no longer viable.

"Your Highness honours me," he managed, his voice slightly strained. "Though I fear I have other pressing engagements—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the king, draping a heavy arm around the squirrel's shoulders. "You shall be my personal guest! We have much to discuss about these remarkable strawberries of yours! My Hat of Wisdom—currently taking a well-deserved rest in the

palace—will be most interested in your agricultural techniques!”

Trapped between royal insistence and the increasingly closed formation of Vulponian guards around him, the count surrendered to the inevitable with as much grace as possible. “It would be my humble honour, Your Majesty.”

With Princess Lisa orchestrating from the front and Reynard coordinating the guards from the rear, the entire berry-affected assembly was herded toward the opera house’s back entrance. The king, still wearing his prop crown and now enthusiastically describing his plans for “revolutionary additions to the royal orchestra, including instruments that haven’t been invented yet,” led the procession with the captive count at his side.

As Flavius supervised the loading of giggling nobles into the hastily summoned royal carriages, Reynard pulled Crispin aside, relieving him of his centurion helmet with gentle firmness.

“Did you consume any of those berries?” he asked, noting his colleague’s unusually bright eyes.

“What? Me? Of course not!” Crispin sounded offended at the suggestion. Then, after a pause: “Well, maybe just a small nibble. For investigative purposes. How else could I determine their effects?”

“And those effects include a sudden belief that you’re a Roman military commander?”

Crispin adjusted his uniform with dignity. “It was for crowd control purposes. They responded better to authoritative headgear.”

Before Reynard could respond to this dubious explanation, Princess Lisa approached, her expression a mixture of satisfaction and concern.

“The carriages are loading,” she reported. “I’ve instructed the drivers to take the long route to the palace, which should buy us some time. The effects seem to diminish after a few hours, based on reports from the market district.”

“And the count?” inquired Reynard.

“Secured in my father’s personal carriage, being enthusiastically interrogated about strawberry cultivation techniques.” Her lips quirked in a half-smile. “Though I suspect his aristocratic credentials may not withstand close examination.”

“We need to identify the source of these enhanced strawberries,” said Reynard. “He mentioned the Grand Hôtel de Noisette. If he truly is leading a group of squirrels distributing these berries throughout Paris...”

“Then we need to locate their operation before they can cause further disruption,” finished Lisa. She glanced

toward where the king was demonstrating what appeared to be his interpretation of a thunderstorm to an enthralled audience of berry-affected nobles. “I’ll ensure Father and his new artistic collective reach the palace safely. You three should investigate this hotel immediately.”

“Agreed,” said Reynard. He turned to Crispin, who was attempting to look entirely professional despite occasionally glancing at the ceiling as if it contained fascinating constellations. “Can you maintain focus on the mission?”

Crispin drew himself up with affronted dignity. “I am a member of the Vulponian Guard. My focus is unwavering, my dedication absolute, my commitment to duty as solid as—” His attention drifted to a passing butterfly, which he tracked with fascinated intensity before snapping back to Reynard. “What were we discussing?”

“Perhaps Crispin should accompany the king’s party,” suggested Lisa diplomatically. “His... creative energy... might help maintain the cultural enthusiasm during transit.”

Reynard nodded agreement. “Flavius and I will investigate the hotel. We’ll send word to the palace as soon as we discover anything of significance.”

With the plan established, they parted ways—Lisa and Crispin shepherding the king and his impromptu artistic movement toward the palace, while Reynard and Flavius set off for the Grand Hôtel de Noisette to uncover the source of the strawberry operation that had turned Paris’s cultural elite into experimental performance artists.

The Grand Hôtel de Noisette stood on a fashionable corner near the Tuileries Gardens, its elegant façade suggesting the kind of establishment that asked few questions of its guests, provided they could pay the exorbitant rates. A discreet brass plaque beside the entrance announced it as “Purveyor of Fine Accommodations to Distinguished Foreign Visitors Since 1682,” which Reynard mentally translated as “We’ve been hosting spies, exiled nobles, and wealthy fugitives for generations.”

“How should we approach this, sir?” asked Flavius as they observed the hotel from across the street. “We have no official warrant for search or seizure.”

Reynard considered their options. Direct confrontation risked alerting any accomplices, while official channels would take too long and potentially involve bureaucratic complications.

“We’ll use the direct approach,” he decided. “But with a slight embellishment of our authority.”

They crossed the street and entered the hotel’s lobby, a sumptuous space of marble floors, velvet furnishings, and discreet alcoves designed for private conversations. At the reception desk, a well-groomed rabbit in a formal jacket regarded them with professional neutrality that didn’t quite mask his surprise at seeing members of the city guard in his establishment.

“Good afternoon, messieurs,” he greeted them, his voice pitched low. “How may I assist the... Vulponian Guard?”

Reynard approached the desk with deliberate authority. “We’re here on official business regarding the delegation from the Eastern Forest. By royal command.”

The rabbit’s ears twitched slightly—the only indication of his discomfort. “I’m afraid our guest registry is confidential, monsieur. Hotel policy.”

“This isn’t a matter of ordinary registry inquiry,” Reynard countered smoothly. “This concerns a direct request from His Majesty King Loo-Eee-By-Gum regarding his special guest, the Count of Whispering Pines.”

At the mention of the king, the rabbit's professional resistance wavered. "The count? He departed for the opera this morning and has not yet returned."

"Precisely," nodded Reynard. "He is currently enjoying the king's hospitality at the palace. His Majesty instructed us to retrieve certain items from the count's rooms—diplomatic gifts that the count wished to present this evening."

The rabbit hesitated, clearly weighing the risks of refusing a royal request against the hotel's privacy policies. Royal displeasure won out.

"The Eastern Forest delegation occupies the entire third floor," he admitted. "The count himself resides in Suite Fourteen."

"We'll need a master key," Flavius added with surprising authority. "For efficiency."

After another moment's hesitation, the rabbit produced an ornate key from beneath the desk. "Please ensure everything is... returned to its proper place when you depart."

"Of course," assured Reynard, accepting the key with a grateful nod. "The king appreciates your discretion."

They ascended the grand staircase to the third floor, encountering no one in the plushly carpeted corridor. Suite Fourteen was located at the end of the hall, its

double doors carved with an intricate pattern of leaves and acorns—a touch of woodland aesthetic that seemed especially appropriate given its occupant.

“Ready?” Reynard asked, inserting the master key into the lock.

Flavius nodded, his paw resting lightly on the hilt of his dagger.

The suite that greeted them upon entry was exactly as opulent as one would expect for a visiting dignitary—or someone presenting themselves as such. Silk draperies framed tall windows overlooking the gardens, while the furniture combined Parisian elegance with subtle accommodations for squirrel physiology—higher perches, specialized grips, and a writing desk with miniature ladders.

But it was the adjoining room that captured their immediate attention. What should have been a formal dining area had been transformed into an impromptu laboratory. Long tables lined the walls, covered with glass vials, distillation equipment, mortars and pestles, and botanical specimens in various states of processing. Several wooden crates contained ordinary strawberries, while others held the distinctive enhanced versions, their unnatural gleam even more apparent in the afternoon light.

“They’re not just distributing these berries,” Flavius observed, examining the setup without touching anything. “They’re manufacturing them here.”

Reynard carefully inspected the various substances arranged across the tables. “Some form of chemical enhancement, not just breeding or selection. Look at these extracts and compounds.”

In the center of the main table lay an open ledger, filled with neat notations in a flowing script. Reynard leaned closer, careful not to disturb anything.

“Delivery schedules,” he noted, scanning the entries. “The opera house was just today’s target. Yesterday the market district, the day before several upper-class salons... They’ve been methodically introducing these enhanced strawberries throughout Paris’s elite circles.”

“But to what end?” wondered Flavius. “What purpose does creating widespread hallucinations serve?”

A sound from the corridor outside—the soft pad of approaching footsteps—interrupted their investigation. Reynard motioned Flavius to take position beside the door, while he himself stepped behind an ornate dressing screen.

The door opened, admitting what appeared to be a hotel servant carrying a stack of fresh linens. Only when the door closed behind him and he set down his burden did he reveal himself to be a squirrel—smaller than the

“count” but with the same distinctive eastern facial markings.

“The preparations are complete,” he announced to the apparently empty room. “The shipment for the palace kitchens will be delivered within the hour, and the special batch for the—”

He froze as Flavius stepped into view, his paw moving instinctively to a hidden pocket.

“I wouldn’t,” advised Reynard, emerging from behind the screen. “The Vulponian Guard tends to take a dim view of weapons drawn against its officers.”

The squirrel’s whiskers twitched with alarm as he assessed his options. Finding them severely limited, he opted for injured dignity.

“This is an outrage! An invasion of diplomatic quarters! I shall report this to—”

“To whom?” interrupted Reynard calmly. “The Count of Whispering Pines? Currently enjoying the king’s hospitality at the palace? Or perhaps to the Eastern Forest diplomatic corps—which, according to our inquiries, has no record of a Count Thaddeus Acornswallow or any official delegation in Paris?”

The squirrel’s bravado deflated visibly. “I’m merely a servant following orders.”

“Whose orders, exactly?” pressed Flavius. “And what is the purpose of distributing these enhanced strawberries throughout Paris?”

The squirrel’s eyes darted to the window, measuring the distance and his chances of escape. Reynard casually shifted to block that route, while Flavius moved to secure the door.

“You mentioned a shipment for the palace kitchens,” Reynard reminded him. “A ‘special batch.’ What makes it special, exactly?”

Seeing no viable escape, the squirrel’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “Higher concentration. Longer-lasting effects. The regular berries produce a few hours of... suggestibility. The palace batch would last through the night.”

“Suggestibility,” repeated Reynard. “Not just hallucinations, but a state in which the affected individuals are more easily influenced.”

“The baron’s orders,” muttered the squirrel, apparently deciding that cooperation might be his best remaining option. “Create chaos, yes, but more importantly, ensure the affected nobles are amenable to suggestion.”

“The baron?” Flavius’s ears perked up. “Baron Bushytail?”

The squirrel nodded reluctantly. “After his previous failure with the badger alliance, he determined a more subtle approach was needed. Instead of direct theft, the plan shifted to manipulation. Get the nobles and the king himself in a suggestible state, then introduce proposals for new trade agreements, diplomatic recognitions, treasury allocations...”

“Economic and political manipulation through hallucinogenic fruit,” summarized Reynard. “Creative, if somewhat overcomplicated.”

“The Eastern Forest Collective needs funds and recognition to support its separation from the Pine Needle Alliance,” explained the squirrel, warming to his subject now that concealment seemed pointless. “Direct appeals have failed for years. This approach—” he gestured to the laboratory setup, “—was meant to create opportunities where conventional diplomacy had failed.”

“By drugging half of Paris’s elite,” noted Flavius disapprovingly.

“Only temporarily,” insisted the squirrel. “With minimal lasting effects. The baron is many things, but not malicious. He specifically formulated the compound to avoid permanent harm.”

Reynard was about to respond when a sharp knock at the door interrupted them. Before either fox could react, the door swung open, revealing a hotel footman.

“Begging your pardon,” the deer began, “but there’s a message for the count from—” He stopped abruptly, taking in the scene: two city guards, an agitated squirrel, and what was clearly not standard hotel room decor behind them.

Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, the squirrel darted forward with surprising speed, slipping past the startled footman and bolting down the corridor.

“After him!” instructed Reynard, but the command was hardly necessary. Flavius was already in pursuit, his longer legs giving him an advantage in the straightaway of the hotel corridor.

The chase led them down the grand staircase—the squirrel taking the most direct route by sliding down the bannister, nearly colliding with an ascending bellhop—and through the lobby, where several distinguished guests were treated to the unexpected spectacle of a member of the Vulponian Guard vaulting over a settee in pursuit of a fleeing rodent.

Outside, the squirrel demonstrated the natural agility of his species, quickly scaling a nearby lamppost and leaping from there to the awning of an adjacent shop. Flavius followed with determination if not quite the

same grace, scrambling up the lamppost with considerably more effort and nearly overbalancing on the narrow perch at the top.

What followed was a rooftop chase across a section of Parisian retail establishments, the squirrel using every available architectural feature to his advantage, while Flavius pursued with the single-minded focus of youth and professional pride.

Reynard, meanwhile, had taken a more strategic approach. Rather than joining the vertical pursuit, he circled around the block, calculating the most likely escape route and positioning himself accordingly.

His instincts proved correct. As the squirrel descended from the rooftops via a conveniently placed drain pipe, he landed directly in Reynard's waiting grasp.

"I believe," said Reynard, holding the struggling squirrel firmly by the scruff, "that we were in the middle of a rather informative conversation before you decided on this impromptu tour of Parisian architecture."

Flavius joined them moments later, slightly winded and with his uniform bearing evidence of the less dignified aspects of rooftop pursuit.

"Well done, sir," he managed between breaths. "I nearly had him at the chimney sweep's awning, but he

executed a rather impressive flip that I didn't think prudent to attempt."

"Wisdom in pursuit is as valuable as persistence," observed Reynard, maintaining his hold on the now-resigned squirrel. "Now, let's continue our discussion somewhere more private—and with fewer escape routes."

Back at Vulponian Guard headquarters, the captured squirrel—who identified himself as Filbert, assistant to the self-proclaimed Count of Whispering Pines—provided a comprehensive account of their operation. His cooperation was significantly enhanced by Reynard's casual mention that the alternative would involve personal interrogation by Princess Lisa, who had developed "uniquely persuasive techniques involving soup spoons."

"The baron established our operation three weeks ago," explained Filbert, nursing a cup of tea that Crispin had grudgingly prepared upon his return from the palace. "After the failure of the badger alliance and the masquerade ball incident, he needed a new approach to secure funds and recognition for the Eastern Forest Collective."

"And that approach involved hallucinogenic strawberries?" prompted Reynard.

“The formula was originally developed for medicinal purposes,” insisted Filbert. “A mild euphoric to ease anxiety and pain. But the baron recognized its... broader applications. When consumed, it creates heightened suggestibility along with the more obvious effects. The target becomes remarkably open to suggestion while experiencing sensory enhancement.”

“Convenient for manipulating trade agreements and treasury allocations,” noted Flavius.

“The baron prefers ‘negotiating from a position of pharmaceutical advantage,’” corrected Filbert with a hint of pride. “It’s really quite innovative.”

“Criminally innovative,” Reynard reminded him. “Drugging nobility without consent remains illegal regardless of how one phrases it.”

“A matter of perspective,” sniffed Filbert. “The Squirrel High Council—which, unlike the count’s title, is actually real—considers it creative diplomacy.”

Reynard leaned forward. “The operation at the hotel. How many squirrels are involved? What was the next target after the opera house?”

“Six of us altogether,” admitted Filbert. “The baron—who really is Baron Bushytail, though the ‘Count of Whispering Pines’ identity was created for this operation—myself, and four others handling

distribution and production. As for targets..." he hesitated.

"The palace," supplied Reynard. "You mentioned a special delivery for the palace kitchens."

Filbert nodded reluctantly. "Tonight's grand reception for the Prussian ambassador. Every significant political and military figure in Paris will be in attendance. The baron arranged for a large delivery of 'specialty strawberries' for the dessert course."

Reynard and Flavius exchanged alarmed glances. A roomful of drugged diplomats, military leaders, and nobility would create unprecedented chaos—and opportunity for manipulation.

"The delivery is scheduled for when?" demanded Reynard.

"Five o'clock," replied Filbert. "By special arrangement with the under-chef, who believes they're simply an exotic variety prized for their colour and flavor."

A quick glance at the clock confirmed they had less than an hour before the delivery would take place.

"Flavius, alert the palace guard immediately," instructed Reynard. "Ensure no fruit deliveries are accepted without thorough inspection. Then locate Princess Lisa and inform her of the situation."

“And the remaining squirrels at the hotel?” asked Flavius, already moving toward the door.

“I’ll organize a detachment to secure the location and confiscate their equipment,” said Reynard. “The formula and production methods need to be thoroughly documented before destruction.”

As Flavius departed on his urgent mission, Reynard turned back to Filbert, his expression grave.

“Now, about Baron Bushytail. I need to know exactly what he hopes to accomplish at tonight’s reception. What agreements or concessions is he planning to extract from the affected nobles?”

Filbert’s whiskers drooped. “That’s the complicated part. You see, the baron doesn’t just want treasury allocations. He wants royal recognition of the Eastern Forest Collective as an independent principality—with himself as its sovereign ruler.”

Reynard’s ears flattened slightly. Political ambitions complicated matters considerably, particularly when they involved redrawing territorial boundaries. Such disputes had led to wars in the past.

“And the king would simply... agree to this under the influence of the strawberries?”

“The effect isn’t mind control,” clarified Filbert. “But it does create a state where ideas seem more reasonable

than they might otherwise. Combined with the baron's considerable charisma and the specially prepared documents..." He shrugged. "The chances were favorable."

Reynard stood, signaling the end of the interview. "You'll remain in custody while we address this situation. I suggest you continue your cooperation—it may influence how the magistrate views your case."

As he secured the makeshift cell, Reynard's mind was already racing ahead to the palace reception. If they could intercept the strawberry delivery and capture the remaining members of the squirrel operation, they might resolve this threat without further incident.

But Baron Bushytail—currently in the king's company, with access to the palace and its influential guests—remained a wild card. And if even a small portion of the enhanced strawberries reached the reception...

Reynard quickened his pace. Time was of the essence, and Paris's political stability hung in the balance.

The Palace of Verse-Isle was alive with activity as final preparations for the Prussian ambassador's reception reached their crescendo. Footmen scurried through hallways carrying silver trays and crystal glasses, florists arranged elaborate displays in reception rooms,

and the royal kitchens operated at a fever pitch of culinary creation.

Flavius, having delivered Reynard's warning to the palace guard, navigated the controlled chaos with purpose, seeking Princess Lisa. He eventually located her in a small antechamber off the main ballroom, where she appeared to be engaged in what could only be described as damage control.

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum, still wearing his opera prop crown along with his formal royal attire, was enthusiastically describing his new artistic vision to the bewildered Prussian ambassador—a stout badger whose expression suggested he was reconsidering diplomatic relations with a monarchy whose ruler appeared to believe that interpretive dance should be incorporated into trade negotiations.

“And then, at the signing of the treaty,” the king was explaining, hands gesturing expansively, “the royal orchestra creates the sound of two nations becoming one! Trumpets! Violins! Perhaps some form of rhythmic percussion using actual trade goods!”

“How... innovative, Your Majesty,” managed the ambassador, his diplomatic training being tested to its limits.

Princess Lisa, positioned strategically behind her father, caught sight of Flavius at the door and

immediately recognized the urgency in his expression. With practiced grace, she inserted herself into the conversation.

“Father, perhaps the ambassador would appreciate a moment to refresh himself before the reception. The journey from Prussia is notoriously taxing.”

“Of course, of course!” agreed the king, momentarily distracted. “One must be properly refreshed to fully appreciate the artistic dimensions of diplomacy! Ambassador, my chamberlain will show you to your quarters.”

As a relieved chamberlain led the confused ambassador away, Lisa swiftly joined Flavius at the doorway.

“Please tell me you’ve discovered something that explains why my father believes interpretive dance is an essential component of international relations,” she murmured.

“The strawberry effects should diminish within a few more hours,” Flavius assured her. “But we have a more urgent concern. Baron Bushytail—or the ‘Count of Whispering Pines’ as he’s been calling himself—has arranged for a delivery of enhanced strawberries to the palace kitchens, intended for tonight’s reception.”

Lisa’s expression darkened. “The under-chef mentioned a special delivery of exotic strawberries scheduled to arrive shortly. I thought nothing of it at

the time.” She glanced toward where her father was now explaining his artistic vision to a potted palm with the same enthusiasm he’d shown the ambassador.

“Given the state of those who consumed the opera house batch, I can only imagine the diplomatic incident that would ensue if the entire reception were similarly affected.”

“Reynard has sent guards to intercept the delivery,” Flavius explained. “But the baron himself remains at large within the palace. According to his associate, he plans to use the reception to secure recognition for his political ambitions while the nobility is in a suggestible state.”

“Clever,” admitted Lisa with grudging respect.

“Though I’m not inclined to allow a squirrel with delusions of grandeur to redraw political boundaries through pharmaceutical manipulation.” She straightened, decision made. “We need to locate the baron immediately. Where was he last seen?”

“With the king, after the opera house,” said Flavius.

“But I haven’t spotted him since arriving at the palace.”

“Then we begin with Father,” decided Lisa. “He may recall where his new ‘artistic advisor’ wandered off to, assuming he can distinguish between actual events and strawberry-induced visions.”

They approached the king, who had progressed from lecturing the plant to conducting an imaginary orchestra with enthusiastic, if somewhat erratic, gestures.

“Father,” Lisa addressed him firmly, capturing his wandering attention. “The Count of Whispering Pines—where is he currently?”

The king paused his conducting, appearing momentarily confused. “The count? Ah, yes! Charming fellow, magnificent tail. He expressed great interest in the Crown Jewel display being prepared for the reception. Wanted to study the ‘artistic arrangement’ or some such. I directed him to the Royal Treasury antechamber, where the Master of Ceremonies is organizing the display.”

Lisa and Flavius exchanged alarmed glances. The Royal Treasury antechamber, where priceless jewels were being prepared for public display, was precisely where one would not want a squirrel with dubious intentions and a history of theft.

“How long ago was this?” pressed Lisa.

The king waved vaguely. “Time has become such a fluid concept today. Perhaps an hour? Or possibly yesterday? The Hat of Wisdom would know, but it’s currently resting in my chambers.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Lisa, already moving toward the door with Flavius close behind. “Please continue your... conducting. But perhaps avoid actually consuming any strawberries at the reception?”

“Strawberries!” exclaimed the king as if suddenly remembering something important. “The count mentioned a special delivery for the reception! Said they would ‘elevate the diplomatic discourse to unprecedented heights.’ Rather looking forward to it, actually.”

“I imagine the discourse would be elevated indeed,” muttered Lisa as they hurried from the room. “Along with international incidents and possibly declarations of war, depending on what the Prussian ambassador might agree to while under the influence.”

They moved swiftly through the palace corridors, passing servants engaged in last-minute preparations for the reception. As they neared the Royal Treasury wing, they encountered Crispin, who appeared to have mostly recovered from his “investigative nibble” of enhanced strawberry.

“Reynard sent me to secure the palace entry points,” he explained, falling into step beside them. “All fruit deliveries are being diverted to a separate inspection area. But there’s a complication—one wagon already arrived before our alert was issued. The kitchen staff

reported a delivery of ‘specialty berries’ accepted approximately twenty minutes ago.”

“And the delivery staff?” asked Flavius.

“Two squirrels,” confirmed Crispin. “Departed immediately after unloading.”

“Then we may already have enhanced strawberries in the palace kitchens,” said Lisa grimly. “Crispin, divert to the kitchens and locate that delivery. Ensure nothing is prepared for serving until properly inspected.”

As Crispin hurried off toward the kitchens, Lisa and Flavius continued toward the Treasury antechamber, their pace quickening. The corridor opened into a grand circular room where, on ceremonial occasions, selections from the royal jewel collection were displayed to impress visiting dignitaries.

The room was currently occupied by several royal staff and the Master of Ceremonies—an elderly stoat whose ceremonial robes added considerable bulk to his diminutive frame. He was directing the placement of display cases with the precision of a general organizing troops.

Of Baron Bushytail, however, there was no sign.

“The Count of Whispering Pines,” inquired Lisa, approaching the Master of Ceremonies. “We were

informed he was consulting on the display arrangement.”

The stoat bowed deeply. “Indeed, Your Highness. The count provided several suggestions regarding optimal viewing angles and lighting considerations. Most helpful. He departed perhaps fifteen minutes ago, mentioning a need to prepare for the reception.”

“Did he show particular interest in any specific items?” asked Flavius, scanning the display cases with professional suspicion.

“The Moon’s Tear diamond, of course,” replied the stoat. “Everyone is fascinated by it. Though he seemed equally interested in the ceremonial treaties display.”

“Treaties display?” echoed Lisa, a note of alarm entering her voice.

“Yes, Your Highness. For the diplomatic reception, we’re displaying historical treaties with Prussia and other allies. The count was most attentive to the formal structure and royal seal placement. Quite the student of diplomatic protocol.”

Lisa and Flavius exchanged significant glances. A squirrel with political ambitions, studying the formal structure of royal treaties, while planning to drug an entire diplomatic reception into suggestibility.

“The treaties are secure?” confirmed Flavius.

“Absolutely,” assured the Master of Ceremonies, gesturing to a guard positioned beside the display. “Continuous supervision until the reception begins.”

Lisa nodded, already turning toward the exit. “Alert us immediately if the count returns. He is not to be left unattended with any official documents or royal jewels.”

Back in the corridor, she lowered her voice to avoid being overheard by passing servants. “He’s preparing something—a document for the king to sign while under the influence. Something that would recognize the Eastern Forest Collective as independent.”

“With himself as its ruler,” added Flavius. “But where would he prepare such a document? And how would he reproduce the royal seals?”

Lisa’s expression darkened with sudden realization. “The Royal Secretary’s office. It contains the diplomatic templates, the formal language for treaties, and—most importantly—access to the lesser royal seals used for diplomatic correspondence.”

They changed direction, heading toward the administrative wing of the palace. As they approached the Royal Secretary’s chambers, the sound of voices emerged from within—one the distinctive cultured tone of Baron Bushytail, the other the confused protests of the Royal Secretary himself.

“But these documents require proper procedural review,” the secretary was insisting. “I cannot simply prepare treaties for signing without the appropriate diplomatic preparations!”

“My dear fellow,” replied the baron smoothly, “this is a direct request from His Majesty himself. The king was most explicit about his desire to formalize relations with the Eastern Forest Collective tonight, as a gesture of expanded diplomatic engagement. Surely you wouldn’t contradict a royal command?”

Lisa nodded to Flavius, who positioned himself beside the door while she adopted her most imperious royal demeanor. Without knocking, she pushed the door open and swept into the room with all the authority her bloodline afforded her.

“How fascinating,” she declared, fixing the baron with a steely gaze. “I was unaware that my father had authorized new treaty preparations. Particularly with territories that technically fall under the jurisdiction of the Pine Needle Alliance.”

The baron, caught in mid-persuasion, recovered quickly. “Princess Lisa! What an unexpected honour. I was just explaining to the Royal Secretary that His Majesty expressed interest in formalizing certain... preliminary recognitions.”

The Royal Secretary—a nervous rabbit whose spectacles magnified his already substantial eyes to alarming proportions—looked desperately relieved at Lisa’s arrival. “Your Highness! I was explaining to the count that proper protocols must be observed for any official documents, regardless of... informal royal suggestions.”

Lisa smiled thinly. “How conscientious of you. And absolutely correct.” She turned her attention fully to the baron, who was maintaining an admirable facade of innocent diplomatic engagement despite being clearly caught in the act. “Count—or should I say, Baron Bushytail—perhaps we should discuss these ‘preliminary recognitions’ in more detail. Specifically, their connection to certain enhanced strawberries currently being intercepted in the palace kitchens.”

The baron’s whiskers twitched—the only outward sign of his alarm. “Strawberries? I’m afraid I don’t follow Your Highness’s meaning. I merely suggested a local delicacy as a complement to the reception menu.”

“A local delicacy with remarkable properties,” countered Lisa. “Properties that induce hallucinations, euphoria, and—most conveniently—heightened suggestibility. Perfect conditions for securing signatures on hastily prepared treaties, wouldn’t you agree?”

For a moment, the baron maintained his innocent expression. Then, assessing the futility of continued denial, his demeanor shifted to one of pragmatic calculation.

“Politics is the art of recognizing opportunity, Your Highness,” he said, his tone conversational despite the tension in the room. “Conventional diplomatic channels have failed the Eastern Forest Collective for generations. Sometimes, unconventional approaches become necessary.”

“Drugging foreign dignitaries goes somewhat beyond ‘unconventional,’” observed Lisa dryly. “As does impersonating nobility and attempting to manipulate my father into redrawing territorial boundaries.”

The baron straightened, his natural dignity asserting itself. “The Eastern Forest Collective has legitimate claims to self-governance. Claims that have been systematically ignored by larger powers more interested in timber rights than squirrel autonomy.”

“Perhaps so,” acknowledged Lisa, surprising both the baron and Flavius with her concession. “But legitimate claims are properly addressed through legitimate means—not hallucinogenic fruit and fraudulent treaties.”

A commotion in the corridor interrupted their standoff—the sound of running footsteps and Crispin’s

voice raised in alarm. He burst into the office, slightly out of breath.

“The strawberries,” he gasped. “They’re gone from the kitchen. Already distributed to the serving staff for the reception. It begins in twenty minutes!”

The baron’s expression shifted from concern to smug satisfaction. “It appears we shall have the opportunity to test whether legitimate claims receive legitimate consideration when the playing field is... adjusted.”

Lisa’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Flavius, secure the baron. Crispin, with me to the reception hall. We need to stop those strawberries from being served.”

As Flavius moved to detain the baron, the squirrel made a swift calculation. With surprising agility, he leapt onto the Royal Secretary’s desk, scattering carefully organized papers, and from there to the curtain rod beside the window.

“Political evolution cannot be stopped,” he declared, clinging to the rod as Flavius attempted to reach him. “The Eastern Forest Collective shall have its day!”

With that pronouncement, he swung from the curtain to the windowsill and out into the palace gardens, demonstrating once again the natural advantages squirrels maintained in matters of hasty retreat.

“After him!” instructed Lisa. “He’ll likely try to reach the reception to ensure his plan succeeds!”

Flavius immediately gave chase through the window, while Lisa and Crispin took the more conventional route through the palace corridors. The race was now on—to capture the baron, intercept the drugged strawberries, and prevent what would surely be the most diplomatically catastrophic reception in royal history.

The Grand Reception Hall gleamed with the full splendor of royal hospitality. Crystal chandeliers cast prismatic light across marble floors, while gold leaf detailing caught and reflected the glow of hundreds of candles. Dignitaries from across Europe mingled with the cream of Parisian society, creating a kaleidoscope of formal attire, military uniforms, and diplomatic regalia.

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum, still under mild influence from his opera house strawberry consumption but now channeling it into what he believed was exceptionally inspired diplomacy, held court near the main dais. The Prussian ambassador, having somewhat recovered from his earlier bewilderment, was engaged in careful conversation while maintaining a prudent arm’s length from the king’s enthusiastic gesticulations.

Along the perimeter of the hall, serving staff stood at attention, silver trays loaded with the first course of refreshments—including, on several trays, artfully arranged displays of particularly vibrant strawberries.

Reynard, having returned from securing the squirrel operation at the hotel, entered the reception hall just as Lisa and Crispin arrived from the opposite entrance. A silent communication of glances confirmed what they all observed—the enhanced strawberries had indeed reached the serving staff and were moments away from distribution.

“The west wall servers,” murmured Lisa as they converged near a marble column. “Those trays have the berries. We need to intercept them before service begins.”

“What about the baron?” asked Reynard.

“Escaped through the Royal Secretary’s window with Flavius in pursuit,” she replied tersely. “Likely headed here to ensure his plan succeeds.”

Reynard nodded, mentally calculating their approach. “Crispin, circuit the left perimeter. I’ll take the right. Princess, perhaps you could create a distraction at the appropriate moment?”

A brief smile flashed across Lisa’s face. “Distraction is my specialty. On my signal, then.”

They separated, moving casually through the crowd while maintaining sight lines to the serving staff. Just as the major-domo prepared to signal the beginning of service, Lisa stepped deliberately into the center of the hall, directly before the royal dais.

“Your attention, honoured guests!” she proclaimed, her voice carrying with practiced royal authority. “Before we commence this evening’s festivities, I wish to share a special diplomatic announcement!”

All eyes turned to the princess, including those of her slightly confused father, who nevertheless beamed with pride at his daughter’s unexpected initiative. Taking advantage of the distraction, Reynard and Crispin swiftly approached the serving staff, quietly but firmly instructing them to withdraw the suspect trays.

“As a symbol of cultural exchange,” continued Lisa, improvising magnificently, “I have prepared a traditional Prussian folk dance, taught to me by the ambassador himself during his last visit!”

The Prussian ambassador, who had done no such thing and whose culture was not particularly known for its folk dancing traditions, stared in mute astonishment as Lisa launched into what appeared to be an entirely improvised routine involving high kicks, enthusiastic twirling, and occasional bursts of what might generously be described as yodeling.

The spectacle was so unexpected and riveting that no one noticed the subtle removal of certain strawberry displays from the service rotation—nor the arrival of Baron Bushytail through a side entrance, his formal attire somewhat disheveled from his garden escape.

The baron took in the scene with mounting dismay—his enhanced strawberries being quietly removed from circulation, the princess creating an outlandish diversion, and the treaty documents he had prepared still clutched uselessly in his paw. His grand plan was unraveling before his eyes.

With the desperate resolve of a politician seeing his ambitions collapse, the baron made a final, bold move. Straightening his jacket and assuming his most dignified bearing, he strode directly toward the king, treaty in hand.

“Your Majesty!” he called, cutting through the distraction of Lisa’s increasingly athletic folk interpretation. “A matter of urgent diplomatic significance requires your immediate attention!”

Before he could reach the king, however, his path was blocked by Flavius, who had finally caught up after the garden pursuit. Simultaneously, Reynard appeared on his other flank, effectively boxing him in among the crowd of bemused diplomats.

“Baron Bushytail,” said Reynard formally, “you are under arrest for conspiracy, fraud, distribution of prohibited substances, and attempted manipulation of royal authority.”

“Preposterous!” declared the baron, attempting to maintain his dignity despite the increasingly untenable situation. “I am a diplomatic representative engaged in legitimate negotiations!”

“A representative with unusual negotiating techniques,” observed Lisa, abandoning her dance routine to join the confrontation. “Including drugged strawberries and forged treaty documents.”

The baron’s whiskers drooped as he realised the comprehensive failure of his plan. The strawberries had been intercepted, his identity exposed, and his diplomatic fiction unraveled.

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum, showing a moment of surprising clarity despite his earlier strawberry consumption, stepped forward with unexpected royal authority.

“Baron,” he addressed the squirrel directly, “while We appreciate creative approaches to diplomacy, certain boundaries of propriety must be observed. Drugging Our court falls somewhat outside acceptable practice.”

“Your Majesty,” attempted the baron, making a last desperate appeal, “the Eastern Forest Collective has

sought recognition for generations. Our legitimate concerns have been systematically ignored by larger powers—”

“Then perhaps,” interrupted the king, “these concerns should be presented through legitimate diplomatic channels. We are not unreceptive to petitions properly submitted. We are, however, distinctly opposed to psychoactive strawberries at formal receptions.”

With that pronouncement, royal guards stepped forward to take the baron into custody. As he was led away, the squirrel maintained his dignity despite his evident defeat.

“This isn’t over,” he informed Lisa and the foxes quietly. “The Eastern Forest Collective’s quest for recognition will continue. Though perhaps,” he added with a rueful twitch of his whiskers, “with slightly more conventional diplomatic approaches in the future.”

As the baron was escorted from the reception, the king turned to address the bewildered assemblage of diplomats and nobles, most of whom were still trying to process whether Princess Lisa’s “traditional Prussian dance” was an elaborate joke or a serious cultural misunderstanding.

“Distinguished guests!” he proclaimed, seemingly invigorated by the excitement. “A minor diplomatic

irregularity has been resolved! Let us proceed with our celebration of Prusso-Parisian relations, thankfully without unauthorized botanical enhancements!”

The reception gradually resumed its intended course, with the Prussian ambassador discretely informing several confused countrymen that no, that was absolutely not a traditional dance from their homeland, and yes, the princess did appear to be making it up entirely on the spot.

In a quiet corner of the hall, Lisa, Reynard, Flavius, and Crispin gathered for a moment of mutual congratulation.

“Well,” said Lisa, smoothing her slightly disheveled gown, “that was invigorating. Though I fear I may have created some confusion about Prussian cultural traditions that could take generations to correct.”

“A small price for preventing a diplomatic incident of considerably larger proportions,” observed Reynard. “Imagine the treaty concessions that might have been agreed to under the influence of those strawberries.”

“The Eastern Forest Collective as an independent principality,” mused Crispin, who had somehow acquired a plate of (thoroughly inspected) canapés during the commotion. “Ruled by Baron Bushytail the First. It has a certain absurd charm.”

“The baron’s claims might have legitimate foundations,” Flavius pointed out, ever the thoughtful one. “Even if his methods were unacceptable.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Lisa, watching as her father engaged the Prussian ambassador in what appeared to be a considerably more conventional diplomatic conversation than his earlier artistic expositions. “And perhaps there’s a more appropriate way to address those claims. The royal diplomatic corps could review the situation—through proper channels and without botanical persuasion.”

“A surprisingly generous perspective, Your Highness,” noted Reynard with approval.

Lisa shrugged elegantly. “Good governance occasionally requires recognizing valid concerns even when they’re presented invalidly. Besides,” she added with a mischievous smile, “imagine the diplomatic leverage of being known as the monarchy that considers squirrel autonomy with an open mind. The political capital alone would be worth the administrative inconvenience.”

A royal page approached, bowing deeply. “Your Highness, Centurion Reynard. His Majesty requests your presence. He wishes to formally commend your actions in preventing what he is now referring to as ‘The Great Strawberry Conspiracy.’”

As they followed the page toward the royal dais, Crispin leaned closer to Flavius. “This marks the third time in a month we’ve prevented some form of plot against the crown. I’m beginning to think Paris might be slightly more intrigue-filled than the average city.”

“At least this one didn’t involve badgers or fire,” replied Flavius philosophically. “Just hallucinogenic fruit and political squirrels. I consider that progress.”

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum received them with evident pleasure, the last effects of his strawberry experience having apparently transformed into general bonhomie rather than artistic radicalism.

“The heroes of the hour!” he declared, gesturing expansively. “First the tavern fire, then the masquerade plot, and now this strawberry scheme! One begins to wonder if Paris has always been this eventful, or if you four somehow attract intrigue like honey attracts bears!”

“I assure you, Father, we’re merely observant,” replied Lisa smoothly. “Though I admit our combined talents seem particularly suited to addressing unusual threats.”

“Indeed!” agreed the king enthusiastically. “Which is why I have made a decision!” He paused for dramatic effect, clearly enjoying the moment. “Effective immediately, I am establishing a new division within the royal security apparatus—the Special Investigations

Bureau! Dedicated to addressing unconventional threats to the crown and capital!”

The four exchanged surprised glances.

“And who will lead this new bureau, Your Majesty?” inquired Reynard cautiously.

The king beamed. “Why, you four, of course! Centurion Reynard as Director, with Guardsmen Crispin and Flavius as field agents, and Princess Lisa as royal liaison and special operative!”

Lisa’s expression suggested she hadn’t been consulted about this arrangement, but contained a distinct undertone of pleasure at the prospect. “Father, are you certain? My usual duties—”

“Can be managed by others,” the king waved dismissively. “Your talents are clearly better applied to more dynamic pursuits. Besides,” he added with surprising insight, “you’ve been systematically avoiding court functions for years. This provides an official justification that saves both of us the trouble of pretending otherwise.”

Reynard, ever practical, addressed the logistical concerns. “Such a bureau would require headquarters, resources, authority...”

“All arranged!” declared the king. “The east wing of the old Customs House has been allocated for your use.

Formal authority will be granted by royal decree tomorrow morning. As for resources..." he chuckled, "consider it a worthy investment in preventing future incidents involving flaming taverns, stolen crowns, or choreographed Prussians."

And so, with royal proclamation and diplomatic backdrop, the Special Investigations Bureau was born—a unique collaboration between the Vulponian Guard and the royal household, dedicated to protecting Paris from threats too unusual for conventional security forces.

As the reception continued around them, the newly appointed team shared a moment of quiet acknowledgment. Whatever challenges awaited them in their new capacity, they would face them together—fox and princess, guard and royal, united in service to a city that seemed determined to produce ever more creative forms of crisis.

"To the Special Investigations Bureau," murmured Lisa, raising a glass of (thoroughly inspected) champagne. "May our partnership be long and successful."

"And feature regular meal breaks," added Crispin, ever focused on priorities.

Across the reception hall, life returned to diplomatic normalcy. The enhanced strawberries had been secured,

Baron Bushytail was in custody, and the Eastern Forest Collective's bid for recognition would proceed through proper channels—with considerably less psychoactive persuasion.

But as any resident of Paris would attest, tranquility in the capital was merely the brief pause between movements in an ongoing symphony of intrigue. And now, with royal authority, unconventional methods, and a princess with questionable impulse control, the city's more creative threats would face a formidable new adversary.

The Special Investigations Bureau was on the case—heaven help the criminal underworld, foreign conspirators, and anyone foolish enough to believe that unusual crimes would go unnoticed in a city now defended by foxes, royalty, and the occasional improvised Prussian folk dance.

Chapter Four: In Which Strategic Moves are Made on Stone, Unfortunate Consequences Befall the Populace, Our Heroes Investigate a Game That Isn't Playing Fair, and the King Considers Taking Up Knitting

It is a truth universally acknowledged, at least within the slightly mildewed walls of Paris, that anything left unattended in a royal garden for long enough will eventually develop aspirations beyond its station. This principle applied equally to ambitious weeds, socially climbing topiary, and, as it turned out, giant ornamental chess sets.

The Royal Chess Garden, nestled between the meticulously pruned Parterre of Perplexity and the slightly less meticulously pruned Hedge Maze of Existential Doubt, was one of King Loo-Eee-By-Gum's less successful landscaping projects. Conceived during a brief phase where His Majesty believed strategic thinking could be absorbed by osmosis simply by strolling near large representations of game pieces, the garden featured a chessboard the size of a modest ballroom, inlaid with alternating squares of black obsidian and white marble. The pieces themselves were carved from granite, each standing taller than a reasonably sized badger, and weighing approximately as much as the collective guilt of the royal tax collectors.

For years, the set had served primarily as an elaborate perch for pigeons with delusions of grandeur and a backdrop for courtiers attempting discreet assignations, usually foiled when one party

tripped over a pawn and landed in the begonias with a yelp that shattered the carefully constructed romantic atmosphere.

Then, one Tuesday, it moved.

Not all at once, you understand. That would have been too straightforward for Paris, a city that considered subtlety to be shouting slightly less loudly than usual. No, it began with a single white pawn, previously occupying square E2, appearing quite suddenly and with absolutely no witnesses on square E4. The only indication anything had happened was a faint grinding sound, like a mountain clearing its throat, and the discovery by a junior gardener that his prize-winning petunia, formerly residing on E3, had been inexplicably pulverized.

This event was noted, briefly discussed ("Did you move that pawn, Jean-Pierre?" "Me? Sacré bleu, I haven't the strength to move my lunch!"), and then largely ignored. Royal gardens were known for odd occurrences; only last month, a statue of Cupid had apparently developed a wanderlust and turned up trying to hail a cabriolet on the Rue de Rivoli.

Weeks passed. Then, a black pawn slid ponderously from D7 to D5. The grinding noise was slightly louder this time, accompanied by a low vibration that caused several nearby nobles enjoying afternoon tea to spill Earl Grey down their lace fronts. More significantly, that very afternoon, the entire city's supply of artisanal cheese vanished without a trace, plunging Paris into a state of dairy-deprived panic not seen since the Great Brie Famine of '88.

It was at this point, following the mysterious disappearance of all left shoes from the Royal Cobblers' Guild three months later

(coinciding with the white knight hopping from G1 to F3), that the newly formed Special Investigations Bureau was called in.

Director Reynard, flanked by Field Agents Crispin and Flavius, stood surveying the giant chessboard with the weary resignation of a fox who suspected his retirement plans involving a quiet vineyard were receding further with every bizarre incident Paris threw at him. Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, Royal Liaison and Special Operative, leaned against a granite bishop, examining the board with the keen focus she usually reserved for spotting flawed logic in diplomatic treaties or identifying the best escape route from a tedious court function. Her magnificent breastplates glinted in the watery sunlight, causing Crispin to squint.

“So,” Reynard began, adjusting his slightly-too-tight centurion collar, “we have a giant, self-playing chess set.”

“Seems so, sir,” Flavius confirmed, consulting his notes. “Pawn E2 to E4, petunia incident. Pawn D7 to D5, cheese crisis. Knight G1 to F3, unilateral footwear theft.” He looked up, bewildered. “The connections are... tenuous, sir.”

“Tenuous?” scoffed Crispin, rubbing his backside where the armour still chafed despite liberal application of goose fat. “It’s barking mad, is what it is! Chess pieces moving on their own? Bad things happening? Sounds like something the King dreamed up after eating too much pickled herring before bed!”

“Father *has* been unusually interested in the strategic implications of condiment placement lately,” Lisa mused, tapping a gauntleted finger against the granite bishop. “But I doubt even he could orchestrate disappearing cheese on a city-

wide scale. That requires a level of organizational competence rarely seen outside the Squirrel High Council.”

Reynard sighed. “Regardless of *how* it’s happening, the *fact* is that it *is* happening. And correlating with civic misfortune. Our mandate,” he reminded them, gesturing vaguely at the palace looming behind them, “is to investigate unconventional threats.” He paused. “And I think we can safely classify ‘sentient, malevolent giant chess’ under ‘unconventional’.”

Suddenly, with a deep groan that resonated through the soles of their boots (and paws), the black queen slid diagonally from D8 to H4. The movement was slow but inexorable, like bureaucracy enacting a new regulation. It came to rest with a soft *thud*.

Silence descended. The four investigators looked at each other, then instinctively scanned the Paris skyline beyond the garden walls, bracing for... well, they weren’t sure what.

“Anything?” Crispin asked nervously after a minute.

“No explosions,” reported Flavius, ears straining.

“No sudden plagues of frogs?” Lisa inquired. “Always a possibility in this city.”

“Hold on,” Reynard said, sniffing the air. “Do you smell... gingerbread?”

Indeed, a faint but distinct aroma of gingerbread was wafting over the garden wall. It grew stronger, mingling with the scent of roses and damp earth.

Moments later, a frantic palace messenger burst into the garden, wig askew. “Director Reynard! Your Highness! Urgent news

from the city!” he panted. “All the pigeons... they’ve turned into gingerbread!”

The Special Investigations Bureau stared at the messenger, then at the giant chessboard, then back at the messenger.

“Gingerbread,” repeated Lisa flatly. “The pigeons.”

“Oui, Your Highness! Cooing one minute, delicious spiced biscuit the next! There’s chaos! People are trying to catch them! The Cardinal is demanding an explanation! And the bakers are protesting unfair competition!”

Crispin blinked. “Well,” he said, after a moment of profound silence. “That’s... unexpected.”

“Black Queen D8 to H4,” murmured Flavius, scribbling frantically in his notebook. “Result: Spontaneous aviary transmogrification into baked goods.” He shook his head. “The correlations are becoming decidedly less tenuous, sir.”

Reynard rubbed the bridge of his snout. “Right. Sentient chess, civic disasters ranging from missing shoes to biscuit-based pigeons.” He looked at the unmoving granite pieces. “We need to understand the game. Who, or what, is playing? And why does capturing a piece... no, wait. No pieces have been captured yet.”

Lisa’s eyes narrowed, scanning the board with her renowned strategic insight. “No captures, true. But Queen to H4... that’s an aggressive move. Threatening. Almost... checking.”

As if on cue, another grinding sound commenced. A white bishop, C1, began to inch its way towards F4.

“Bishop to F4,” Lisa breathed. “A standard response, blocking the Queen’s line of attack...”

The bishop settled into place. Again, they waited.

This time, the consequence was less dramatic but equally bizarre. Reports filtered back within the hour: every moustache in Paris had spontaneously curled upwards at the tips, regardless of its owner’s prior styling preferences or political affiliations. Dignitaries looked startled, guardsmen looked confused, and several prominent members of the aristocracy resembled startled catfish.

“Okay,” Crispin declared, tugging futilely at his own whiskers which remained resolutely uncurled (a small mercy afforded to foxes, apparently). “This is officially weirder than the time the King declared war on Tuesdays.”

“It’s playing a game,” Reynard stated, his gaze fixed on the obsidian and marble squares. “And the city... the city is somehow the stakes. Or perhaps, the side-effects.”

“But who is the opponent?” wondered Flavius. “Is White playing against Black? Or is the entire board playing against... us?”

Lisa strode towards the edge of the board, peering intently at the granite King piece. “Perhaps the question isn’t who the opponent is, but what the *game* represents.” She tapped the massive piece again. “These aren’t just moves. They’re... events. Queen moves, pigeons bake. Bishop moves, moustaches curl.” She looked back at Reynard, her expression grimly alight with realization. “What happens when a piece is *taken*?”

The question hung heavy in the air, smelling faintly of gingerbread and anxiety. The giant chess pieces stood impassive, silent guardians of a game whose rules involved far more than checkmate, played on a board as large as Paris itself, with consequences that defied logic, probability, and the warranty on municipal pigeon cohesion.

“Right,” Reynard said, straightening his uniform with newfound resolve. “New plan. We don’t just investigate. We intervene.” He eyed the white granite knight. “Crispin, Flavius. Fetch the largest crowbar you can find in the palace stores. Preferably several.”

Crispin’s eyes widened. “You want us to... nudge it, sir?”

“Nudge it? No,” Reynard replied grimly. “I want to see if we can persuade White to offer Black a draw. Before someone decides to castle and accidentally relocates the River Seine.”

Lisa watched them, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Crowbars might work,” she mused. “But against granite pieces this size, powered by... whatever this is... perhaps we need a more nuanced strategy.” She glanced towards the palace kitchens. “Anyone know if the King still has that experimental cheese catapult?”

Reynard’s suggestion of employing crowbars against several tons of magically animated granite was met with a silence usually reserved for when someone accidentally compliments the Cardinal’s taste in vestments.

“Crowbars, sir?” Flavius queried hesitantly, picturing the scene. It mostly involved strained vulpine sinews, a lot of ineffective grunting, and possibly a hernia, followed by the chess piece

remaining stubbornly unmoved or, worse, retaliating by turning the crowbar into a particularly judgemental garden gnome.

“Well, we have to *do* something!” Reynard insisted, though his voice lacked the full conviction of someone entirely confident in the physics of levering sentient masonry. “We can’t just stand here waiting for the next move! What if it decides to promote a pawn and suddenly all the city’s cats start speaking fluent Latin? Think of the theological implications!”

Crispin, meanwhile, was still contemplating the tactical possibilities of dairy-based siege weaponry. “The cheese catapult, Your Highness...” he began thoughtfully. “Would that be Gruyère or Roquefort? Aiming might be tricky with Roquefort, what with the veining affecting the aerodynamics.”

“It was decommissioned,” Lisa admitted with a sigh, shelving the idea. “After Father attempted to launch a wheel of Brie at the Prussian ambassador during trade negotiations. Something about ‘softening his stance.’ Diplomacy has been rather strained since.” She turned her attention back to the board, her brow furrowed. “Crowbars seem... unsubtle. And likely futile. This isn’t mere mechanics; it feels like... inherent magic. Or possibly extremely advanced clockwork designed by someone with a very peculiar sense of humour.”

Before they could debate the merits of brute force versus precision engineering further, the familiar, gut-rumbling groan echoed across the garden once more. All eyes snapped to the board. This time, it was a black rook, previously lurking on A8, which began a stately, horizontal slide across the obsidian squares. It moved with the ponderous inevitability of tax season, finally settling onto D8.

Rook A8 to D8. A defensive move, perhaps? Or just rearranging the furniture? The Bureau held its collective breath, scanning the Paris environs for the next inevitable absurdity.

Minutes ticked by. The gingerbread pigeons cooed biscuity sounds from the eaves of the palace. Moustachioed guardsmen peered suspiciously at their own upper lips. Nothing.

“False alarm?” suggested Crispin hopefully. “Maybe it just felt like stretching its crenellations?”

“Unlikely,” Lisa murmured, eyes narrowed on the rook. “These moves seem deliberate. Purposeful.”

Just then, the same frantic messenger from before sprinted back into the garden, looking even more frazzled, if such a thing were possible. He tripped over a decorative urn, performed an involuntary pirouette, and collapsed in a heap at Reynard’s feet.

“Director!” he gasped, spitting out gravel and possibly a small beetle. “The... the goats!”

Reynard helped the messenger up, brushing dust off his livery. “What about the goats, man? Speak clearly.”

“They’re... they’re chocolate!” the messenger wailed. “Solid milk chocolate! Every last one! From the prize-winning Alpine herd at the Jardin du Luxembourg to old Madame Dubois’s cantankerous Billy on Rue Crémieux! One minute they were bleating and chewing things they shouldn’t, the next... *poof!* Chocolate!” He wrung his hands. “The children are delighted, the goatherds are demanding compensation, and the Swiss ambassador has lodged a formal complaint about unfair confectionery competition!”

Flavius dutifully noted: “Rook A8 to D8. Result: Caprine-to-confectionery conversion.” He looked up, his expression one of deep scientific bewilderment. “There’s no logical pattern, sir! Cheese, shoes, pigeons, moustaches, goats... It’s like the universe is rummaging through its pockets for spare change and keeps pulling out random plagues!”

“Evidence,” Reynard said firmly, trying to impose order on the encroaching chaos. “We need tangible evidence. Examine the pieces. Search the garden. Interview the... the owners of the chocolate goats.” He sighed. “Flavius, see if the Royal Library has any records pertaining to the construction of this garden or any known enchantments associated with giant chess sets. Look under ‘Esoteric Landscaping’ or possibly ‘Things The King Commissioned While Wearing The Hat of Wisdom’.”

“Crispin,” Reynard continued, “You have a way with... shall we say... unofficial sources. See what the pigeons on the street are saying. The non-gingerbread ones, obviously.”

“Talk to pigeons, sir?” Crispin looked dubious. “They mostly just gossip about statues and complain about the lack of quality crumbs.”

“Just do it,” Reynard ordered. “And Lisa... Your Highness... perhaps your unique insights...?”

Lisa was already kneeling beside the black rook that had just moved, running a gauntleted hand over the cool granite. “There are markings here,” she said softly, tracing faint lines barely visible against the dark stone. “Not chisel marks. Almost like... circuitry? Or runes?” She squinted. “They seem to pulse with a very faint energy.”

She stood up, brushing stone dust from her gauntlet. “Let’s examine the base of the board itself. Perhaps the control mechanism, whatever it is, lies beneath.”

Together, they began a more thorough examination. Reynard and Lisa circled the perimeter of the massive board, looking for seams, access panels, or anything that suggested the inlaid squares were anything other than solid stone. Crispin grumbled his way off towards the palace gates, presumably to interrogate the local birdlife, while Flavius hurried towards the library, hoping the section on magical board games hadn’t been borrowed by the King for ‘light reading’.

As Reynard ran his paw over the join between a marble square and the surrounding garden path, he felt a slight vibration under the surface, a low thrumming like a distant, deeply buried machine. “There’s something down there,” he confirmed Lisa’s suspicion. “Powering this... game.”

Suddenly, Lisa stopped, pointing towards the centre of the board. “Look! The square the rook just vacated! A8!”

On the now-empty obsidian square, a faint symbol glowed with a soft, internal light before fading away. It looked vaguely like a stylized goat’s head, but made of cocoa beans.

“It leaves a residual... signature,” Flavius breathed, having returned momentarily from his library quest (finding only a treatise on the proper way to polish royal silverware). “Each move corresponds to an event, and the square retains a trace of that event?”

“Or perhaps,” Lisa mused, “the square *causes* the event? A form of sympathetic magic linked across the city?”

Their evidence gathering was interrupted by a commotion from the direction Crispin had taken. The fox reappeared, looking flustered and slightly pecked-at.

“Right, sir,” he reported, dusting feathers off his armour. “The pigeons were singularly unhelpful. Mostly concerned about the sudden influx of gingerbread interlopers stealing the best roosting spots. But! One particularly disreputable-looking wood pigeon mentioned something about ‘the old groundskeeper’s folly’ and ‘the heart stone under the mad king’s chair’.”

“The mad king?” Reynard frowned. “King Loo-Eee isn’t mad. Eccentric, easily distracted, prone to declaring war on inanimate objects, perhaps. But not mad.”

“Not *our* King, sir,” Crispin clarified. “King Dagobert the Deranged. Built the original palace foundations centuries ago. Bit of a chess fanatic, apparently. Liked his games... unpredictable.”

Before Reynard could process this new historical wrinkle, another grinding sound started – slow, ominous. A white pawn on B2 began to creep forward.

Pawn B2 to B4.

The team braced themselves. What now? Would spoons turn into sausages? Would all the city’s cats suddenly develop a penchant for opera?

The answer, when it came via the now almost permanently attached messenger, was perhaps the most alarming yet.

“Director! Your Highness!” the messenger shrieked, skidding to a halt. “The King! He’s... he’s knitting! A giant tea cosy! And he says he can’t stop!”

Interlude: Of Royal Purls and Procurements

While the Special Investigations Bureau grappled with sentient granite and confectionery livestock in the gardens, a different kind of crisis was unfolding within the silk-lined walls of the royal apartments.

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum sat upon his favourite chaise longue (recently reupholstered in a pattern best described as ‘aggressively floral’), not contemplating matters of state, nor devising new and baffling forms of interpretive diplomacy, but knitting. Knitting with a speed and intensity that would make a professional lacemaker weep with envy and possibly develop repetitive strain injury just from watching.

His project, as reported, was a tea cosy. However, given the King’s somewhat loose grasp on scale (this was, after all, the man who commissioned a life-sized marzipan replica of his favourite horse, only to be surprised when it didn’t fit in the dining hall), the tea cosy was rapidly assuming dimensions that suggested it was intended for a teapot capable of hydrating a small army. Or possibly hiding one.

Click-clack-purl-click-clack-purl. The sound echoed through the otherwise quiet room, a relentless rhythm section to the symphony of royal domesticity.

Queen Mary-Anne Twinset watched him from her needlepoint frame across the room. Mary-Anne was a woman whose calm exterior belied a will forged in the fires of dealing with decades of royal eccentricity. She possessed a pragmatic air, an impressive collection of matching knitwear sets for every conceivable occasion (hence the name, bestowed by court wags but worn with quiet pride), and an almost supernatural ability to locate misplaced royal decrees amidst piles of palace clutter.

“More wool, darling?” she asked, her voice calm and practical, betraying none of the rising logistical alarm she felt as she surveyed the rapidly diminishing mountain of yarn beside the King’s chaise longue.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, my dear! Definitely more wool!” the King replied distractedly, not looking up from his work. His brow was furrowed in concentration, his tongue poking slightly out from the corner of his mouth. “This pattern calls for... well, rather a lot of it. Trying a new cable stitch here, tricky but satisfying! Must keep the tension even, you know. Crucial for a quality cosy!”

Queen Mary-Anne Twinset exchanged a glance with the Royal Chamberlain, who hovered nervously by the doorway, clutching a ledger. The Chamberlain, a thin man whose primary job qualification seemed to be an ability to look perpetually apologetic, cleared his throat.

“Your Majesties,” he began timidly, “regarding the wool situation... We have depleted the palace’s entire reserve. Including the emergency supply kept for darning the royal socks and the skeins Her Majesty had earmarked for that commemorative coronation waistcoat.”

Queen Mary-Anne Twinset sighed internally. That waistcoat had featured a particularly challenging intarsia pattern of the royal crest.

“Furthermore,” the Chamberlain continued, his voice dropping to a near whisper, “the Royal Purveyor of Yarns reports that acquiring the quantity His Majesty requires at this speed is proving... challenging. Apparently, there is a national shortage of sheep willing to be sheared outside the official shearing season, sire. They cite union rules.”

Snap.

One of the King’s knitting needles fractured clean in two, unable to withstand the sheer velocity of his purling. He blinked, looked down at the broken halves, and sighed.

“Blast! Third pair this morning!” He tossed the pieces onto a growing pile beside him – a small hillock of splintered wood and bent metal that attested to the unnatural forces at play.

“Chamberlain, fetch another set, would you? The reinforced rosewood ones this time. And see about that wool! Can’t have the cosy languishing, can we? Tea gets cold frightfully quickly without adequate insulation!”

The Chamberlain bowed, looking slightly green. “At once, Your Majesty. I shall dispatch riders to scour the neighbouring provinces. Perhaps the nuns at the Convent of Perpetual Knitting have a surplus...” He backed out of the room, already composing urgent missives about emergency fleece procurement.

Queen Mary-Anne Twinset picked up her needlepoint again, trying to focus on a particularly intricate crown motif. The

King's compulsive knitting, triggered by that wretched chess game, was becoming a logistical nightmare. First the pigeons, then the goats, now a potential wool famine and a veritable graveyard of knitting needles. She wondered vaguely what would happen if he ran out of wool entirely. Would the spell break? Or would he simply start unravelling the Aubusson carpets?

Click-clack-purl-click-clack-purl. The relentless sound continued, a maddening counterpoint to the Queen's carefully maintained composure. She took a slow, deep breath and selected a new shade of gold thread. It was going to be a long afternoon. And she sincerely hoped Reynard and her daughter were having better luck in the garden. Preferably before the King decided the giant tea cosy needed a matching throw rug for the entire palace east wing.

The image of King Loo-Eee-By-Gum frantically knitting a tea cosy large enough to comfortably house a family of badgers was troubling enough, but Paris, never content with just one flavour of weirdness when a whole smorgasbord was available, was about to serve up the main course.

Back in the Royal Chess Garden, the Special Investigations Bureau was attempting to formulate a plan that didn't involve either crowbars or airborne dairy products. Lisa was closely examining the pulsing runes on the granite pieces, Reynard was trying to reconcile Crispin's pigeon-derived intel about King Dagobert the Deranged with known historical records (which mostly described Dagobert as 'fond of turnips' and 'prone to declaring Thursdays illegal'), and Flavius was attempting to

sketch the fading goat symbol on square A8 before it disappeared entirely.

It was then that the most dramatic move to date occurred.

With a sound like mountains comparing chiropractor bills, the white Bishop currently residing on F4 lunged diagonally forward, capturing the black pawn stationed on D5. There was a sharp *crack* that echoed across the garden, louder than any previous sound, and a distinct puff of obsidian dust arose from square D5 as the granite pawn simply... ceased to be. It wasn't knocked over; it vanished, leaving only a faint scent of ozone and shattered cheese ambitions (given that the pawn's previous move had coincided with the Great Cheese Disappearance).

Bishop takes Pawn. The first capture of the game.

The four investigators froze, anticipating the next wave of urban absurdity. Chocolate goats? Knitting monarchs? What could possibly top that?

The answer arrived, not via the increasingly exhausted messenger, but via the frantic tolling of every bell in Paris, including several ornamental ones that hadn't actually worked in centuries. This was followed by screams, shouts, and the unmistakable sound of large crowds running in multiple directions at once, a noise usually associated with free wine distribution or the sighting of a tax collector attempting to explain a new levy.

“That,” declared Crispin, ears flat against his skull, “does not sound like spontaneously curling moustaches.”

Reynard was already moving. “Report! What’s happening?” he yelled at a guardsman sprinting past the garden gate, looking pale.

The guardsman skidded to a halt, eyes wide with disbelief. “Place de Grève, Centurion! The Guillotine! It’s... it’s working backwards!”

“Backwards?” echoed Flavius, dropping his sketchbook. “How can a guillotine work backwards? Does the blade go up instead of down?”

“Worse!” the guardsman stammered. “Much worse! It’s... reattaching heads! People are being un-beheaded!”

Silence fell upon the Royal Chess Garden, thick and heavy as Queen Mary-Anne Twinset’s emergency fruitcake.

“Un-beheaded,” Lisa repeated slowly, the colour draining slightly from her face despite her usual unflappability. “As in, the recently... separated... are becoming... re-integrated?”

“Exactly, Your Highness! Heads rolling back to bodies, bodies sitting up, people getting off the scaffold looking confused and asking what year it is! Claude the Cutpurse, Jaques the Knave, even Mad Marguerite who poisoned three husbands with arsenic-laced éclairs! They’re all back! And,” the guardsman added, gulping, “they don’t look pleased about the interruption to their eternal rest!”

Reynard stared at the white bishop standing triumphantly on D5, the square where the black pawn had been only moments before. Bishop takes Pawn. A piece removed from the board. And in the city... pieces were being *returned*.

The consequences began to cascade almost immediately. Reports flooded the palace. Reanimated thieves instantly tried to pick the pockets of the gawking crowd. Mad Marguerite was reportedly last seen heading towards the nearest patisserie with a look of grim determination. Jaques the Knave, never one to miss an opportunity, was attempting to organise the newly re-corporealised criminals into some sort of union, demanding back pay and better afterlife conditions.

The city guard was in chaos. How do you arrest someone who is officially, legally, and very recently, deceased? What charge do you level against a reattached head for complaining about the quality of stitching? Does double jeopardy apply if your first conviction was briefly interrupted by decapitation?

Lawyers across Paris began rubbing their hands together with glee, anticipating decades of lucrative litigation. Families who had inherited property from executed relatives suddenly found themselves facing awkward conversations with annoyed, newly-un-deceased great-uncles demanding their estates back.

“This,” Reynard stated, his voice dangerously quiet, “has escalated. Significantly.”

“Bishop takes Pawn,” Lisa murmured, her strategic mind racing. “Capture removes a piece. Reversal of execution adds one. It’s maintaining some sort of... existential balance?”

“Balance?” Crispin yelled. “We’ve got un-dead criminals wandering the streets demanding union rights, and you call it balance? Sir, with all due respect, the city is going to Hades in a handcart, possibly one driven by a reanimated horse-thief!”

“The game is escalating,” Reynard agreed, ignoring Crispin’s outburst. “Captures are now occurring. If this continues...” He didn’t need to finish the sentence. Checkmate, in this context, didn’t bear thinking about. Would the entire city vanish? Or would everyone simultaneously turn into sentient cheese?

“King Dagobert the Deranged,” Lisa said suddenly, turning to Crispin. “The pigeon mentioned a ‘heart stone under the mad king’s chair’. Where would that be?”

Crispin frowned, thinking back. “The pigeon wasn’t specific, Your Highness. Sounded like typical cryptic bird-talk. But Dagobert’s throne room... the original one... it’s deep beneath the palace, isn’t it? Part of the old foundations the King keeps meaning to renovate but never gets around to because he gets distracted by competitive topiary?”

Reynard nodded slowly. “The oldest part of the palace. Seldom used. That’s where we need to look.” He turned to his team, the urgency clear in his voice. “Forget the crowbars for now. Flavius, Crispin, secure climbing ropes, lanterns, and perhaps something sturdy to hit potentially reanimated medieval guards with. Lisa, Your Highness, your knowledge of subterranean Paris might be invaluable.”

Lisa’s eyes glinted with a familiar spark of adventurous determination. “Subterranean investigations? Excellent. Far less chance of encountering tedious courtiers.” She adjusted her gauntlets. “Lead the way, Centurion. Let’s find Dagobert’s heart stone. Before this chess game decides to promote a pawn and turns the Seine into soup.”

The giant granite pieces stood silent in the garden, the captured pawn gone, the victorious bishop gleaming white. The game continued, oblivious to the chaos unfolding beyond the garden walls, waiting for the next move, the next capture, the next descent into delightful, terrifying absurdity. And deep beneath the palace, in foundations laid by a mad king, the Bureau headed towards a potential endgame of their own.

The descent into the older foundations of the palace was less a journey into history and more an exercise in advanced cobweb navigation and speculative archaeology. Dust motes the size of small rodents danced in the beams of their lanterns, illuminating stonework that hadn't seen sunlight since King Dagobert the Deranged decided that windows were 'too mainstream'. The air hung thick with the scent of centuries-old damp, forgotten secrets, and what Crispin insisted was the ghost of a particularly judgmental cheese.

"Are we sure this is the right way?" Flavius asked nervously, wiping a curtain of spider silk from his face only to walk into another one. "It feels less like ancient royal foundations and more like the inside of a forgotten sock drawer."

"Princess Lisa's sense of direction in subterranean environments is legendary," Reynard reminded him, though privately he was navigating mostly by the echoing complaints from Crispin about the state of his armour's polish.

"Indeed," Lisa confirmed, deftly sidestepping a puddle of primordial ooze that bubbled suggestively. "I once navigated the Paris catacombs from Notre Dame to Montmartre using only the ambient grumbling of the city's plumbing and a

particularly stubborn echo. This is comparatively straightforward.”

After what felt like several geological epochs, they emerged into a vast, vaulted chamber. In the centre, upon a dais carved with unsettlingly geometric patterns, sat a throne. It wasn’t grand or gilded like King Loo-Eee-By-Gum’s current model; this throne was hewn from rough, dark stone, scarred and imposing, looking less like a seat of power and more like something you’d use to discipline unruly mountains.

And embedded directly beneath the seat, pulsing with a faint, rhythmic light that matched the thrumming they’d felt in the garden above, was the ‘heart stone’. Except it wasn’t a stone.

It was, unmistakably, a colossal, fossilized turnip.

“A turnip,” Crispin breathed, awe mixing with profound confusion. “King Dagobert’s heart stone... is a giant, glowing turnip.”

“Explains his documented fondness for them,” Flavius muttered, scribbling in his notes. “Source of power: Petrified root vegetable. Hypothesis: Questionable royal diet leads to magical anomalies.”

The turnip pulsed again, and they could almost *feel* a ripple pass through the ancient stones around them. Lisa stepped forward cautiously, her eyes scanning the chamber. Carved into the walls, barely visible under layers of grime, were intricate diagrams that looked suspiciously like chess notation mixed with what might have been advanced turnip cultivation techniques.

“He linked it,” Lisa realised aloud. “Dagobert the Deranged didn’t just play chess. He used this... turnip... to link the game in the garden to the city itself. To the *laws* of the city. Probability. Causality. Maybe even physics.”

“But *why*?” Reynard demanded, staring at the ludicrous glowing vegetable.

“Perhaps he found governing tedious,” Lisa speculated. “Maybe he thought letting a chess game randomly introduce chaos would keep things interesting. Or maybe,” she added, peering at a particularly complex diagram involving a rook and what looked like a recipe for turnip soufflé, “he was just barking mad.”

As she spoke, the turnip pulsed brightly. Simultaneously, they heard a distant, faint *clack* echo down from the gardens above. Another move was being made.

“We have to stop it!” Flavius urged. “Before something else happens! What if it decides Knight takes Bishop and all the city’s artists suddenly become accountants?”

“Smashing the turnip seems unwise,” Reynard mused, eyeing the pulsating vegetable warily. “Given its apparent connection to reality, the side effects could be... extensive.”

“Perhaps we can reason with it?” suggested Flavius hopefully.

Crispin snorted. “Reason with a giant magical turnip that plays chess? We’d have better luck negotiating with the King’s knitting needles.”

Lisa, however, wasn't looking at the turnip. She was looking at the throne. An idea, utterly absurd yet perfectly suited to the situation, sparked in her eyes.

"We can't stop the game," she said slowly. "And we can't reason with it. But maybe... maybe we can *beat* it. Or at least, confuse it." She strode towards the throne. "Dagobert linked the game to the city. What if we link *another* game?"

Before Reynard could ask what she meant, Lisa reached into a pouch at her belt – the one she usually kept emergency lock picks and occasionally a small, flat bottle of something fortifying in – and pulled out a deck of cards. Not just any cards. These were well-worn, slightly sticky cards used for a game popular in the less reputable taverns of Paris: Exploding Kittens. (Historically inaccurate, of course, but historical accuracy had clearly taken a holiday some time around the pigeon-to-gingerbread incident).

"Right, Turnip," Lisa announced, climbing onto the dais and slamming the deck of cards down on the ancient stone throne, directly above the pulsing light. "You want to play games that mess with reality? Let's see how you handle a Nope card followed by a Tactical Chinchilla!"

The effect was instantaneous and profoundly silly. The fossilized turnip seemed to... hesitate. The steady pulse flickered, becoming erratic, like a grandfather clock suddenly trying to play jazz. The faint grinding sound from the garden above stuttered and stopped.

A wave of... anti-weirdness... seemed to wash back through the foundations. They heard a distant chorus of surprised

bleating (as chocolate goats presumably reverted to being merely goats), the sound of flapping (as gingerbread pigeons became ordinary, unappetizing pigeons again), and a collective sigh of relief from thousands of Parisians whose moustaches suddenly uncurled. Up in the royal apartments, King Loo-Eee-By-Gum blinked, looked down at the half-finished giant tea cosy in his lap, and wondered why on earth he was knitting. The compulsion vanished, leaving only mild confusion and a slight ache in his wrists. (The un-beheaded, however, remained resolutely corporeal, presenting a whole new set of bureaucratic and theological headaches for the city to deal with later).

In the throne room, the turnip's glow faded to a dull, non-magical luminescence, like a root vegetable deeply regretting its life choices. The Exploding Kittens cards lay scattered innocently on the throne.

"Did... did that actually work?" Flavius asked, stunned.

Lisa shrugged, retrieving her cards with a satisfied air.

"Apparently, ancient reality-bending turnip magic has a low tolerance for strategic deployment of Portable Cheetah Butts. It seems Dagobert never programmed a defence against feline absurdity."

Reynard stared from the now quiescent turnip to the Princess. "You just short-circuited ancient, city-altering magic... with a card game?"

"Never underestimate the power of introducing a completely incompatible operating system," Lisa replied cheerfully.

"Besides, it was either that or trying to teach it Pat-a-Cake."

Crispin poked the turnip cautiously with his sword hilt. It remained stubbornly inert. “So... it’s over? No more magical chess moves?”

“For now, it seems,” Reynard confirmed, relief washing over him, quickly followed by the dawning horror of the paperwork this incident would generate. “The link is... scrambled.”

They made their way back up to the surface, blinking in the now-ordinary afternoon light. The giant chess pieces stood frozen mid-game in the garden, looking merely like oversized, slightly eccentric garden ornaments once more. The scent of gingerbread was gone, replaced by the usual Parisian aromas of river water, baking bread, and existential ennui.

The Special Investigations Bureau gathered by the edge of the silent board. The crisis, in its most acute and bizarre forms, appeared to be over. Paris was safe from spontaneous confectionery conversion and reverse decapitation, though it now had a surplus of confused ex-criminals and a King with a half-finished tea cosy the size of a small house.

“Well,” Crispin said, stretching his back now that the immediate threat of reality unravelling had subsided. “Another day, another existential threat averted. Anyone else fancy a biscuit? I suddenly have a craving.”

“I believe,” Reynard said dryly, “that after today, biscuits are officially off the menu.” He looked at his team – the earnest young fox, the pragmatic older one, and the princess who fought reality with card games. “Good work, all of you.”

Lisa smiled, tucking her cards away. “All in a day’s work for the Special Investigations Bureau.” She glanced towards the

palace, where Queen Mary-Anne Twinset was likely dealing with the aftermath of the knitting frenzy. “Though I suspect explaining the giant turnip in the basement might require some... creative reporting.”

As they walked away from the now-silent chessboard, leaving it to the pigeons (the regular, feathered kind) and the bewildered gardeners, Paris returned to its usual state of chaotic normality. The game was over, stopped not by checkmate, but by sheer, unadulterated absurdity. And somewhere, deep beneath the palace, a giant fossilised turnip sat in the dark, possibly contemplating the unfairness of encountering weaponised kittens in a game of cosmic chess.

Chapter Five: In Which Introductions Are Made, Cigarettes Shouldn't Exist, Background Radiation of Attraction Is Detected, Vegetables Prove Decisive, and Camels Cause Bureaucratic Headaches

The establishment called itself 'Le Coq Hardi' (The Plucky Rooster), a name chosen less for its association with bravery and more because the original owner had lost a bet involving poultry and poor life choices. Inside, the air hung thick with the ghosts of spilled wine, forgotten ambitions, and the faint, unsettling aroma of existential dread that often permeates Parisian bars after lunchtime. Shadows clung to the corners like nervous debutantes, occasionally twitching when a patron laughed too loudly, which wasn't often.

Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude occupied a small table, strategically positioned with excellent lines of sight to all exits and minimal exposure to potential buffoonery. She was elegance personified, if elegance occasionally involved exhaling smoke from a cigarette brand that Time, if consulted, would vehemently deny had been invented yet. Her "St Moretitz" glowed defiantly, its smoke curling into shapes that suspiciously resembled sarcastic commentary on the bar's decor. Whether she was *in* her preferred suit of armour was debatable; one suspected that even in civilian attire, Lisa carried the *essence* of armour plating about her person, a sort of metaphysical defence against fools and poorly aimed innuendo. She sipped delicately at a glass containing something clear and smelling faintly of earthy desperation – Turnip Vodka, her own

peculiar vice. Lesser mortals shuffled past, carefully avoiding eye contact, sensing perhaps that her tolerance for inanity was currently operating at dangerously low levels.

Into this carefully curated zone of prickly solitude strode General Hercule de Pamplémoussé. He didn't just walk; he *processed*, each step punctuated by a slight, almost apologetic, limp that somehow only added to his air of raffish distinction. His largely grey hair caught the flickering gaslight like tarnished silver, and his uniform, while impeccable, hinted that it had seen things best left undiscussed, possibly involving surprised llamas or strategic retreats through unusually dense blancmange. The air itself seemed to rearrange itself politely to let him pass.

He stopped before Lisa's table, executing a bow that was flamboyant yet precise, managing to suggest both courtly manners and the distinct possibility he might suddenly produce a bouquet of flowers from his epaulettes.

"Mademoiselle," his voice was smooth, like expensive brandy poured over velvet gravel. "Forgive the intrusion into your splendid isolation, but the ambient radiation of sheer force of personality emanating from this table is frankly interfering with my attempts to calculate the precise trajectory of that fly buzzing near the pickled onions." He gestured vaguely towards the bar. "Might a humble General, recently victorious over a particularly stubborn bout of ennui, offer to replenish your... fascinating beverage?"

Lisa raised an eyebrow, a manoeuvre that on her could convey anything from mild curiosity to the imminent deployment of deadly force. Her three-dimensional thinking instantly mapped

his approach, calculated the sincerity-to-flamboyance ratio (approximately 4:7, with a margin of error involving potential hidden charm), and cross-referenced his facial structure against known archetypes of 'Roguishly Handsome Older Men Who Might Be Trouble'. The results were inconclusive but undeniably intriguing.

"General Pamplemoussé, I presume?" she replied, her voice cool but not entirely dismissive. She didn't tolerate fools, but competence, even flamboyant competence, earned a degree of attention. Besides, his eyes held a spark of genuine intelligence, a rare commodity in her experience.

"The very same," he confirmed, pulling up a chair without waiting for explicit permission, a gamble that paid off. "And you, unless my military intelligence deceives me, which it rarely does except on Thursdays and when dealing with tactical pigeons, are the Princess Lisa."

"I permit myself to be called such," Lisa allowed, taking another drag from her impossible cigarette. "Though the precise legal standing involves footnotes and several conflicting royal decrees. My lineage is... complex."

"Ah, complexity!" The General beamed, settling in. "The spice of life! Far preferable to the dreary certainty of uncomplicated parentage. Tell me, Princess, does your unique perspective grant you insight into matters mundane? For instance," he leaned forward conspiratorially, "do you believe ferrets experience ennui, or is it merely indigestion?"

Lisa found herself momentarily thrown. It wasn't the usual tedious flattery or clumsy proposition. It was... odd. She

considered the question, her chess-master mind analysing ferret behaviour patterns recalled from her brief veterinary ambitions. "Ennui seems unlikely," she stated after a pause. "Their existential angst generally manifests as a sudden, inexplicable desire to steal socks."

The General roared with laughter, a sound that startled the shadows and made a nearby bottle of cheap wine vibrate nervously. "Magnificent! A strategic mind indeed! Another turnip vodka, Princess?"

Lisa found herself nodding, a strange warmth spreading through her – entirely unrelated, she told herself sternly, to the vodka or the way the General's eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. Her wariness was still present, a vigilant guard pacing the battlements of her heart, but there was also... curiosity. And perhaps, just perhaps, the faintest stirring of that other, notoriously inconvenient impulse she tried so hard to keep locked away.

The hours dissolved like sugar cubes in hot tea, or perhaps more accurately, like resolutions in the face of expertly applied charm and turnip vodka. Merriment, a notoriously fickle entity, decided to pull up a chair at their table and make itself comfortable. Laughter bounced off the smoke-stained ceiling – Lisa's surprisingly hearty, the General's a rich baritone that seemed capable of charming birds out of trees (or possibly convincing trees to take up ballroom dancing).

The General, clearly subscribing to the 'go big or go home' school of smoking, produced cigars of frankly baffling proportions. They resembled small zeppelins wrapped in tobacco leaf, emitting plumes of fragrant smoke that threatened

to form their own microclimate around the table. Lisa, unfazed, countered with the steady, defiant glow of her St Moretitz, the two smoke sources engaging in a silent, atmospheric battle for dominance above their heads.

Conversation veered wildly, from the strategic weaknesses of the common garden gnome ("hopelessly exposed flanks," opined the General) to Lisa's theory on synchronised swimming for ferrets ("logistically challenging, but aesthetically promising"). They discovered a shared appreciation for paradox, well-polished armour (functional or metaphorical), and the precise moment when absurdity tips over into sublime genius.

Gradually, the lesser mortals who populated Le Coq Hardi began to trickle out, defeated by the lateness of the hour or perhaps the sheer concentration of personality radiating from the corner table. Soon, only Lisa, the General, and the lingering scent of improbable cigars remained, aside from the proprietor.

The owner, a man named Antoine who bore an uncanny resemblance to a weasel who'd misplaced his life savings and blamed the world for it, began pointedly polishing glasses with the aggressive finality of someone wishing his patrons would spontaneously combust. He stacked chairs onto tables with unnecessary clatter, sighed heavily enough to stir the dust motes, and eventually sidled towards them, radiating impatience.

"Ahem," Antoine began, his voice thin and reedy. "Closing time, monsieur, mademoiselle. Unless you plan on purchasing the entire establishment?" It was intended as sarcasm, but his weaselly eyes held a flicker of avaricious hope.

Lisa didn't even turn her head. She simply shifted her gaze slightly, fixing Antoine with those piercing blue eyes. It wasn't a glare, precisely. It was more of a *look*. A look that carried the weight of questionable royal lineage, mastery of three-dimensional thought, significant upper body strength, and the serene confidence of someone who regularly wears armour in public. It was a look that hinted at an intimate understanding of leverage, both physical and metaphysical.

Antoine the Weasel visibly wilted. The colour drained from his face. He suddenly found the floor tiles intensely fascinating. "Or... or take your time," he stammered, backing away slowly. "No rush. Absolutely none. I'll just... be over here. Counting the... the dust bunnies." He retreated behind the bar, looking nervously at the Princess as if expecting her to unleash laser beams or perhaps summon a badger cavalry.

The bar fell quiet again, save for the faint hum of the gaslights and the distant sounds of Paris preparing for another night. The General watched the exchange with an appreciative smirk. He leaned closer across the table, the scent of expensive cologne, cigar smoke, and sheer audacity enveloping Lisa. The playful glint in his eyes sharpened into something more direct, more intense.

He lowered his voice to a whisper, meant only for her ear. "Princess," he began, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur that sent an unexpected shiver down her spine, despite its theoretical armour plating. "You intrigue me more than a locked diplomatic pouch or a strategically vital, yet entirely unguarded, cream bun factory."

He paused, his grey eyes locking with hers. "I find myself overcome with a sudden, perhaps reckless, desire for your continued company. To that end... I happen to possess a small villa. Nothing ostentatious, you understand, just a little place to escape the crushing ennui of Paris. It's on the Normandy coast. At a charming little resort known as 'Le Toucan'."

Lisa remained still, absorbing the words, her mind racing faster than a spooked ferret. Le Toucan. She knew of it – a place where fortunes were won and lost with alarming speed, and where respectability often took a brief holiday.

The General leaned even closer, his whisper barely audible above the nervous polishing sounds Antoine was making behind the bar. "And as fate, or perhaps merely excellent forward planning, would have it... I have a coach and horses waiting just outside. Right now."

He drew back slightly, letting the implication hang in the air. "Forget tedious schedules and the tyranny of the calendar. I propose an extended weekend. Commencing immediately – why wait for Friday when Wednesday night holds so much promise? – and concluding... well, let's be flexible. Sometime next Tuesday? Perhaps later, depending on the strategic situation... and the quality of the local seafood."

He held her gaze, a question hanging in the air, bold and utterly improper. An invitation to cast aside caution, propriety, and the known laws of sensible weekend planning, and step into a waiting coach bound for the coast, chaos, and his company.

Lisa blinked. Her logical mind, the one that saw chess moves ten steps ahead and could calculate the structural integrity of

palace ceilings, immediately flagged the proposition as Highly Irregular. Impulsive. Potentially Disastrous. The General was charming, yes, intelligent, certainly, sexy, undeniably... but this was ridiculously fast. Her wariness, honed by past heartbreaks – men who had indeed died for her, sometimes literally, sometimes just metaphorically in terms of their careers or dignity – screamed warnings. *Danger! Unforeseen Complications Ahead! High Probability of Eventual Disappointment!*

And yet...

Another part of her, the part that craved connection, the part that was, frankly, *ridiculously sex mad* and starved for affection despite her prickly exterior, was vibrating with a resonant frequency. The sheer, glorious absurdity of it! A weekend starting on a Wednesday? Lasting nearly a week? A coach waiting *now*? It appealed to her disdain for convention, her robust spirit that occasionally enjoyed throwing caution to the wind (preferably while wearing sturdy gauntlets). He hadn't treated her like a fragile flower or a political pawn; he'd engaged her mind, matched her wit, and now offered... adventure. With him. The slight limp, the grey hair, the undeniable confidence... it was a potent combination.

She pictured the villa, the coast, the gambling dens of Le Toucan. She pictured the General, his laughter, the intensity in his eyes. Her internal chess board lit up, pieces moving at lightning speed. Risk analysis versus desire. Caution versus impulse. The potential for exquisite pleasure warring with the near certainty of future complications.

The internal battle raged for a moment longer, a silent, high-speed chess game played out behind Lisa's piercing blue eyes. Caution deployed a defensive Sicilian, Desire countered with a reckless King's Gambit. Then, with the decisiveness that had made her a chess grandmaster at seven, Lisa mentally swept the cautious pieces from the board.

She looked directly at the General, a flicker of something unreadable – excitement? Trepidation? Both? – in her gaze. She gave a single, sharp nod. "Very well, General. Le Toucan it is. An extended weekend commencing retroactively has a certain... tactical appeal."

Then, the practical princess resurfaced, overriding the impulsive adventurer. A frown creased her brow. "However," she stated, extinguishing her St Moretitz with unnecessary force in the small metal tray, "This leaves absolutely no time to pack. I have *nothing* suitable. No changes of armour, no appropriate frocks, not even my spare set of travelling gauntlets. It's highly inconvenient." She sounded genuinely put out, as if the lack of luggage was a far greater hurdle than the sheer impropriety of the entire escapade.

The General chuckled, a low, appreciative sound. "My dear Princess, consider it part of the adventure. Besides," he added with a twinkle, "Le Toucan offers... shopping opportunities. And I assure you, my villa is well-stocked with essentials. Silks, weaponry, emergency turnip vodka – the basics."

He rose smoothly, offering her his arm. Lisa hesitated for only a heartbeat before taking it. There was a brief, silent exchange as they passed the bar – the General gave Antoine a dismissive nod, while Lisa offered the weasel-like proprietor another dose

of that unnerving, armour-plated gaze that promised swift retribution should he gossip. Antoine swallowed hard and became intensely interested in polishing a spot that was already gleaming suspiciously.

Outside, the Paris night had decided to cooperate. The air was surprisingly warm for the season, soft and carrying the heavy, sweet perfume of magnolia blossoms from a nearby garden – a scent that seemed entirely too romantic for a city usually preoccupied with existential angst and aggressive pigeons. A handsome, sturdy carriage stood waiting, gleaming darkly, the horses shifting patiently, plumes nodding gently. A liveried driver snapped to attention as they approached.

The General handed her into the carriage with practiced ease. The interior was plush velvet, surprisingly comfortable, smelling faintly of old leather and expensive cologne. As the General settled beside her and gave the driver a curt instruction, the carriage lurched forward, wheels clattering briefly on the cobblestones before settling into a smooth rhythm.

They moved through the sleeping city, gaslights casting fleeting golden patterns across their faces. Lisa leaned back against the squabs, the impulsiveness of her decision washing over her. Beside her, the General was a solid, reassuring presence, his profile silhouetted against the passing lights. The scent of magnolia drifted through the open window, intoxicating and strangely poignant.

Could this, a small, treacherous voice whispered somewhere in the fortified recesses of Lisa's usually pragmatic mind, actually be... love? Or at least, a strategically advantageous alliance with potentially enjoyable fringe benefits? The thought was

absurd, premature, and utterly captivating. She glanced sideways at the General, who met her gaze with a knowing smile. The journey to Le Toucan, and whatever chaos awaited them there, had begun.

The journey had been a blur of rumbling wheels, flickering lamplight, shared silences, and surprisingly insightful conversation about the migratory patterns of particularly stubborn geese. Lisa found the General's company disturbingly easy, his presence a comfortable weight beside her. As the first hint of dawn began to bleed watercolour washes of pink and grey across the eastern sky, the rhythmic clatter of hooves on cobblestones gave way to the crunch of gravel. The carriage slowed and finally stopped.

Lisa peered out of the window. They had arrived not just at a villa, but at a *chateau*. It loomed against the dawn sky, a magnificent pile of stone, turrets, and improbable architectural flourishes, perched dramatically on a cliff overlooking the undeniably golden sands of Le Toucan beach below. The air tasted salty, carrying the cries of gulls and the distant, optimistic rattle of someone probably losing money already, even at this hour.

The carriage door was opened by a butler who moved with the unnerving silence and efficiency of a well-oiled automaton, possibly because he *was* one. (Clockwork staff were notoriously discreet, though prone to winding down at inconvenient moments). He was flanked by a housekeeper whose starched apron seemed capable of deflecting small arms fire and whose expression suggested she had witnessed empires fall and hadn't been remotely impressed.

"Welcome to Villa Pamplémoussé, General, Mademoiselle," the housekeeper intoned, her voice like gravel rolling downhill. Her eyes flickered briefly over Lisa, taking in the slightly travel-rumpled state and distinct lack of luggage, but her professional facade remained perfectly uncracked. If she thought anything amiss, she gave no sign, merely gesturing towards the imposing entrance hall.

"Ah, Gaston, Clothilde," the General greeted them warmly, seemingly oblivious to any potential judgment. He turned to Lisa, offering his arm again. "The journey was swift, but I imagine you must be famished after our nocturnal travels, Princess."

He guided her into the grand hall, the scent of beeswax and old money replacing the magnolia of the night air. Sunlight, now streaming more confidently through tall, arched windows, illuminated dust motes dancing in the opulent space.

"Allow my excellent staff to settle you in," the General continued smoothly, his gaze sweeping around the hall before landing back on Lisa with unmistakable intent. "Let's take breakfast together first, shall we? A little sustenance is essential." He smiled, a slow, deliberate curve of his lips that sent another unexpected tremor through Lisa. "And *then*," he added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial, yet entirely audible, murmur, "we can enjoy ourselves... in the State Bedroom."

Breakfast was served in a room that couldn't quite decide if it wanted to be a sun-drenched conservatory or a medieval banqueting hall. Palm trees in pots jostled for space with suits of armour holding toast racks, and the view over the

shimmering sands of Le Toucan was slightly marred by a gargoyle that seemed to be pulling a face at the tide.

Princess Lisa was, to put it mildly, famished. The combination of turnip vodka, witty repartee, minimal sleep, nocturnal travel, and blatant indecent proposals had left her stomach rumbling with the ferocity of a small, ill-tempered badger demanding its dinner. Maintaining her regal composure (questionable lineage notwithstanding) was taking considerable effort. Her eyes, however, betrayed her, scanning the table with the focused intensity usually reserved for analysing an opponent's flawed endgame.

The General, looking remarkably fresh despite the night's adventures, surveyed the scene with the benign satisfaction of a man whose breakfast routinely bordered on the surreal. Clothilde directed the proceedings with silent, starched authority, while Gaston moved with eerie smoothness, placing dishes as if handling volatile state secrets.

And the food... oh, the food.

There was coffee, served in a pot that occasionally muttered philosophical objections when poured ("Is existence merely the state of being poured?"). There were eggs, boiled to perfection, sitting in little cups shaped like surprised griffins; they seemed to pulse with a faint, rhythmic light, suggesting they might hatch at any moment, possibly into minor paradoxes. The toast arrived on a silver platter, already cut into triangles, but seemed determined to rearrange itself into complex geometric proofs when nobody was looking directly at it.

Gaston presented a dish of kippers arranged in a swirling vortex pattern that made Lisa slightly dizzy. Beside it sat a bowl of what Clothilde announced, deadpan, as "Compote of Aggressively Optimistic Berries" – they fizzed faintly and radiated an aura of relentless cheerfulness. Then came the sausages. Plump, sizzling, and undeniably singing. Not a random sizzle, but a distinct, multi-part harmony rendition of a jaunty sea shanty, slightly muffled by the frying process.

Lisa stared at the singing sausages. Her hunger warred with a lifetime of ingrained propriety and a deep suspicion of food that exhibited musical talent. "General," she began, her voice carefully neutral, "Are those sausages... performing?"

"Ah, the Chorizo Choristers!" The General beamed, spearing one with gusto (it let out a brief tenor 'Ouch!'). "A local delicacy. Excellent baritones, don't you think? Though the sopranos can be a bit shrill if overcooked." He popped it into his mouth with evident enjoyment. "Adds a certain... *je ne sais quoi* to the morning meal."

Lisa cautiously spooned some of the optimistic berries onto her plate. They vibrated faintly against the porcelain. She tried the toast, which immediately attempted to form an isosceles triangle under her fork. Her famished stomach won the internal debate regarding the sausages. She took one. It hummed thoughtfully as she chewed. Surprisingly tasty, despite the faint echo of 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?'.

There was also a small, unassuming pot labelled 'Marmalade?', the question mark seemingly integral to the description. The General advised caution. "Made by my Great Aunt Ermintrude," he explained sotto voce. "She dabbled in temporal

mechanics. Sometimes it tastes of tomorrow's breakfast. Occasionally, next Tuesday's."

Lisa, ravenous but retaining a core of self-preservation learned through years of navigating court intrigue (and possibly her mother's pamphlets), decided to stick with the singing sausages and the philosophical coffee. She ate with focused determination, ignoring the self-arranging toast and the pulsing eggs, vaguely aware of the General watching her with amused fondness. The sheer absurdity of it all – the chateau, the staff, the sentient breakfast, the looming promise of the 'State Bedroom' – was simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. This "weekend" was certainly proving unconventional.

Lisa, feeling considerably less likely to gnaw on the silverware now that her hunger had been addressed (if oddly), placed her napkin beside her plate of self-aware breakfast remnants. The singing sausages had faded to a gentle hum, apparently digesting their own performance. The optimistic berries continued to fizz quietly, radiating relentless positivity into the room.

The General pushed back his chair, dabbing his lips with a napkin the size of a small flag. "Well, Princess," he said, his voice smooth and carrying that familiar undertone of amusement, "a successful refuelling operation, wouldn't you say? Ready for the next phase of our... coastal manoeuvres?"

He rose and offered her his arm once more. Lisa hesitated only fractionally this time. She had accepted the trip, she had survived the breakfast; backing out now seemed... strategically unsound. Besides, a significant part of her was intensely curious about what constituted a 'State Bedroom' in a

household that served sentient sausages. She placed her hand on his arm, the fine wool of his uniform warm beneath her fingers.

He led her out of the bizarre dining room, back into the echoing grandeur of the chateau. They walked along a wide corridor paved with marble tiles that seemed to whisper snippets of local gossip as they stepped on them ("...lost *how much* at the casino?" "...and the Mayor's toupee..."). Ancestral portraits lined the walls, their subjects depicted with varying degrees of improbable heroism; Lisa could have sworn a stern-looking ancestor with an enormous moustache subtly winked as they passed. Gaston, the clockwork butler, glided silently ahead, opening doors with unnerving prescience.

Lisa walked with her head held high, maintaining an outward facade of regal calm, though internally, her thoughts were a less orderly mixture of anticipation, apprehension, and a critical assessment of the chateau's structural weak points (old habits died hard). This was it. The moment the 'indecent proposal' moved from theoretical to practical.

They stopped before a set of imposing double doors carved from dark, gleaming wood. Unlike the other doors, these weren't opened by Gaston. The General paused, turning to face her. He didn't gesture towards a guest suite or a separate wing. Instead, he placed his hand firmly on the ornate handle of the door before them.

"The State Bedroom," he announced, his voice dropping slightly, leaving no doubt about its function or occupant. He pushed the door open. "My command centre, as it were. Do come in, Princess."

The implication was as subtle as a cannonball. This wasn't merely a room; it was *his* room. The heart of his private domain within the eccentric splendour of Villa Pamplémoussé. He stood aside, holding the door, waiting for her to cross the threshold.

Lisa stepped across the threshold, her initial apprehension momentarily overshadowed by sheer curiosity. The State Bedroom was... eclectic. It was undeniably masculine and bore the stamp of the General's personality, but with the same layer of absurdity that seemed to permeate the entire chateau.

A huge, four-poster bed dominated the room, draped in heavy velvet the colour of old campaign maps. But perched incongruously on one of the posts was a stuffed parrot wearing a tiny admiral's hat. Military campaign chests served as side tables, gleaming with polish, yet one held not strategic documents but a collection of alarmingly lifelike glass eyes staring blankly forward. Maps adorned the walls, charting battles both historical and, judging by the inclusion of giant squid and exploding teacups, entirely fantastical. A suit of gleaming armour stood sentinel in one corner, though this one seemed preoccupied with trying to subtly adjust its own codpiece. Sunlight streamed through tall windows overlooking the sea, illuminating the controlled chaos within.

The General closed the heavy doors behind them, the click echoing softly in the sudden quiet. The sounds of the chateau, the distant sea, even the nervous polishing of Antoine the Weasel, faded away, leaving them in a world of their own making. He didn't speak immediately, merely watched Lisa as

she took in the room, his expression a mixture of amusement and something deeper, more intense.

The air crackled with unspoken energy. The journey, the absurd breakfast, the blatant proposal – it had all led to this point, this room. Lisa turned from her survey of the General's eccentric domain to face him. Her usual defences, the metaphorical armour she wore even without the physical metal, felt heavy and suddenly unnecessary. His gaze held hers, direct and unwavering, asking a question that needed no words.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic rhythm against the sudden stillness. The wariness was still there, a faint tremor beneath the surface, but it was overwhelmed by the potent cocktail of attraction, curiosity, and the undeniable pull she felt towards this complex, infuriatingly charming man. She had taken a leap of faith leaving Paris; this felt like the inevitable next step.

An unspoken understanding passed between them, swift and decisive as a checkmate. The barriers lowered, the strategic analysis ceased. What happened next wasn't about logic or caution. It was about the electric current that had sparked between them in the dimly lit bar, fanned by shared laughter and improbable cigars, culminating here, in this room filled with maps of impossible battles and the scent of the sea.

The late morning sun climbed higher, casting long shadows across the floorboards. The parrot in the admiral's hat kept its glassy gaze fixed firmly on the ceiling. Outside the heavy doors, the chateau carried on its eccentric existence, oblivious to the intimate campaign being waged within the State Bedroom. Hours melted away, marked only by the shifting

sunlight and the rhythmic murmur of the waves on the golden sands below.

Time, having clearly decided to take cues from the occupants of the State Bedroom, had flowed in a rather energetic and unconventional manner. The late morning sun had long since completed its arc, and the light filtering through the tall windows now held the warmer, softer hues of late afternoon, bordering on evening. The rhythmic crash of waves on the beach below provided a soothing counterpoint to the lingering charge in the air.

Lisa lay amidst the slightly disordered campaign-map-coloured velvet, feeling languid and thoughtful. The whirlwind pace of the last twelve hours seemed both dreamlike and intensely real. The General, it turned out, approached bedroom manoeuvres with the same blend of strategic vigour and surprising stamina he likely applied to military campaigns.

He stirred beside her, disentangling himself with a sigh that sounded remarkably contented for a man of his vintage and rumoured battle scars. Propping himself up on one elbow, he looked down at her, his grey eyes crinkling at the corners.

"My dear Princess," he murmured, tracing a finger lightly along her cheekbone. "An afternoon... most productively spent. Surpassed even the famous victory against the Unexpectedly Aggressive Pastry Brigade of '78."

He glanced towards the window, where the sky was deepening towards twilight. "Alas," he continued, swinging his legs out of bed with only the slightest hint of his characteristic limp, "duty, or at least a prior engagement involving cards, calls."

He began searching for his discarded uniform pieces amidst the room's opulent clutter. "It's almost evening once more," he explained, locating a boot hiding under a campaign chest. "And I have an appointment down at the Casino de Le Toucan. Matters of... local intelligence gathering. And possibly fleecing some unsuspecting tourists at baccarat." He grinned conspiratorially.

"I must make my excuses, bathe, and attire myself appropriately for financial combat." He paused, fully dressed now and looking every inch the distinguished (and slightly dangerous) General again. "Don't you worry about a thing," he added, correctly anticipating her likely thoughts about attire. "I've instructed Clothilde. She will attend you shortly and show you to a wardrobe. I believe you'll find a selection of stunning options quite suitable for a Princess gracing Le Toucan with her presence – armour perhaps not included, unless specifically requested."

He leaned down, placed a brief, firm kiss on her forehead, the faint scent of his cologne mixing with the sea air drifting through the window. "Rest. Explore. Make yourself entirely at home. I shall return later, hopefully victorious and bearing winnings."

With a final, lingering look and a slight bow, General Hercule de Pamplémoussé exited the State Bedroom, leaving Lisa alone once more, surrounded by the evidence of a passionate afternoon and the lingering promise of further chaos and adventure in the notorious gambling resort of Le Toucan. The prospect of choosing clothes from a stranger's wardrobe –

however stunning – brought a familiar frown to her brow, even as a reluctant smile played on her lips.

Lisa awoke with the disorientation of someone surfacing from the very depths of sleep – the kind usually reserved for the truly exhausted or those hibernating through minor ice ages. The room was plunged into a profound darkness, broken only by the faint, rhythmic sweep of a distant lighthouse beam painting fleeting stripes across the ceiling. Silence pressed in, thick and heavy, the earlier sounds of the chateau and the sea entirely absent. Night had well and truly fallen, and judging by the utter stillness, it had probably brought its pyjamas and settled in for the duration.

A small, internal clock, usually dedicated to calculating chess moves or escape vectors, informed Lisa that significant time had passed. The General was long gone to his 'intelligence gathering' at the casino. She was alone.

Swinging her legs out of the vast bed, her feet met cool floorboards. Groping slightly in the near-dark, her hand brushed against soft, yielding fabric draped over the parrot admiral's perch (the bird itself seemed fast asleep, its tiny hat slightly askew). It was a robe – thick, plush towelling, the sort one finds in establishments promising either five-star pampering or dubious massages involving hot stones and regret. It smelled faintly of ozone and, inexplicably, lavender. Shrugging it on, feeling slightly ridiculous but appreciating the warmth, Lisa tied the belt securely.

And then, the old inquisitiveness, the part of her brain that couldn't resist analysing, exploring, and generally poking its nose into things that weren't strictly its business, flickered back

to life. Fuelled by rest and an innate suspicion of surfaces, Lisa began to investigate the State Bedroom in earnest.

Using the intermittent lighthouse beam as her guide, she first approached the maps on the wall. Illuminated briefly, they revealed not just mundane coastlines but detailed charts of 'The Archipelago of Lost Socks', tactical diagrams for 'Operation: Biscuit Breakthrough' (apparently targeting a heavily defended custard cream), and a worrying number of areas marked 'Here Be Extremely Judgmental Squids'.

Moving to the campaign chest, she examined the collection of glass eyes. In the sweeping light, they seemed to possess a disconcerting liveliness. One particularly large blue eye swivelled distinctly to follow her movement. Below it, a tiny brass plaque read: 'Algernon - Disapproved of my choice of cravat, 1882'.

She peered at the suit of armour in the corner. It remained still, but she could have sworn its posture was slightly different. Less 'sentinel on duty', more 'trying nonchalantly to lean against the wall after a long shift'. Was that a faint whistling sound coming from behind its visor?

The parrot admiral remained asleep, but tucked under its perch, Lisa found a small, leather-bound book: *"Voltaire's Guide to Advanced Gambling & Existential Dread"*. The bookmark, a faded betting slip, marked a chapter titled 'Why Raising on a Pair of Deuces is Philosophically Indistinguishable from Challenging the Void'.

She risked a glance out of the tall windows. Le Toucan glittered below, a constellation of artificial lights against the black velvet

sea. The casino itself pulsed with a life of its own, occasionally emitting flashes of lurid green light or faint, mournful trombone solos that drifted up on the night air. Odd.

Lisa paused in the centre of the room, wrapping the slightly-too-large robe around herself. The General, it seemed, was a man of even more hidden depths and peculiar hobbies than initially suspected. His bedroom wasn't just a room; it was a museum of delightful absurdity, questionable military campaigns, and possibly sentient decor. Instead of feeling alarmed, however, Lisa felt a familiar spark ignite – the thrill of complexity, the challenge of the unknown. This 'weekend' was rapidly escalating from an indecent proposal to a full-blown investigation into advanced eccentricity.

Her initial survey complete, Lisa drifted towards the large bay window that dominated one wall of the State Bedroom. The lighthouse beam swept past again, briefly illuminating her path. Her dress lay draped over a chair shaped suspiciously like a giant, sleeping badger – likely where it had been deposited hours earlier. Reaching into a pocket she knew contained essentials, her fingers closed around the familiar slim cylinder of a St Moretitz.

Finding a lucifer match in a small, ornate box on a nearby table (the box itself was labelled 'For Emergencies & Setting Fire to Doubt'), she struck it, the flare briefly banishing the shadows. She lit the cigarette, the tip glowing like a tiny, defiant ember in the darkness.

Lisa had her rituals. Just as some sought solace in prayer or strong spirits, Lisa often found clarity in nicotine. And she invariably enjoyed a contemplative smoke after... well, after

vigorous activity. Especially, as now, exercise of the distinctly nuptial kind. It helped recalibrate her thoughts, placing the physical back into the context of the strategic and emotional.

She stood silhouetted against the vast window, wrapped in the borrowed robe, the cigarette smoke curling upwards, briefly visible in the rhythmic sweep of the lighthouse. Below, Le Toucan glittered, a slightly gaudy jewel nestled against the dark sea. The casino pulsed, a hypnotic beacon promising fortune and ruin in equal measure. Faint music still drifted up occasionally, now sounding more like a lament played on a kazoo.

What *was* she doing here? In the absurdly opulent chateau of a flamboyant, albeit captivating, General? On a 'weekend' that defied calendars? Her wariness hadn't vanished, merely retreated to regroup. Yet, looking out at the twinkling, slightly disreputable town, she didn't feel regret. Only a profound sense of stepping off the familiar map of her life into territory marked 'Here Be... Interesting Complications'. She took a long drag from the St Moretitz, the smoke a familiar comfort against the backdrop of the utterly bizarre. The night was far from over, and Lisa had a feeling the absurdity level in Le Toucan had yet to reach its peak.

The single St Moretitz wasn't enough to satisfy the itch of inquisitiveness that had now fully awakened within Lisa. The State Bedroom, while fascinatingly peculiar, was clearly just the command centre; what about the rest of the territory? Wrapped still in the slightly-too-large, lavender-scented robe, she decided a reconnaissance mission was in order.

Opening the heavy doors, she peered into the corridor. Silence reigned, punctuated only by the distant, rhythmic sigh of the lighthouse and the faint, almost imperceptible sound of gears meshing – possibly Gaston the clockwork butler recharging in a hidden alcove, or maybe just the house settling in strange ways. She moved silently along the marble floor, her bare feet making no sound.

The chateau by night was even more absurd than by day. Moonlight slanted through tall windows, illuminating hallways lined with statues that seemed to shift poses when she wasn't looking directly at them (a marble cherub appeared to be attempting to pick the lock on a display cabinet containing fossilized pastries). She passed a grandfather clock that displayed time zones for places like 'Atlantis (Approx.)' and 'Next Tuesday'. A library beckoned, shelves groaning not just with books but with seemingly random objects classified under the Dewey Decimal System (a teapot under 'Applied Thermodynamics', a single riding boot under 'Existential Angst - subcategory: Footwear').

It was in a long, dimly lit gallery connecting two wings of the chateau that the pattern began to emerge. The walls here were dedicated almost entirely to portraiture, clearly intended to showcase the lineage of the villa's owners. Elaborate frames held canvases depicting stern-faced individuals, family groups, and solemn-looking children holding improbable pets (one boy clutched what looked suspiciously like a philosophical badger).

Lisa paused, her sharp eyes scanning the faces. She expected to see generations of Pamplémoussés, perhaps tracing the lineage back, finding younger versions of the General, noting family

resemblances, the distinctive jawline, the potential source of the slight limp...

But there was nothing. None of the faces staring out from the canvases bore the slightest resemblance to General Hercule de Pamplemoussé. There were no hints of his grey eyes, his facial structure, his Gallic flair.

Instead, the people depicted were... different. Strikingly so. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she moved from portrait to portrait, Lisa noted a distinct consistency in their features: strong noses, dark, deep-set eyes, olive complexions, often depicted in attire that hinted at warmer climes – flowing robes, intricate kaftans, elaborate turbans or headscarves. The artistic style varied across the presumed generations, but the subjects themselves possessed features Lisa could only describe, with a growing sense of unease and confusion, as decidedly Arabic in appearance. From the oldest, severe-looking patriarch painted in a stiff, archaic style, to the more recent, softer depictions of women and children, the lineage portrayed was consistently, unmistakably, *not* the lineage of a French General named Pamplemoussé.

Who *were* these people? And where were the General's ancestors? Was 'Pamplemoussé' an assumed name? Was the villa truly his, or was he merely a long-term, eccentric guest? The discrepancy was jarring, a discordant note in the already strange symphony of the house. Things, Lisa concluded, frowning as she stared up at a portrait of a woman whose dark eyes seemed filled with ancient secrets, were most definitely not what they seemed. The mystery surrounding her host had just deepened considerably.

Intrigued and unsettled by the gallery of mismatched ancestors, Lisa continued her exploration, pushing open a heavy oak door just off the library (which was guarded by two stone sphinxes who appeared to be quizzing each other on obscure historical trivia). This room was smaller, quieter – perhaps a study or a withdrawing room, lined with yet more bookshelves, though these seemed dedicated to slightly more practical subjects like 'Advanced Knot-Tying for Unexpected Captivity' and '1001 Uses for a Stale Baguette'.

And there, on a low table bathed in a pool of moonlight from another tall window, sat a chess set.

Lisa approached it cautiously. After her previous experience with giant, malevolent, reality-warping granite chess pieces back in Paris, she regarded any unattended board game with deep suspicion. This one, however, looked reassuringly normal. It was a beautiful Staunton set, intricately carved from warm cherry wood, the pieces polished to a gentle gleam. The board itself was inlaid maple and walnut. It looked... civilized. Innocent, even. A far cry from the city-disrupting monstrosity in her father's garden.

Her chess-master's instincts drew her closer. Someone had been playing; the pieces were mid-game, poised in a complex Sicilian Defence. Curious about the state of play, Lisa leaned down, peering closely at the position of the white knight, analysing the potential lines of attack.

As her face drew near the carved horse head, a tiny, dry voice, like rustling parchment, whispered directly into her ear.

"Be careful, Lisa."

Lisa froze, every nerve ending suddenly screaming an alert that bypassed logic entirely. She remained bent over, rigid, wondering if a draught had carried a sound, if Gaston was hiding under the table, if the parrot admiral had developed ventriloquism skills.

The whisper came again, impossibly close, seeming to emanate directly from the cherry wood knight itself. *"Things aren't as they seem."*

Lisa recoiled as if slapped, stumbling backwards and nearly tripping over a footstool shaped like a contemplative hedgehog. Her hand instinctively flew to her side, searching for a sword hilt that wasn't there, leaving her clutching the plush towelling of the borrowed robe. She stared at the chess set, her heart performing a frantic drum solo against her ribs.

Shock, cold and sharp, lanced through her. Talking chess pieces? Not giant, magically activated ones, but a small, polite, *wooden* one? And it knew her *name*? This wasn't the grand, city-altering chaos of the Paris set; this was intimate, specific, and deeply unnerving. The sheer, mundane absurdity of a *cherry wood knight* offering cryptic warnings sent a shiver down her spine that had nothing to do with the night air.

Her mind, trained to see patterns and calculate odds, struggled to process the input. Probability of talking Staunton knight: infinitesimally small. Significance of event: therefore, extremely high. The warning itself – "Things aren't as they seem" – echoed the unease sparked by the portraits in the gallery. This wasn't random absurdity; it felt targeted. Directed.

Unease curdled in her stomach, replacing the lingering warmth from the afternoon's... exertions. The chateau, previously just eccentric and intriguing, now felt laden with secrets, potentially sentient furniture, and warnings whispered by well-informed game pieces. Lisa backed slowly away from the table, her eyes fixed on the impassive wooden knight, the silence of the room suddenly feeling far more threatening than before.

Clutching the 'Highwayman's Guide', Lisa backed out of the cell-like room, quietly pulling the door shut. The click echoed down the dusty corridor, sounding unnervingly like a trap springing shut. Suddenly, the vast, eccentric chateau felt less like an intriguing puzzle and more like a gilded cage. The silence, previously just quiet, now seemed menacing. The shadows pooling in the corners looked less like nervous debutantes and more like lurking footpads waiting to demand 'Your money or your questionable lineage!'

A frisson of genuine fear, albeit laced with absurdity, prickled Lisa's skin. It wasn't just the disparate clues – the portraits, the whispering knight, the rogue's handbook – it was the *implications*. Was the charming General, the athletic lover, the connoisseur of sentient sausages, actually a gentleman scoundrel living under an assumed name in a villa belonging to a completely different family, possibly of Arabic origin? And if so, what did he want with *her*? Was she a conquest? A hostage? A potential accomplice he planned to train using the dubious guidebook? Her mind, usually so clear and analytical, conjured images of the General bursting in wearing a mask and demanding she learn how to fence using a baguette.

She felt frighteningly alone. Miles from Paris, with no luggage, no backup, and surrounded by potentially judgmental furniture and suspiciously well-informed chess pieces. Her team, the '3 Foxeteers' as Crispin liked to call them (usually when Reynard wasn't listening), seemed impossibly far away. She needed help. She needed Reynard's pragmatic cynicism, Flavius's note-taking, even Crispin's complaining would be welcome right now.

Lisa hurried back towards the State Bedroom, the borrowed robe flapping around her ankles. She needed a messenger. A fast, discreet messenger capable of navigating from Normandy to Paris without attracting undue attention or demanding unreasonable quantities of birdseed. Her eyes fell upon the stuffed parrot perched on the bedpost, its tiny admiral's hat slightly askew in the gloom. An idea, utterly mad yet perfectly suited to the current level of reality, sparked in her mind.

She approached the bedpost, standing before the inanimate bird. "Admiral," she began, her voice low and urgent, ignoring the sheer lunacy of addressing taxidermy. "I find myself in a strategically disadvantageous position. Matters are not as they seem. Potential rogue elements are suspected."

The parrot remained silent, glassy eyes staring straight ahead.

"Listen," Lisa hissed, leaning closer. "Your General may be compromised. Or perhaps he isn't the General at all! Maybe he's 'Silas the Slippery', notorious highwayman! I require reinforcements." She paused, trying a different tack. "Admiral, consider this a direct order from... well, from someone significantly higher up the chain of command than a stuffed

parrot, anyway. You *will* undertake a mission of utmost importance."

She rummaged for a scrap of paper – finding a discarded betting slip from the General's Voltaire book – and hastily scribbled a message using a charcoal stick from a small, unused fireplace nearby: *"Reynard. Urgent. Le Toucan, Villa Pamplémoussé. General suspect. Situation... peculiar. Come quickly. Bring backup. Possibly snacks. Lisa."*

She carefully folded the note and looked for a way to attach it. Spotting a loose thread on the Admiral's tiny jacket, she managed to secure the message under its wing.

"Right," she addressed the parrot again, trying to project confidence and command. "Your destination is Paris. Special Investigations Bureau headquarters. Find Reynard – he looks like a fox, frequently exasperated. Deliver this message. Do you understand?"

The parrot, predictably, did not respond. Lisa decided desperate measures were called for. She picked up the surprisingly heavy bird. "For King and Country!" she whispered fiercely (even though her father wasn't *that* King, and the country was complicated).

She carried it to the tall window overlooking the sea, pushed it open wide, letting the cool night air flood in. Taking a deep breath, she held the stuffed admiral aloft. "Fly well, Admiral!" she commanded, and with a surge of desperate hope and sheer force of will, she launched the parrot out into the darkness towards Paris.

It didn't plummet. Nor did it soar. It wobbled precariously for a moment, seemed to dip, then, with a faint, internal *whirring* sound Lisa might have imagined, its cloth wings gave a stiff, jerky flap. It gained a foot of altitude, then another, and began heading, slowly but with undeniable determination, in the general direction of Paris, a tiny, absurd silhouette against the moonlit clouds.

Lisa watched until it disappeared, her breath held tight. Then she leaned her forehead against the cool window frame, alone again in the vast, silent chateau, wondering if she'd finally lost her mind, or if sending a possibly clockwork, possibly enchanted, definitely stuffed parrot admiral for help was now considered standard operating procedure.

Meanwhile, back in Paris, the headquarters of the Special Investigations Bureau was experiencing a period of relative calm, which usually meant the paperwork was threatening to achieve sentience and form a breakaway republic. It was Thursday morning. Director Reynard was attempting to reconcile expense reports involving 'one suspiciously large turnip (interrogation supplies)' with the Finance Ministry's definition of 'approved vegetables'. Flavius was meticulously cataloguing feathers gathered from the scene of the 'Gingerbread Pigeon Incident', hoping to find anomalous biscuit crumbs. Crispin was complaining that the office coffee tasted suspiciously like resignation and weak excuses.

Sunlight streamed through the dusty windows of their slightly cramped office overlooking a bustling Parisian street – a picture of relative normality, soon to be comprehensively shattered.

The shattering began with a faint, determined *whirring* sound from outside, rapidly growing louder. It was followed by a series of frantic tapping noises at the windowpane.

"What in the name of misguided millinery is that?" Reynard muttered, peering over his ledgers.

Flavius adjusted his spectacles. "Appears to be... avian, sir. Though the flight pattern is remarkably inefficient. Possibly intoxicated?"

Before Crispin could suggest shooting it for lunch, the window latch suddenly jiggled violently, the window flew open inwards, and the messenger arrived.

It wasn't so much a landing as a controlled crash. The stuffed parrot admiral tumbled onto Reynard's desk, scattering expense reports and landing beak-down in the inkwell. It lay there for a moment, tiny admiral's hat askew, emitting a final, exhausted *whirr-clunk* sound, like a clockwork mechanism giving up the ghost.

The three foxes stared. Silence descended, broken only by the dripping ink from the parrot's beak.

"Well," Crispin said eventually, breaking the silence. "That's not something you see every Thursday. Is it... regulation issue, sir?"

Reynard poked the parrot cautiously with the end of his pen. It remained stubbornly inanimate, though now sported a rather fetching ink moustache. "Not any regulation I'm familiar with," he growled. "Flavius, analysis?"

Flavius leaned closer, peering intently. "Taxidermy, sir, of reasonable quality. Species uncertain due to plumage condition and... ink. Notable uniform: Admiral's hat, miniature.

Intriguing." He gently lifted one of the stiff, cloth wings. "Ah, and definite clockwork components detected internally.

Explains the flight pattern and the whirring. Seems to have expended its power source upon arrival." He paused, noticing the folded scrap of paper tucked beneath the wing. "Also, it appears to be carrying mail."

He carefully detached the note, now slightly ink-stained, and handed it to Reynard. The Director unfolded it, his eyebrows climbing steadily towards his hairline as he read Lisa's distinctive scrawl.

"Reynard. Urgent. Le Toucan, Villa Pamplémoussé. General suspect. Situation... peculiar. Come quickly. Bring backup. Possibly snacks. Lisa."

He read it again, then looked at the inert, ink-stained clockwork parrot admiral lying defunct on his desk. He looked at his two agents.

"Le Toucan," Reynard said flatly. "Princess Lisa appears to have found trouble again. Or perhaps," he added, eyeing the parrot, "trouble has found her, delivered via wind-up poultry."

Crispin groaned. "Le Toucan? That den of iniquity and questionable shellfish? And what does she mean, 'peculiar'? After sentient chess pieces and chocolate goats, 'peculiar' could mean anything!"

"Precisely," Reynard agreed grimly, already mentally calculating travel times and potential threats. "Which is why

we're going. Flavius, pack the standard investigation kit, plus the extra-strong smelling salts and possibly the anti-badger spray – one never knows. Crispin, stop complaining and fetch the emergency travel rations." He glanced at the note again. "And see if Cook has any of those oat biscuits Lisa likes."

The brief period of calm in the Bureau was officially over. Lisa needed them, and she'd sent a clockwork parrot to prove it. Things were definitely peculiar.

Panic, when deployed correctly, can be a remarkably efficient organisational tool. Within minutes of deciphering Lisa's ink-stained, parrot-delivered plea, the Bureau headquarters had transformed from a place of simmering paperwork-induced despair into a hive of focused, if slightly bewildered, activity.

Flavius, ever methodical, assembled the Standard Field Kit (magnifying glasses, fingerprint dust – rarely useful on sentient cheese, but procedure was procedure – assorted sample bags, and smelling salts potent enough to wake the dead, or at least make them sit up and complain). He also added, on his own initiative, a portable seismograph (for detecting rebellious furniture), three spare inkwells, and a small device of his own invention intended to measure ambient absurdity levels (currently registering 'Alarmingly High').

Crispin, meanwhile, interpreted 'emergency travel rations' broadly, stuffing saddlebags not only with the requested oat biscuits but also several wheels of suspiciously pungent cheese ("Might need bait, sir! Or a barricade!"), a small keg of fortified wine ("For morale! And possibly cleaning wounds!"), and his personal, silver-plated armour polishing kit ("Can't face down peculiar situations looking scruffy, can I?").

Reynard oversaw the chaos, checking maps of Normandy that seemed disconcertingly vague around the Le Toucan area ("Coastal defences appear to consist mainly of existential doubt and overpriced souvenirs," he muttered), packing a thermos of industrial-strength tea, and ensuring his ceremonial (but surprisingly sharp) letter opener was securely fastened. He also grabbed the now-defunct clockwork parrot admiral, wrapping it carefully in an oilcloth. "Evidence," he declared grimly. "Or possibly spare parts."

Their transport awaited: the Bureau's official high-speed response carriage. Externally, it looked like a fairly normal, sturdy coach, albeit painted a colour best described as 'Stealth Fawn'. Internally, however, it was a marvel of questionable engineering, allegedly powered by a combination of highly compressed steam, distilled cynicism, and the sheer bureaucratic inertia of the French state. Its acceleration was legendary, capable of reducing roadside chickens to bewildered clouds of feathers, but its steering occasionally responded best to strongly worded suggestions rather than the reins, and it had a tendency to develop philosophical objections to bridges.

They bundled themselves and their bizarre assortment of gear inside. "Right!" Reynard commanded, banging on the roof. "To Le Toucan! Maximum velocity! And try," he yelled at the unseen driver (rumoured to be a former philosopher who'd lost a bet), "not to engage any toll booth operators in debates about free will this time!"

With a sound like a startled hippo clearing its throat, followed by a violent lurch that sent Flavius's absurdity meter spinning wildly, the carriage shot forward. It hurtled through the streets

of Paris, narrowly avoiding a collision with a cartload of bewildered onions and causing several statues to glance nervously at each other. Crispin immediately began complaining about the upholstery ("Infested with the ghosts of previous missions, I swear!"). Flavius started taking meticulous notes on the G-forces experienced during cornering ("Subjectively alarming, objectively fascinating!"). Reynard gripped his thermos of tea, staring grimly ahead, already anticipating the myriad forms of 'peculiar' that awaited them in Le Toucan. The rescue mission, powered by steam, cynicism, and oat biscuits, was absurdly underway.

The Bureau carriage devoured the kilometres between Paris and the Normandy coast with alarming, if erratic, speed. The journey was less a smooth transit and more a series of near-catastrophic lurches punctuated by moments of baffling calm. At one point, they overtook a flock of migrating geese who appeared to be flying backwards, possibly due to temporal distortions caused by the carriage's engine arguing with itself about the concept of 'Tuesday'. Later, a philosophical debate with a particularly stubborn milestone resulted in an unscheduled detour through a field of suspiciously symmetrical sunflowers.

Inside, Crispin discovered the emergency rations contained, alongside the biscuits, a single, mournful sock puppet and a jar of pickled onions that hummed aggressively when stared at. Flavius's absurdity meter occasionally spiked into zones labelled 'Frankly Implausible' and 'Requires Strong Tea', forcing Reynard to administer stabilizing doses from his thermos. The carriage itself sighed heavily on hills, occasionally whistled jaunty, unrecognizable tunes through its

steam vents, and seemed to take personal offense at poorly maintained bridges, threatening to dematerialize entirely at one point over the River Orne.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these vehicular eccentricities, they finally arrived, hurtling into the outskirts of Le Toucan sometime later, the carriage skidding to a halt with a final, dramatic sigh of exhausted steam. They tumbled out, slightly dishevelled, smelling faintly of ozone and Crispin's emergency cheese.

Le Toucan glittered before them under the coastal sun, a riot of brightly coloured awnings, stucco buildings of questionable architectural merit, and the distant, hypnotic rattle and clatter of gambling dens already plying their trade. The air smelled of salt, frying fish, desperation, and overpriced candy floss. Seagulls wheeled overhead, looking more cynical and streetwise than their Parisian counterparts.

"Right," Reynard said, brushing sunflower petals off his uniform and consulting Lisa's ink-stained note. "Villa Pamplémoussé. Doesn't appear to be marked on any standard maps, or indeed, the map of questionable landmarks Flavius acquired." He scanned the slightly gaudy street. "We'll need directions." He eyed a nearby local who was attempting to teach semaphore to a trio of bored-looking crabs. "This could take a while."

Reynard approached the local man, who had paused in his crab-based semaphore lesson to contemplate the philosophical implications of low tide. "Excuse me, monsieur," Reynard began, adopting his most official 'Special Investigations Bureau

- Nothing To See Here' tone. "We seek directions to Villa Pamplemoussé."

The man looked up slowly, his eyes glazed with either profound thought or cheap local cider. He observed the three foxes in their slightly singed uniforms, then glanced at the Bureau carriage, which was currently humming a mournful tune to itself. "Ah, the Chateau Pamplemoussé," he said, his voice surprisingly clear, though it sounded like it was echoing from the bottom of a well. "The big place on the cliff where the winds tell secrets and the butler runs on Tuesdays?"

Reynard exchanged a look with Flavius. "That sounds... probable," he conceded.

"Aye. Follow this road," the man gestured vaguely with a crab leg he'd been using as a pointer, "straight out of town. Ignore the signpost that claims the road leads to 'Inevitable Disappointment' – it's notoriously pessimistic. Keep the sea on your left, unless it decides to move, which it sometimes does on alternate Thursdays. When you see the flock of sheep attempting to unionise, turn right up the cliff path. Can't miss it. Looks like a wedding cake designed by a slightly unstable giant." He then turned back to his crabs, muttering, "Right, where were we? 'The existential weight of barnacles'..."

Thanking the oracle of the shoreline (or perhaps just ignoring him), the Foxeteers piled back into the Bureau carriage. "Did he say unionising sheep?" Crispin grumbled, buckling himself in. "This place gets weirder by the minute."

"Note the directions, Flavius," Reynard ordered.

The carriage, perhaps sensing the urgency, or maybe just wanting to get away from the philosophising sheep it could presumably sense approaching, engaged its 'Slightly Less Erratic Than Usual' mode. The fifteen-minute journey out of town and up the winding cliff path was achieved with minimal fuss, aside from having to wait for a contemplative donkey to finish reciting poetry in the middle of the road and Flavius insisting on taking readings of the 'Unionised Sheep Aura' (results: 'Bemused with undertones of militant grazing').

Finally, they rounded a bend, and there it was: Villa Pamplemoussé, perched dramatically against the sky, looking exactly as Lisa might have described it if she'd sent a more detailed message than could be carried by clockwork poultry. It was undeniably impressive, a sprawling chateau overlooking the glittering sea.

It was also, quite clearly, deserted.

The imposing front gates stood slightly ajar, creaking mournfully in the sea breeze. No lights shone from the windows, despite the day progressing towards evening. No smoke rose from the chimneys. No clockwork butler glided out to meet them; no starched housekeeper appeared to glower disapprovingly. An eerie silence hung over the place, broken only by the cry of gulls and the distant, rhythmic sigh of the waves. It felt less like a 'villa' and more like the Marie Celeste redesigned by a particularly flamboyant architect.

The three foxes exchanged uneasy glances. "Doesn't look like anyone's home," Crispin observed unnecessarily.

"Lisa's message said 'peculiar'," Reynard murmured, scanning the silent facade. "An empty chateau after an urgent summons delivered by parrot-mail certainly qualifies." He drew his ceremonial letter opener, which suddenly felt rather inadequate. "Right. Let's proceed with caution. Standard entry protocols. Flavius, check for... well, check for everything. Crispin, try not to complain loud enough to alert any potentially lurking highwaymen."

The seemingly empty villa loomed before them, silent and secretive.

Their initial attempts to gain entry to Villa Pamplémoussé proved about as successful as trying to explain irony to a sea cucumber. The main doors remained resolutely shut, emitting a low hum that suggested deep disapproval. Windows either refused to budge or slammed shut with petulant finality. Crispin's attempt to scale a drainpipe was thwarted when the pipe deliberately rerouted itself halfway up the wall, leaving him dangling precariously above a patch of suspiciously thorny roses. Even Flavius's sophisticated lock-analysis device merely sparked apologetically and displayed the message: "Error: House Currently Sulking."

"Right," Reynard sighed, wiping brick dust from his tunic after trying to shoulder-barge a suspiciously solid-looking garden gate. "Standard entry protocols are failing. The villa appears to be employing passive-aggressive architecture as a primary defence mechanism."

"So we're stuck out here?" Crispin complained, extracting thorns from his posterior. "While the Princess is trapped inside with a potential highwayman and sentient furniture?"

"Not necessarily," Flavius mused, adjusting his spectacles. He gestured towards the oilcloth bundle Reynard had placed carefully on the ground. "We possess a potential communication vector. Agent Parrot Admiral, Designation: Clockwork."

Reynard's eyes lit up. "Of course! If it flew from Lisa to us, perhaps we can persuade it to undertake the return journey." He unwrapped the ink-stained, defunct parrot. It lay limp and lifeless, its tiny hat still askew. "Question is, how do we reactivate it?"

Flavius immediately knelt beside the bird, producing a set of miniature tools and a look of intense concentration.

"Clockwork mechanisms of this era are often susceptible to... percussive maintenance," he muttered, tapping the parrot gently behind its left wing. Nothing. "Or perhaps a specific lubrication?" He rummaged in his kit. "I have standard machine oil, goose fat derivative, or... ah, essence of distilled complaining, confiscated from Agent Crispin's private stores?"

Crispin looked indignant. "Hey!"

"Try the complaining essence," Reynard ordered grimly.

Flavius carefully applied a single drop near the parrot's internal winding mechanism. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a shudder that rattled its glass eyes, the parrot emitted a series of reluctant *whirs* and *clicks*. Its head twitched. Its admiral's hat straightened itself with a snap. It sat up on Reynard's palm, looking slightly cross.

"Success!" breathed Flavius, noting furiously: "Hypothesis confirmed: Avian clockwork responds positively to concentrated negativity."

"Quickly," Reynard instructed, producing another scrap of paper and his pen. "A message." He scribbled rapidly. *"Lisa - Foxeteers here. Outside villa. Cannot enter (house sulking?). Are you safe? Confirm status. Armed to teeth (incl. tactical cheese, anti-badger spray, 1 x Ballistic Turnip). Await signal/diversion. Reynard."*

He carefully tucked this new note under the parrot's other wing. "Right, Admiral," he addressed the bird sternly. "Back to the Princess. That's an order!"

The parrot ruffled its cloth feathers, let out a sound suspiciously like a clockwork sigh, and seemed to brace itself. Reynard carried it to a point offering a clear(ish) view of the upper windows of the chateau. "Bon voyage," he muttered, and gave it a gentle toss upwards.

This time, the parrot flew with slightly more conviction, its whirring mechanism sounding determined, if still slightly asthmatic. It ascended, dodged a swooping seagull that seemed to take personal offense at its tiny hat, and made a beeline for the window of the State Bedroom where Lisa had last been seen (or where Reynard assumed the most likely place for dramatic plot developments was).

The three foxes watched its progress, sheltering behind a strategically placed (and possibly sentient) rhododendron bush. They were outside, armed with cheese, turnips, and cynicism, relying on a reactivated stuffed parrot to penetrate the defences

of a passive-aggressive chateau. It was, Reynard reflected, just another Thursday for the Special Investigations Bureau.

The parrot admiral, propelled by reactivated clockwork and possibly sheer indignation at having been stuffed in the first place, flew towards the upper windows of the Villa Pamplémoussé with dogged determination. Its flight path, however, suggested its internal navigation system was calibrated more for enthusiasm than accuracy.

It reached the imposing facade and began to circle, whirring like an agitated beetle, clearly searching for an ingress. Spotting the large bay window of the State Bedroom, it made a direct approach, only to bounce off the closed glass with a pathetic *thump* and a cascade of protesting gear sounds. Undeterred, it tried another window, achieving a similar result, this time ending up spinning briefly before regaining control.

Down below, hidden behind the rhododendron, the Foxeteers winced. "Subtle," muttered Crispin. "Perhaps we should have attached a battering ram to it."

The parrot circled again, looking increasingly frantic (or as frantic as a stuffed bird with limited articulation can look). It bumped against a third window, letting out a particularly distressed *whirr-clunk*. Then, something unexpected happened.

As the parrot hovered near that third window, the heavy sash slid upwards with a smooth, unnerving silence, seemingly of its own volition. No hand was visible, no mechanism apparent; the window simply opened, an invitation into the quiet depths of the chateau.

The parrot seemed to hesitate for a second, perhaps surprised by this sudden cooperation from the previously sulking architecture. Then, with a decisive *whirr*, it zipped through the opening and disappeared inside. The window slid silently shut behind it.

"Well," breathed Flavius, noting rapidly, "Inanimate object exhibits selective portal courtesy. Fascinating. Suggests conditional access protocols."

"Or the house just likes parrots more than foxes," Crispin grumbled.

Inside the chateau, the parrot admiral found itself navigating the dimly lit, silent corridors. Its clockwork whirred softly as it flew, bumping occasionally against suits of armour that might or might not have flinched, dodging dangling chandeliers, and ignoring portraits whose eyes definitely followed its progress. Its programming, or perhaps the sheer desperate intent imbued by Lisa and reinforced by Reynard, drove it onward. Somewhere within these opulent, absurd, and potentially menacing walls was Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude. The Admiral was on a mission to find her.

The Foxeteers remained huddled behind the increasingly inadequate cover of the rhododendron bush, straining their ears for any sound from the villa – perhaps a triumphant squawk from the parrot admiral, or an outraged yelp from Lisa, or even just the satisfying crash of sentient furniture being subdued. Instead, a new sound reached them, faint at first, carried on the sea breeze: a soft, rhythmic shuffling accompanied by the crunch of hooves on gravel.

"Horses?" whispered Crispin hopefully. "Is Pamplemoussé back already?"

"Doesn't sound quite right for carriage horses," Reynard murmured, peering cautiously around the bush. "Too... sandpapery?"

They spun around as the source of the sound came into view around the bend in the driveway, and collective vulpine jaws dropped. It wasn't horses.

It was a camel. A large, disdainful-looking camel, laden with rolled-up carpets that looked far too expensive to be used for mere floor covering. It chewed cud with an air of profound boredom, as if Normandy was a rather disappointing detour on its way somewhere more interesting, like Tuesday.

And behind it, was another camel. And another. And another. A long, long train of them, swaying rhythmically, laden with an astonishing variety of cargo. Brass-bound trunks jostled against crates overflowing with dates and pomegranates; bundles of vibrant silks sat next to cages containing exotic birds that looked deeply confused by the climate; golden ornaments glinted amongst bags of spices that sent strange, enticing aromas into the salty air.

The camels themselves radiated sentience. One wore a pair of spectacles perched precariously on its nose, seemingly reading a small book tucked into its saddlebag. Another appeared to be quietly criticising the quality of the driveway gravel to its neighbour via a series of elaborate sighs and nostril flares. A third had a garland of slightly wilted French marigolds draped incongruously around its neck.

Riding amongst the procession, or walking alongside with an air of weary dignity, were the presumed owners. They matched the portraits Lisa had seen – men and women with strong features and dark eyes, dressed predominantly in flowing, richly coloured robes, though with odd concessions to European fashion. One stern-looking patriarch sported magnificent embroidered slippers but paired them with a tweed waistcoat. A younger woman wore a beautifully draped hijab alongside a pair of sturdy walking boots. Luggage tags tied to the brass trunks clearly read: "Property of Al-Camemberti. If Found, Please Point Towards Nearest Oasis or Reputable Fromagerie."

They seemed entirely unperturbed by the inherent absurdity of arriving at a Normandy clifftop chateau via trans-continental camel train. An elderly woman was animatedly arguing with a younger man about the correct cheese pairing for spiced figs, while two children chased a small, escaped monkey that was attempting to steal dates from a saddlebag.

The Foxeteers stared, utterly dumbfounded.

"Camels," Crispin whispered, aghast. "Sentient camels. In Normandy. Carrying... well, everything. Did we take a wrong turn into someone else's extremely confusing dream?"

Flavius was already scribbling furiously. "Species: *Camelus Dromedarius*. Number: Extensive. Cargo: Eclectic, suggesting significant trade route activity. Note presence of Al-Camemberti family name, correlating with potential villa ownership theory. Sentience level: Highly probable, observe advanced expressions of ennui and possible literary pursuits."

Reynard felt a headache forming behind his eyes. The situation had escalated from 'peculiar' through 'absurd' and was now rapidly approaching 'requires a complete rewriting of known geographical and zoological principles'. "Stay down," he hissed, pulling Crispin further behind the rhododendron, which suddenly felt very small indeed. "Nobody moves. Let's see what the possibly-real owners do now."

The Al-Camemberti family, oblivious to the trio of foxes witnessing their bizarre arrival, began the slow, complex process of unloading sentient camels and arguing about cheese, right outside the silent, mysterious Villa Pamplémoussé.

The camel train continued its slow, swaying arrival, the animals shuffling their large, soft feet on the gravel with expressions ranging from mild irritation to profound philosophical indifference. The air filled with their occasional sighs, the clink of brass trunks, the rustle of expensive silks, and the ongoing debate about fig preservation techniques.

Hidden behind the rhododendron, the Foxeteers watched, mesmerised by the sheer unexpectedness of it all. The scene was a riot of colour and confusion, utterly incongruous against the backdrop of the grey Normandy sky and the imposing, silent chateau.

Suddenly, one of the men – younger than the patriarch, dressed in vibrant blue robes but sporting an incongruously cheerful beret – broke away from supervising the unloading of a particularly argumentative camel (this one seemed to object to having its saddlebags removed on principle). He clapped his hands together, beaming, his voice carrying clearly across the driveway.

"Ah! Praise Allah!" he exclaimed, his tone brimming with genuine, effervescent excitement. "We have returned safely to Burj Al-Haddock Al-Mudahesh at long, long last!"

He gestured expansively towards the chateau, which did, from a certain angle, possess a vague resemblance to a surprised fish if one squinted and had consumed enough turnip vodka.

Behind the bush, three pairs of pointed fox ears twitched simultaneously.

"Burj Al-Haddock Al-Mudahesh?" Flavius whispered, scribbling frantically. "Tower of the Surprised Haddock! Consistent with Directions Given by Crab-Semaphore Operative X! Designation Confirmed!"

Crispin stared blankly. "So... Pamplemoussé just borrowed it? Or rented it? Or is the General secretly Mr. Al-Surprised-Haddock?"

Reynard's frown deepened, carving new lines of suspicion onto his vulpine features. The excitable man's declaration confirmed the villa had another identity entirely. Which meant General Hercule de Pamplemoussé, currently 'gathering intelligence' at the casino (or possibly wrestling giant squid, given the maps Lisa had seen), had some serious explaining to do. If, that is, they could ever get inside the Tower of the Surprised Haddock to ask him. The arrival of the apparent *real* owners complicated matters exponentially.

Lisa, drawn by the undeniable commotion filtering up from the driveway – sounds distinctly un-French and involving far more camel-related sighing than usual – had cautiously returned to the State Bedroom. Peering discreetly from behind a heavy

velvet curtain, she could just make out the chaotic scene unfolding below: the train of complaining camels, the exotically dressed people, the bewildering amounts of luggage. Her suspicion meter, already twitching after the highwayman book discovery, redlined completely. Pamplemoussé definitely wasn't the owner.

It was while she was mentally calculating the odds of her being accidentally included in a bulk sale of Persian rugs that she heard it – a familiar, frantic *whirring* sound approaching from within the chateau. She spun around just as the clockwork parrot admiral careened into the room, having apparently navigated via a combination of blind luck and ricocheting off suits of armour.

It performed an erratic loop around the four-poster bed, buzzed the collection of glass eyes (causing Algernon to swivel indignantly), and then made a wobbly beeline directly towards Lisa. Instead of landing gracefully, it seemed to misjudge its altitude and velocity, performing a clumsy barrel roll before crash-landing with a soft *thud* at her feet, landing upside down, its little cloth legs kicking feebly.

Lisa stared down at the capsized avian messenger. "Well," she muttered dryly, "So much for naval precision."

As she bent to pick it up, the parrot gave a final, determined *whirr-clack-ping!* Its right wing popped stiffly outwards, revealing the new scrap of paper tucked underneath. It then emitted a faint puff of what smelled suspiciously like burnt toast, and its clockwork mechanism fell completely silent once more. Mission accomplished, parrot exhausted.

Carefully, Lisa retrieved the note, recognising Reynard's practical, slightly spiky handwriting. She unfolded it and read:

"Lisa - Foxeteers here. Outside villa. Cannot enter (house sulking?). Are you safe? Confirm status. Armed to teeth (incl. tactical cheese, anti-badger spray, 1 x Ballistic Turnip). Await signal/diversion. Reynard."

A wave of relief washed over her – they'd received her message! They were here! Followed immediately by exasperation – of course the house was sulking and wouldn't let them in. And then, sheer incredulity. *Ballistic Turnip*? Flavius had clearly been spending too much time trying to weaponise vegetables again. And tactical cheese? Crispin's contribution, no doubt. Armed to the teeth indeed, with the most absurd arsenal imaginable.

But they were *here*. Outside. Waiting for *her* signal or a diversion. Just as the apparent *real* owners of the villa, the Al-Camemberti family, were busy unloading sentient camels and arguing about figs downstairs.

Lisa looked from the note to the inert parrot, then back towards the window overlooking the chaotic arrival scene. She was no longer just a potentially compromised guest; she was trapped between a rock (or possibly a sentient rhododendron bush hiding her allies) and a hard place (or possibly a large number of newly arrived, potentially hostile, villa owners). Creating a diversion just became significantly more complicated, and considerably more dangerous.

Events, having clearly consulted Murphy's Almanac and possibly conspired with Murphy himself, decided to unfold all at once.

While the Al-Camemberti family were still directing their sentient camels with a mixture of exasperation and familial affection ("No, Abdullah, the Ming vase does *not* go on your hump!"), and while the Foxeteers were debating the aerodynamic properties of the Ballistic Turnip in hushed whispers behind the rhododendron, two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, the faint sound of horse's hooves approached rapidly, not from the direction of town, but along a muddy track leading from the cliffs. A figure on horseback galloped into view, reining in dramatically near the main gate. It was, recognisably, General Pamplemoussé – except he wasn't wearing his immaculate uniform. Instead, he sported a slightly lopsided tricorne hat, a flowing black cape that had seen better days (and possibly a close encounter with a hedge), high boots splattered with mud, and a mask pushed up onto his forehead. He looked less like he'd spent the night gambling and more like he'd spent it unsuccessfully robbing coaches or possibly wrestling eels. His usual suave demeanour was replaced by a look of harried exhaustion.

Second, one of the younger, more inquisitive camels, perhaps detecting the scent of Crispin's tactical cheese or simply bored with unloading carpets, decided to investigate the large, rustling rhododendron bush. It nudged its way in, sniffed inquiringly at Crispin's ear, and then, with a resounding *CRUNCH* of displaced foliage, pulled its head back out, revealing the three

startled, leaf-covered faces of the Special Investigations Bureau to the assembled Al-Camemberti family.

Silence fell, broken only by the sighing camel and the distant cry of a seagull probably laughing. The Al-Camemberti patriarch, a man with eyes that had seen deserts bloom and markets crash, raised a questioning eyebrow.

Just as Reynard was mentally composing an official Bureau explanation for hiding in shrubbery armed with root vegetables, a third element added itself to the tableau. From the window of the State Bedroom high above, a makeshift rope fashioned from knotted, expensive-looking velvet sheets snaked downwards. Princess Lisa, clad still in the slightly-too-large hotel robe, descended with more determination than grace, landing in a slightly undignified heap on the gravel near the front door, the defunct parrot admiral tumbling down beside her.

Everyone froze.

The Highwayman-General stared at the suddenly arrived Al-Camemberti family and their camel train. The Al-Camemberti family stared at the highwayman who looked suspiciously like their long-term house-sitter/tenant. The Foxeteers stared at the highwayman, the family, and the Princess who had just rappelled down a stately home using bed linen. Lisa, dusting gravel and parrot feathers off her robe, stared at the General's outrageous attire, her bemused rescuers, and the crowd of strangers who seemed to own the place. The camels just looked bored.

Reynard stepped forward, adjusting his tunic and attempting to project an authority somewhat undermined by the leaf stuck to his nose. He cleared his throat.

"Right," he stated, his voice tight with the effort of processing multiple layers of absurdity simultaneously. "It appears," he surveyed the chaotic scene – the highwayman, the princess, the foxes, the family, the camels, the Tower of the Surprised Haddock – "that there is some explaining to be done..."

The tableau held for a fraction of a second – a frozen moment of collective disbelief punctuated by the sound of a camel thoughtfully digesting its cud. Then, instinct took over.

General Hercule de Pamplémoussé, or whoever he truly was, his eyes darting between the stern faces of the Al-Camemberti family, the newly arrived foxes, and the pyjama-clad Princess dusting herself off, clearly decided that explanation was futile and retreat was the only viable option. With a muttered curse that sounded distinctly un-General-like, he spurred his horse, attempting to wheel around and bolt back down the cliff path.

"He's escaping!" yelled Crispin.

"Negative!" snapped Flavius. Already anticipating potential hostilities (or just keen to field-test his latest invention), he had unslung a peculiar contraption from his pack – something resembling a modified crossbow but built to accommodate root vegetables. With surprising speed, he slapped a large, knobbly turnip onto the launch rail, made a swift calculation involving wind speed, horse velocity, and the inherent stubbornness of brassicas, and fired.

The Ballistic Turnip flew through the air with a faint, aggressive *whizzing* sound. It wasn't a particularly accurate shot – it missed the highwayman entirely but struck his horse squarely on the rump with a resounding *THWOCK*.

The horse, deeply offended at being assaulted by flying produce, let out a startled whinny, bucked violently, and refused to move another inch, instead opting to glare resentfully at the offending vegetable which now lay split in two on the gravel. The General, thrown off balance, lost his tricorne hat and nearly his seat, clinging desperately to the spooked animal's mane. His escape was, for the moment, comprehensively thwarted by root-vegetable-based intervention.

Seizing the opportunity presented by the turnip-induced stalemate, Reynard swiftly stepped forward from the now-decimated rhododendron bush. He brushed a final leaf from his tunic, smoothed his fur, and approached the Al-Camemberti patriarch – the stern-looking man with the tweed waistcoat over his robes. Ignoring the disgruntled highwayman, the bewildered princess, his own dishevelled agents, and the general background chaos of camels, Reynard executed a low, formal bow.

"Forgive the intrusion and the... unconventional arrival," he began, his voice calm and official, cutting through the ambient absurdity. "Director Reynard, Special Investigations Bureau, Paris." He gestured briefly towards his companions. "My agents, Field Operative Flavius, Field Operative Crispin." He paused, meeting the patriarch's dark, steady gaze. "We are here at the request of Her Highness, Princess Lisa." He nodded towards Lisa, who was now trying discreetly to hide the

defunct parrot behind her back. "It appears we have arrived amidst a situation of some... complexity."

The patriarch surveyed Reynard, then glanced at the turnip fragments, the thwarted highwayman, the princess in the robe, and his own camel train. He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Special Investigations," he mused, his voice a low rumble. "How very... unexpected. We were merely anticipating the arrival of the tide." He looked Reynard up and down. "Complexity, you say? Here? At the Tower of the Surprised Haddock? Imagine that."

While Reynard was attempting to establish some semblance of diplomatic protocol with the unflappable Al-Camemberti patriarch, the General/Highwayman saw his chance. His horse was still too spooked to be reliable, but perhaps he could make a run for it on foot, disappear into the coastal scrubland... or maybe just hide behind a particularly large camel. Regaining his balance, he slid down from the saddle, preparing to make a dash for freedom.

He didn't get two steps.

From amidst the Al-Camemberti entourage, the same excitable man who had joyfully proclaimed their arrival (the one with the beret) let out a sharp cry. "Hold, infidel! Or... house-sitter! Or whoever you are!" With surprising speed and accuracy, he grabbed a large, spiky artichoke from a nearby crate of exotic produce and hurled it underarm with the practiced aim of someone skilled in... well, in throwing artichokes, apparently.

The vegetable flew through the air in a perfect, thorny arc, connecting with the back of the escaping

General/Highwayman's head with a dull *thud* that was significantly more impactful than the turnip's rump-shot.

The General/Highwayman's eyes rolled up in his head, his escape forgotten. He swayed for a moment, a look of profound surprise replacing the panic, before crumpling bonelessly onto the gravel driveway, unconscious amidst the camel dung and the scattered fragments of the ballistic turnip.

Another silence descended, this one filled with slightly more astonishment than the last.

The excitable Al-Camemberti man beamed, dusting off his hands. "Excellent! A fine Cuisse de Nymphe artichoke – firm, yet with surprising aerodynamic properties! Always useful for deterring unwanted guests or settling theological debates."

Lisa stared at the unconscious figure of the man she'd spent a passionate afternoon with, now felled by produce. Crispin muttered something about adding artichokes to the Bureau's approved non-lethal arsenal. Flavius was already kneeling beside the unconscious man, presumably to check his pulse or perhaps analyse the impact velocity of the artichoke.

The patriarch simply raised an eyebrow again, looking from the unconscious man to the beaming artichoke-thrower, then back to Reynard. "As you were saying, Director? 'Complexity'?" He gestured towards the felled highwayman. "Perhaps you could start by explaining... him?"

Lisa decided it was time to assert her presence, however compromised her current attire and situation might be. She pulled the slightly-too-large robe tighter around herself, smoothed down imaginary creases, and stepped forward, trying

to project an aura of command that was somewhat hampered by her bare feet and the lingering presence of parrot feathers.

She addressed the Patriarch directly, adopting her most regal tone, though a distinct flush coloured her high cheekbones, betraying her embarrassment. "I," she announced, perhaps a decibel louder than necessary, "am Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude."

She gestured towards the Foxeteers, who were trying to look inconspicuous (difficult when you're a fox emerging from a bush and one of you is holding a turnip-launcher). "These," she declared, "are my men." She paused, correcting herself with a slight frown. "Well, foxes, actually. From the Special Investigations Bureau in Paris."

Indicating the prone figure now being cautiously examined by Flavius, she continued, "We are here investigating reports concerning a highwayman." Her gaze flickered towards the man who called himself Pamplemoussé, then quickly away. "I myself was... lured here by him under false pretences." She hesitated, the flush deepening. "And, errrr... well... subsequently taken prisoner. By the villa." She waved a hand vaguely at the chateau looming behind them, as if its sentient sulking was entirely responsible for her predicament. "It refused egress. Naturally, I summoned my 'men'," she indicated the foxes again, "who ingeniously effected my rescue using... ah... a clockwork parrot."

She finished lamely, acutely aware of how utterly bizarre her explanation sounded, even by the standards already established today. She tried to meet the Patriarch's gaze with regal confidence, hoping he wouldn't inquire too closely into the

nature of the 'luring' or the precise mechanics of parrot-based rescue operations.

The Patriarch listened impassively, stroking his beard. His dark eyes held a glint of something that might have been amusement, or perhaps just profound resignation to the universe's eccentricities. "A Princess," he repeated slowly. "Investigating highwaymen. Imprisoned by architecture. Rescued by clockwork poultry." He surveyed the scene again – his family, the camels, the foxes, the unconscious man, the princess in the robe. "You French," he murmured, seemingly to himself, "do have the most interesting house guests."

Lisa drew herself up, trying to regain composure and authority despite the embarrassing circumstances. She gestured towards the unconscious man being trussed up in silk. "Patriarch," she continued, her voice gaining a measure of firmness, though the flush still lingered on her cheeks. "It seems this man," she deliberately avoided using the name 'Pamplemoussé', "this... highwayman... has been most unscrupulously, and indeed illegally, using your magnificent dwelling while you have been away travelling."

She paused, letting the accusation hang in the air, hoping it sounded convincing. "Furthermore," she pressed on, warming to her theme, "it appears he has been using Burj Al-Haddock Al-Mudahesh," she pronounced the name with newfound confidence, having overheard the excitable man earlier, "as a base for his nefarious activities." She cast a meaningful glance at the 'Highwayman's Guide' which Reynard had discreetly retrieved from the dusty corridor.

Then came the part that addressed her own presence, delivered with a carefully crafted blend of indignation and vulnerability. "Activities which apparently include," she sniffed delicately, "making a habit of seducing damsels whom he perceives to be in a state of vulnerability." She avoided looking directly at the unconscious figure, focusing instead on the Patriarch with what she hoped was convincing victimhood. The implication, naturally, was that she was one such damsel, cleverly lured and preyed upon, thus explaining everything quite neatly (apart from the parts she was deliberately omitting).

The Al-Camemberti Patriarch considered Lisa's words, his dark eyes twinkling with an unreadable emotion. He stroked his beard once more, then turned to two sturdy-looking men from his entourage (who had paused in their attempt to coax a nervous monkey down from a camel's hump).

"Omar, Tariq," the Patriarch commanded calmly. "Be so good as to secure our... guest." He gestured towards the unconscious man on the gravel. "Use the Yazidi Silken Knot technique, if you please. The cerulean blue scarves should be strong enough. And perhaps prop him against Abdullah?" He indicated the particularly disdainful-looking camel that had exposed the Foxeteers. "Abdullah enjoys having something to lean against while he contemplates the futility of existence."

Omar and Tariq nodded gravely, produced several lengths of incredibly luxurious, brightly coloured silk scarves from their voluminous robes, and proceeded to tie up the unconscious General/Highwayman with a series of intricate and flamboyant knots that looked more suited to gift-wrapping royalty than restraining a rogue. Within moments, the man was securely

trussed and gently leaned against the side of the sighing camel Abdullah, looking like a poorly wrapped, unconscious present.

Having dealt with the immediate problem, the Patriarch turned back to Lisa. The sternness left his face, replaced by a surprisingly warm smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He executed a graceful bow, a gesture of genuine respect despite Lisa's borrowed robe and precarious position.

"Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude," he said, his voice smooth and courteous, though carrying an undertone of distinct amusement. "It appears the Al-Camemberti family owes you a significant debt of gratitude." He paused, letting the words sink in before delivering the twist. "You have done us a great service this day in exposing and capturing our... ah..." he glanced briefly at the silk-wrapped figure leaning against the camel, "...our *invited guest*."

The Foxeteers exchanged wide-eyed looks behind the Patriarch's back. *Invited guest?!*

The Patriarch beamed at the stunned Princess. "His presence," he continued smoothly, "while welcome, occasionally becomes... complicated. Your intervention has been most... clarifying." He spread his hands wide in a gesture of magnanimous generosity. "We are deeply indebted. How can the humble Al-Camemberti family, proprietors of this Tower of the Surprised Haddock, ever possibly repay you for your timely assistance and," he added, his eyes twinkling, "your innovative use of clockwork couriers?" He seemed entirely sincere, leaving Lisa wondering if repayment might involve camels, spices, or perhaps lessons in advanced artichoke-throwing.

The Patriarch clapped his hands again, beaming, clearly delighted with his explanation and the successful conclusion (via artichoke) of his 'research subject's' tenure. "But explaining is not enough! Gratitude must be shown! You have provided entertainment, invaluable research data, and," he gestured vaguely towards the driveway where Abdullah the camel presumably still stood guard over the unconscious highwayman, "solved a minor housekeeping issue."

He raised his voice, calling out commands in a rapid mix of Arabic and surprisingly fluent French. Almost immediately, servants hurried forward, not just with more food, but with the rewards.

"Princess Lisa," the Patriarch declared grandly, as a magnificent, haughty-looking white camel was led forward by Omar, adorned with a ridiculously opulent saddle inlaid with mother-of-pearl. "For your bravery and initiative – Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert! May she carry you swiftly... though perhaps not through central Paris during rush hour, one advises."

Lisa stared at the camel, which regarded her with intelligent, slightly condescending eyes. "Patriarch, I couldn't possibly..." she began, flustered.

"Nonsense!" he boomed cheerfully. "A trifle! And for your valiant men..." He gestured again, and Tariq led forward three more camels – slightly less grand than Yasmin, but still undeniably large, knobbly-kneed, and smelling strongly of camel. One immediately tried to eat Flavius's notebook. "One for each of you! Strong, reliable beasts. Excellent for carrying..."

well, whatever it is Special Investigators carry. Turnips, perhaps?"

Before Reynard could formulate a diplomatic refusal involving Bureau regulations on livestock procurement, more servants arrived bearing armfuls of shimmering, brightly coloured silks, depositing the bundles near Lisa and the Foxeteers. "And silks!" the Patriarch announced. "The finest from Damascus! For... well, for silken things!"

Finally, the *pièce de résistance*. A servant approached bearing a huge, ornate silver platter, heaped high with cooked, glistening sheep's eyes. They stared upwards with glassy, unblinking accusation. "And a small token of our esteem!" the Patriarch beamed. "A delicacy to share with your colleagues back in Paris! Enough for the entire Bureau, I should think!"

Lisa looked faint. Crispin made a small choking sound and turned slightly green. Flavius leaned closer, muttering, "Note ocular presentation technique... potential for preservation study..."

Reynard cleared his throat. "Patriarch Al-Camemberti, your generosity is... overwhelming. Truly. But Bureau regulations concerning the acceptance of livestock and... ocular delicacies... are notoriously strict..."

The Patriarch waved a dismissive hand, his smile never faltering, but his eyes held a hint of steel that suggested refusal was not merely impolite, but fundamentally impossible according to Al-Camemberti rules of hospitality. "Director, Princess, it is accepted! Our honour demands it, your bravery warrants it! To refuse would cast a shadow upon the Tower of

the Surprised Haddock, and Abdullah finds shadows so terribly dreary."

And so, Lisa and the three foxes found themselves the bewildered recipients of four camels of varying temperaments, several bolts of luxurious silk entirely unsuited for fieldwork, and a large, intimidating platter of sheep's eyes. They were honour-bound to accept. Getting them back to Paris, Reynard thought with a sinking heart, was going to involve paperwork of truly epic, possibly sentient, proportions. The convivial atmosphere persisted, though now tinged with the recipients' polite, frozen smiles of barely concealed horror.

The departure from Burj Al-Haddock Al-Mudahesh was less a coordinated exit and more a slow-motion catastrophe choreographed by bewildered foxes and deeply unimpressed camels. Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert allowed Princess Lisa to mount only after inspecting her silk gown with a critical eye, seemingly deeming it *just* acceptable. The three camels allocated to the Foxeteers proved more troublesome. Crispin's designated mount immediately tried to eat his armour polish; Flavius's insisted on arranging the investigation kit strapped to its back according to some obscure geometric principle; and Reynard's simply sighed with the profound weariness of a creature forced to associate with law enforcement.

Their cargo was distributed with difficulty. Bundles of vibrant silk were draped over humps, adding splashes of incongruous colour. The investigation paraphernalia was strapped on wherever it would fit, Flavius's absurdity meter now permanently stuck at 'Please Make It Stop'. The platter of sheep's eyes presented the greatest challenge. After Yasmin

flatly refused to carry it (communicating her displeasure via an eloquent sequence of nostril flares), it ended up balanced precariously on Flavius's camel, nestled between the seismograph and the anti-badger spray, with Flavius rigging a small, inadequate parasol salvaged from the chateau to try and keep the sun off them.

Their progress through the Normandy countryside was, to put it mildly, conspicuous. They moved at a pace dictated entirely by the camels' whims, which rarely coincided with Reynard's desire for haste. Locals stared from fields and cottage doorways, mouths agape, as the bizarre procession swayed past – a Princess attempting to look regal on a haughty camel, followed by three foxes on slightly grumpy ones, all laden with silks and investigation equipment, trailed by the faint, unsettling aroma of sheep's eyes kept slightly too warm. Chickens scattered, cows looked deeply confused, and a group of village elders were overheard debating whether it was an omen, a travelling circus that had severely miss-read its audience, or simply further evidence that Paris was exporting its madness to the provinces.

Attempts to procure supplies were fraught. Innkeepers reacted to requests for stables for four camels with blank incomprehension or outright panic. Trying to buy camel feed in villages that primarily catered to horses and cows proved impossible, forcing Crispin to sacrifice some of his tactical cheese ("They seem partial to the Roquefort, sir! The indignity!"). Flavius spent hours documenting the camels' intricate social dynamics and their shared disdain for French mud. Yasmin developed a habit of only drinking bottled mineral water, which Lisa somehow procured, while Reynard's

camel took to stopping unexpectedly to contemplate particularly interesting hedgerows.

Nights were spent camped by the roadside, the silks used as surprisingly comfortable (if garish) groundsheets. Crispin complained constantly about the smell of damp camel and the lack of decent coffee. Lisa adapted with surprising aplomb, finding Yasmin's aloof dignity strangely companionable and using the travel time to mentally replay chess games. Reynard despaired, trying to maintain some semblance of mission discipline while acutely aware they were transporting decomposing ocular delicacies across northern France on creatures designed for deserts. The sheep's eyes, despite Flavius's parasol and increasingly desperate attempts at preservation using Bureau-issue antiseptic wipes, were beginning to look reproachful.

Days later, significantly behind schedule and attracting stares normally reserved for invading armies or spontaneous outbreaks of polka dancing, the strange caravan finally approached the outskirts of Paris. The camels looked weary but resolute, the foxes looked frayed, Lisa looked surprisingly serene, and the sheep's eyes looked... well, best not to dwell on the sheep's eyes. Re-entering the city promised a whole new level of bureaucratic headaches and public spectacle. Reynard could already feel the paperwork piling up. This, he thought grimly, as Yasmin haughtily refused to step over a discarded cabbage leaf, was going to take some serious explaining back at headquarters.

The arrival of four camels, three foxes, one princess, several bolts of Damascan silk, and a rapidly deteriorating platter of

sheep's eyes at the entrance to the Special Investigations Bureau caused a stir even by Parisian standards. Traffic halted. Onlookers gathered, pointing and speculating wildly. The Bureau's concierge, a man who had seen it all (including, rumour had it, a sentient baguette demanding political asylum), simply stared for a full minute before quietly closing his logbook and deciding it was time for an early lunch, possibly a permanent one.

Inside, windows flew open, heads popped out. Bureau staff, accustomed to oddities, were nevertheless unprepared for the sight of Director Reynard attempting to coax his camel – which was trying to eat a potted plant by the entrance – into moving off the pavement, while Flavius meticulously labelled the sheep's eyes for 'Evidence Locker - Perishable/Questionable'. Crispin was loudly demanding someone confiscate the silks before they attracted moths or, worse, fashion designers.

Lisa slid gracefully (or as gracefully as possible after days on camelback) from the now kneeling Yasmin, trying to maintain an air of dignity amidst the chaos. As servants (presumably summoned by a mystified Bureau underling) began the bewildering process of unloading camels onto a Parisian street, Reynard managed to pull Lisa aside, sheltering momentarily behind Yasmin's haughty neck.

The noise – camels sighing, Parisians exclaiming, Crispin complaining, Flavius dictating notes on optimal camel unloading techniques – provided a strange sort of privacy. Reynard leaned closer, lowering his voice so only she could hear, his expression serious beneath the travel dust.

"Princess," he began, his voice a low murmur. "Your report was... illuminating. Mostly." He paused, fixing her with his sharp, analytical gaze. "But there's one thing I don't quite understand... a gap in the timeline, you might say."

Lisa braced herself. She had a feeling she knew what was coming.

"What *exactly* happened," Reynard asked quietly, but pointedly, "between you and 'Pamplermousse' in the period *after* you arrived at the villa together, and *before* he apparently left for the casino?"

Lisa's cheeks instantly flushed, a betraying wave of colour rising even after days spent cultivating regal composure atop a camel. She avoided his gaze, suddenly finding the intricate patterns on Yasmin's saddle intensely fascinating.

"Well, Reynard," she began, stalling slightly. "As I said, he lured me there... under false pretences..." She fiddled with a loose thread on the silk gown the Al-Camemberti had provided. "He was... initially quite charming. Persuasive. We... we talked for some time after breakfast." She waved a hand vaguely. "Discussed... various matters. Strategy. Philosophy. The inherent risks of sentient breakfast foods."

She chanced a glance at Reynard; his expression was patient but unconvinced. "And then," she hurried on, grasping for her previous excuse, "as I mentioned, the villa itself became... uncooperative. Quite imprisoning, really. Doors sticking, windows refusing to open... most peculiar. It was only then, feeling trapped, that I realised the necessity of summoning reinforcements via..." she gestured towards the now-empty

space where the parrot admiral might have been, "...avian clockwork."

She finished lamely, acutely aware of the holes in her story, the careful omissions, the convenient blaming of architecture. She *tried* to explain, but explaining the impulsive surrender to attraction and passion after discovering her host was likely a fraud and possibly a highwayman wasn't something she could easily articulate, especially not to the pragmatic Director of the Special Investigations Bureau while standing next to a camel on a Parisian street. She could only hope he wouldn't press the issue further. Reynard simply held her gaze for a moment longer, a thoughtful, unreadable expression in his eyes, before sighing and turning back to the logistical nightmare of camels, silks, and sheep's eyes.

Chapter Six: In Which an Owl Offers Unsolicited Judgement, Camels Cause Consternation, Clockwork is Reanimated, Bureaucracy Takes Flight, and the Special Airborne Service is Hatched

The headquarters of the Special Investigations Bureau, nestled in the slightly less reputable armpit of Parisian administration, enjoyed periods of calm in much the same way that a dormant volcano enjoys periods of not actively showering the surrounding landscape with molten rock and profound regret. That is to say, nervously, and with everyone keeping one eye on the exits. Following the... *recent unpleasantness* involving sentient chess pieces, reverse decapitations, hallucinogenic strawberries distributed by politically ambitious squirrels, and the chaotic acquisition of several large, opinionated dromedaries from Le Toucan, a lull had settled. It was the kind of lull that usually precedes either a budget review or something infinitely weirder.

Director Reynard was attempting to navigate the treacherous currents of Form 7b/Stroke-Alpha ("Justification for Expenditure on Non-Standard Investigative Vegetables") while simultaneously fielding complaints from the concierge about "excessive sighing" emanating from the courtyard. Flavius was meticulously cataloguing feathers retrieved from the Opera House incident (cross-referencing them against known avian species and theoretical biscuit content), and Crispin was engaged in his usual vital work of complaining about the coffee and strategically shedding fur onto Reynard's paperwork.

The relative normality was disturbed only by two recent, and largely unexplained, additions to the Bureau's roster.

The first was perched stoically atop a filing cabinet labelled "MISC. – HANDLE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE". It was a Eurasian eagle-owl, *Bubo bubo*, though Crispin insisted on calling it 'His Lordship Hootington the Third'. No one quite knew where it had come from. It had simply *appeared* one Tuesday morning, sitting there, fixing the assembled foxes with an unblinking yellow stare that suggested it had witnessed the heat death of the universe and hadn't been particularly impressed. Attempts to remove it had been met with a level of passive resistance so profound it bordered on the offensive. It never made a sound, communicated exclusively through subtle shifts in its ear tufts, and seemed to derive quiet satisfaction from observing the Bureau's more chaotic moments. Reynard, after failing to find any regulation specifically prohibiting the officerial occupation by large, judgemental owls, had simply added it to the inventory under 'Fixtures & Fittings, Feathered, Possibly Sentient'.

The *other* recent addition, however, was far less silent and considerably more problematic, currently residing noisily in the courtyard below. The faint, but persistent, sound of a camel attempting to rearrange paving stones according to unknown aesthetic principles drifted through the open window, punctuated by an occasional haughty snort or a sigh of truly soul-crushing ennui.

Reynard slammed his paw down on a newly arrived demand from the Ministry of Fauna Interaction (Form 9c/Camelid). "Blast these camels!" he exclaimed, startling Crispin mid-shed.

"Minister of Fauna demanding triplicate justifications!
Concierge complaining about unsolicited spitting!
Quartermaster refusing requisitions for 'artisanal dates'! What,
in the name of Dagobert's turnip, are we supposed to *do* with
four overgrown, opinionated, desert-dwelling... liabilities?"

Crispin brightened momentarily. "Send 'em back?" he
suggested hopefully. "We could wrap up that platter of sheep's
eyes—what's left of 'em, anyway—attach a polite note? 'Return
to sender, care of the Tower of the Surprised Haddock. Thanks
for the memories, please cease expectorating on our
begonias'?"

Flavius looked up from his feather analysis, adjusting his
spectacles. "Analysis suggests return is logistically complex
and diplomatically inadvisable, sir. Patriarch Al-Camemberti's
insistence on the 'gift' seemed culturally binding. Asset Y
(Yasmin) exhibits high levels of territoriality regarding the
sunniest patch of cobblestone, Asset A (Abdullah) registers
significant inertia potentially measurable on the Richter scale,
Asset C (Cheesy) has developed a worrying fixation on Agent
Crispin's emergency cheese supply, and Asset M (Marigold)
appears to be attempting rudimentary urban planning with the
recycling bins." He paused, considering. "However, their
collective load-bearing capacity is non-trivial..."

"Useful?" Crispin yelped, incredulous. "Useful? Abdullah's
only useful if you need someone to demonstrate advanced
sighing techniques! Yasmin tried to spit-roast the mail courier
yesterday! Cheesy keeps trying to eat Form 7b/Stroke-Alpha –
says it lacks fibre! And Marigold thinks he's Baron Haussmann
reincarnated with worse taste! They're useless!"

Reynard stroked his chin, a familiar, desperate glint appearing in his eye as he stared out the window at Abdullah, who had now apparently entered a staring contest with a drainpipe. "Wait..." he murmured. "Load-bearing... large... imposing presence... surprisingly resilient to absurdity..." He turned back to his agents. "Crispin, Flavius... perhaps... perhaps they *could* be useful. Unconventional assets for unconventional threats? Think of the possibilities! Heavy transport! Mobile surveillance platforms – they're certainly tall enough! Psychological deterrence!"

Flavius considered this. "Potential exists, sir," he conceded cautiously. "Pending rigorous assessment, development of appropriate motivational stimuli beyond cheese, and acquisition of significantly larger evidence bags."

Crispin remained unconvinced. "Assets? Sir, they're hairy, grumpy liabilities! Unless the next threat involves needing something really tall to look disdainful or rearrange street furniture in a baffling manner, we're doomed!"

"Nevertheless!" Reynard declared, seizing the thin sliver of hope. "Potential! We'll need... management. Someone to assess their capabilities. Later." He waved a paw dismissively, pushing the immediate problem aside as effectively as Abdullah ignored direct commands. "For now, file them under 'Pending – Possible Strategic Camel Deployment'. Right now, we have more pressing mechanical concerns." He gestured towards Flavius's workbench.

[NEW SECTION ENDS HERE]

The second addition *currently requiring attention* sat in pieces on Flavius's workbench: the clockwork parrot admiral. Having survived its harrowing cross-country flight and subsequent crash-landing during the Le Toucan affair (an incident Reynard was determined to bury under several layers of strategically misfiled reports), the parrot was undergoing extensive repairs. Flavius, humming softly, was using tools normally employed for watchmaking or possibly dentistry on field mice, carefully reassembling its intricate brass innards.

"Almost there," he murmured, tightening a minuscule screw. "Just need to recalibrate the squawk-synchroniser and bypass the faulty existential dread circuit..." He gave a final twist, and a faint *whirr-click* emanated from the parrot. Its glass eyes snapped open. "Shiver me timbers!" it squawked suddenly, its voice tinny but surprisingly loud. "Avast ye, landlubbers! Where's the grog?" Crispin jumped. "Blast it, Flavius! Did you have to fix the noisy bit first?"

Flavius beamed, adjusting his spectacles. "A successful reactivation! Though it seems to have defaulted to its previous 'Admiral' persona's core vocabulary subroutine. Highly illogical, but fascinating!"

The parrot ruffled its newly repaired cloth feathers. "Batten down the hatches! Prepare to repel boarders! And somebody find me a cracker!"

It was at this precise moment that destiny, presumably having finished its lunch break, decided to intervene. A frantic screech echoed from the street outside, followed by a flurry of panicked shouts. Reynard was at the window in an instant. "Report!" he barked.

A junior guard stationed below yelled back, "Sir! It's Madame Dubois' prize-winning poodle, Fifi! Chasing Monsieur Boulanger's escaped prize homing pigeon! They've gone up onto the rooftops!"

Reynard sighed. "Inter-species conflict escalating to aerial pursuit. Just another Thursday." He turned back to the room. "Crispin, standard rooftop pursuit protocol!" Crispin groaned. "Aw, sir! Not the roofs again! Last time I got stuck in a chimney and smelled like smoked herring for a week!"

"Nevertheless," Reynard snapped. "That pigeon might be carrying vital... uh... bread-related intelligence!"

As Crispin reluctantly grabbed a grappling hook, Reynard's gaze fell upon the impassive owl, then to the squawking clockwork parrot. An idea, the kind of idea forged in desperation and fuelled by lukewarm coffee, sparked behind his eyes. It was unconventional. It was absurd. It was, therefore, perfect. "Hold!" Reynard commanded, raising a paw. "Standard protocols are insufficient for the modern complexities of Parisian crime!" He pointed dramatically at the owl. "You! Hootington! Observe!"

The owl blinked. He pointed at the parrot. "You! Admiral! Prepare for deployment!" "Aye aye, Cap'n!" the parrot squawked. "Ready to keelhaul the bilge rats!" Flavius looked bewildered. "Sir? Deployment?"

"Gentle-foxes," Reynard declared, puffing out his chest slightly, "for too long this Bureau has been hampered by its terrestrial limitations! We face threats that require... elevation! Surveillance from above! Perhaps even the occasional aerial

nudge!" He surveyed his two new 'assets'. The silent, judgemental owl. The vociferous, possibly unstable, clockwork parrot.

"It is clear," he announced, "that the time has come to formalize our airborne capabilities! I hereby decree the formation of a new elite unit!" He paused, savouring the moment of bureaucratic creation. "The Special Airborne Service! The S.A.S!"

Silence fell, broken only by the parrot muttering, "Walk the plank, ye scurvy dogs!" Crispin stared. "The SAS, sir? Consisting of... His Lordship up there and... Captain Clockwork?" "Precisely!" Reynard confirmed. "Our eyes and ears in the sky! Think of it! Hootington provides silent, all-seeing observation and strategic disapproval. The Admiral offers rapid reconnaissance and loud, possibly confusing, verbal interventions!"

The owl turned its head slowly towards the parrot, fixing it with a look of profound disdain. The parrot squawked defiantly back, "Avast, ye overgrown feather duster!"

"Their first mission," Reynard declared, ignoring the nascent inter-service rivalry, "Operation: Poodle & Pigeon! Retrieve the pigeon, deter the poodle, and... try not to cause an international incident." He looked expectantly at the owl. "Agent Hootington, deploy!" The owl merely blinked again, unmoved. Reynard sighed. "Right. Perhaps requires a more... hands-on approach." He looked at Flavius. "Can you persuade His Lordship onto the windowsill?"

Flavius approached the owl cautiously, offering a piece of Crispin's emergency biscuit (pilfered when Crispin wasn't looking). The owl ignored the biscuit but, with a silent, almost imperceptible shrug of its feathered shoulders, launched itself from the filing cabinet and glided noiselessly to the open window, landing with barely a whisper. It peered out at the rooftops, then turned its head back to stare pointedly at Reynard, as if to say, 'And?'

"Excellent!" Reynard beamed. "Now, Admiral!" He turned to the parrot, still perched on Flavius's workbench. "Your orders! Ascend! Locate pigeon! Report location! Avoid poodles!" "Aye aye!" the parrot screeched.

Flavius quickly wound a small key in its side. With a whirring of gears, the parrot launched itself somewhat unsteadily into the air, performed a wobbly loop-the-loop around Reynard's head, narrowly missed colliding with the owl, and zipped out the window, shouting, "Fifteen men on a dead man's chest! Yo ho ho and a bottle of... oil!"

Reynard, Crispin, and Flavius watched from the window as their newly formed Special Airborne Service began its first operation. The owl glided silently towards the higher rooftops, a shadow against the grey Paris sky. The clockwork parrot buzzed erratically between chimneys, occasionally letting out nautical curses, its flight path resembling a drunken bluebottle. Below, on the street, Madame Dubois could be heard screaming Fifi's name, while Monsieur Boulanger lamented the potential loss of his prize-winning racer.

"Well," Crispin muttered, scratching his head. "It's certainly... airborne. And possibly special. Though I suspect 'Service' might be stretching it a bit."

Flavius, however, was already designing modifications. "Perhaps miniature grappling hooks for the Admiral, sir? And improved optical sensors for Agent Hootington?"

Reynard simply nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. The SAS was unorthodox, yes. Absurd, undoubtedly. But in a city like Paris, sometimes the most absurd solutions were the only ones that stood a chance. The Bureau now had wings – one pair silent and judgemental, the other clockwork and noisy. The Parisian underworld, and possibly its pigeon population, would never be the same.

The Parisian skyline, viewed from street level, was a jagged, chaotic assortment of leaning timbers, improbable gargoyles, and chimneys belching smoke of questionable origin. Viewed from *above*, however, by the newly christened Special Airborne Service, it was revealed to be an entirely different kind of chaos – a complex, three-dimensional maze of steep slate slopes, treacherous gutters clogged with generations of avian debris, precarious chimney pots, and the occasional, entirely unexpected, rooftop garden where someone was attempting to grow turnips against all known laws of horticulture and common sense.

Agent Hootington, the Eurasian eagle-owl, ascended with the silent, effortless grace of a shadow detaching itself from the ground. He gained altitude, his massive wings beating with slow, deliberate strokes, his yellow eyes scanning the terracotta landscape below. He wasn't so much *searching* as *presiding*. He

radiated an aura of profound, ancient judgment, as if the frantic antics of poodles and pigeons were merely fleeting, insignificant footnotes in the vast, turgid novel of existence. Occasionally, he would bank slightly, perhaps having spotted a promising thermal, or maybe just having passed silent condemnation on a particularly ugly weather vane.

In stark contrast, Admiral Parrot buzzed through the aerial pathways like a deranged clockwork insect. Its newly repaired mechanism whirred with manic energy, occasionally emitting sparks and the faint scent of burnt oil. Its flight path was less 'reconnaissance pattern' and more 'randomised trajectory of a ricocheting bullet'. "Avast ye, rooftop gargoyle!" it squawked, narrowly avoiding a collision with a particularly grumpy-looking stone demon picking its nose. "Prepare to be boarded! Show us yer pieces of eight!"

The gargoyle didn't respond, being made of stone and currently preoccupied.

Down below, Reynard, Crispin, and Flavius craned their necks, trying to follow the progress of their airborne assets. "Can you see anything?" Reynard asked Flavius, who was squinting through a pair of Bureau-issue binoculars that occasionally showed him the future, but only on Tuesdays, and usually incorrectly.

"Negative, sir," Flavius reported. "Agent Hootington appears to be establishing strategic oversight from altitude. Admiral Parrot is currently engaging in aggressive negotiations with a chimney cowl."

"Why did we think this was a good idea?" Crispin groaned, rubbing his neck. "My neck's going to seize up. And what if Hootington just decides to fly off? He doesn't exactly seem invested in Bureau protocols."

"Nonsense," Reynard said, though without much conviction. "He has... a sense of duty. Probably. And the Admiral is programmed for... well, loudness, anyway."

High above, Agent Hootington spotted movement. Not with any sense of urgency, but with the weary recognition of an inevitable disturbance in the cosmic order. Two rooftops over, near the bell tower of Saint-Eustache-du-Coin-Perdu (St Eustace of the Lost Corner), a small white poodle was scrabbling frantically at the base of a large, ornate bell, yapping with the hysterical insistence only achievable by small, pampered canines convinced the world owes them an explanation. Fluttering just out of reach, trapped within the bell's cavernous interior, was a thoroughly panicked pigeon, cooing desperately and trying to remember if its homing insurance covered acts of Poodle.

Hootington observed this tableau for a long moment, perhaps contemplating the transient nature of inter-species conflict or maybe just wondering if pigeons tasted better grilled or raw. He banked silently, circling once.

Meanwhile, Admiral Parrot, having abandoned its argument with the chimney cowl (which it had accused of being a 'scurvy dog in disguise'), zoomed past, narrowly missing Hootington. "Ahoy, matey!" it squawked at the owl. "Seen any treasure?"

Hootington ignored it, executing a perfect, silent dive towards the bell tower. The parrot, mistaking the dive for a comradely manoeuvre, followed erratically. "Dive! Dive! Man the depth charges!" it shrieked, whirring dangerously close to the bell tower's ancient stonework.

Hootington landed noiselessly on the lip of the massive bronze bell, peering down at the trapped pigeon and the yapping poodle below. Fifi the poodle paused her assault, startled by the sudden appearance of a very large, very yellow-eyed bird that clearly hadn't read the chapter on 'Appropriate Rooftop Fauna'. The pigeon froze, sensing that its situation had potentially just escalated from 'inconveniently trapped' to 'potentially lunch'.

Before Hootington could enact whatever plan was forming in his inscrutable owl brain (which might have involved strategic waiting, intense staring, or simply eating the pigeon), Admiral Parrot arrived with the subtlety of a dropped crate of anvils. "Surrender the booty, ye scallywags!" it yelled, performing a wobbly figure-eight inside the bell chamber. Its clockwork whirring echoed deafeningly within the confined space.

The noise was too much for Fifi. With a final, ear-splitting yelp, the poodle lost its footing on the steep roof tiles and tumbled backwards, performing a series of undignified rolls before sliding down the slope and vanishing over the edge, presumably into a conveniently placed laundry basket or Monsieur Dubois' prize-winning marrow patch several stories below.

The pigeon, momentarily forgotten by its canine tormentor but now faced with a giant owl and a demented clockwork parrot shouting pirate clichés inside its reverberating prison, made a

decision. Spotting the momentary distraction caused by the parrot's noisy entrance, it saw its chance. With a surge of adrenaline-fueled flapping, it shot upwards, past Hootington's impassive beak, out of the bell chamber, and into the open air.

"The prisoner escapes!" shrieked the Admiral. "After him, ye swabs! Give no quarter!" It attempted a sharp turn to follow but miscalculated, its clockwork wings clipping the inside of the bell with a discordant CLANG that resonated across the rooftops. The parrot spun wildly, emitted a shower of sparks, and squawked, "Abandon ship! Glug glug glug..." before its mechanism seized up completely. It dropped like a stone, landing silently amidst the pigeon debris at the bottom of the bell.

Hootington watched the pigeon fly off towards the Bureau headquarters, watched the poodle disappear over the roof edge, observed the demise of his clockwork colleague, and then blinked slowly. He remained perched on the bell lip for a moment longer, perhaps composing a silent report on the operational inefficiencies he had just witnessed. Then, with a single, powerful beat of his wings, he pushed off, gliding effortlessly back towards the Bureau window, leaving the deactivated Admiral stranded in the bell tower.

Down below, the Foxeteers witnessed the pigeon fluttering gratefully towards its home coop, heard the distant yelp and subsequent silence of Fifi, and saw Hootington returning alone.

"Well?" Reynard demanded as the owl landed silently back on the filing cabinet. "Report, Agent Hootington!"

The owl swivelled its head, fixed Reynard with its intense yellow stare, and then, with great deliberation, regurgitated a small, perfectly formed pellet onto Reynard's desk, right on top of Form 7b/Stroke-Alpha.

Crispin peered at it. "Is... is that the report, sir?" Flavius adjusted his spectacles. "Analysis suggests partially digested Rodentia and trace elements of pigeon feather. Conclusion: Subject encountered. Threat neutralised... possibly. Asset requires retrieval." He indicated the distant bell tower. Reynard stared at the pellet, then at the impassive owl, then sighed the deep, weary sigh of a Director whose Special Airborne Service clearly required significant further development. Preferably involving less clockwork and more common sense.

Retrieving the deactivated Admiral Parrot from the bell tower of Saint-Eustache-du-Coin-Perdu involved grappling hooks, several muttered apologies to startled pigeons, and Crispin complaining loudly that SAS really stood for 'Seriously Absurd Stupidity'. Once recovered, the clockwork bird – looking less like a proud naval officer and more like something that had lost a fight with a cement mixer – was laid gently upon Flavius's workbench back at Bureau headquarters.

Agent Hootington watched impassively from his filing cabinet perch, occasionally swivelling his head with a faint, dry rustle that might have been disapproval or just feathers settling. Crispin hovered nearby, ostensibly offering moral support, which mainly consisted of pointing out the various dents and missing bits. "Look at 'im," Crispin lamented, poking a bent wing strut. "Proper knackered. Flew one mission and conked out. Some elite unit *that* is. Needs more grit. And fewer bells."

Flavius ignored him, deep in diagnostic mode. He adjusted his spectacles, peered through a large magnifying glass that had once belonged to a myopic jeweller who specialized in engraving scripture onto grains of rice, and produced a series of delicate clicks and whirrs with his toolkit. "Damage assessment indicates significant structural deformation," he murmured, probing the Admiral's innards. "Impact trauma consistent with bell-related deceleration trauma. The mainspring is overwound, the squawk-synchroniser is fractured, and the primary volitional gear appears to be suffering from... acute disillusionment."

"Can you fix it?" Reynard asked, observing the delicate operation over Flavius's shoulder. "The SAS is somewhat under strength with only Agent Hootington operational, and his reporting methods," he glanced meaningfully at the owl pellet still residing on Form 7b/Stroke-Alpha, "lack clarity."

"Fear not, sir," Flavius declared, his eyes gleaming with technical fervour. "Repair is feasible. Indeed, this presents an opportunity for... enhancement!" He rummaged excitedly in a box overflowing with tiny cogs, springs, lenses salvaged from discarded opera glasses, and components labelled in precise, spidery handwriting: 'Potential Anti-Gravity Coil (Experimental - Do Not Shake)', 'Spare Sarcasm Modulator (Faulty)', 'Essence of Punctuality (Distilled)'.

"Standard clockwork repair is insufficient for an operative of the SAS," Flavius explained, selecting a coil of gleaming, impossibly fine wire. "We require... state-of-the-art solutions!" Drawing on knowledge that seemed oddly advanced for a Parisian fox – perhaps gleaned from obscure engineering

pamphlets, or maybe inspired by your own interests in fabrication, given how parallel universes occasionally leak – he produced a small, intricate device. It involved heated nozzles, reservoirs of strange, quick-setting resin (that smelled faintly of cheese), and complex gearing.

"My Incremental Material Accretion Device!" he announced proudly. "It allows for the precise fabrication of replacement components *in situ*!" With delicate movements, the device whirred to life, extruding tiny, perfect replicas of the Admiral's broken gears and struts from the cheese-scented resin.

"Hardened casein polymer," Flavius explained happily.

"Excellent tensile strength, minimal friction coefficient, and entirely edible in an emergency."

Crispin looked dubious. "You're fixing him with cheese?" "It's merely the substrate!" Flavius retorted defensively. "The *real* advancement lies elsewhere!" He carefully selected a tiny, shimmering sliver of metal that seemed to bend light around it. "This," he whispered reverently, "is a filament of Refined Improbability. Acquired from a philosopher who accidentally divided by zero. It should enhance the Admiral's operational resilience and," he added hopefully, "improve his tactical decision-making."

He then produced a minuscule tuning fork that hummed with a strange, almost inaudible frequency. "And for the power source..." He gently tapped the fork against the parrot's mainspring. The spring glowed faintly with an internal blue light. "Residual magic! Siphoned from the ambient background count left over from that incident with the sentient chess set.

Far more reliable than conventional winding mechanisms, though prone to occasional bursts of existential angst."

The repairs and upgrades took several hours, involving much intricate work, occasional faint blue sparks, and the Admiral emitting random snippets of sea shanties whenever the tuning fork got too close. Finally, Flavius stepped back, wiping his paws. The Admiral Parrot sat upright on the workbench, gleaming. His dents were gone, replaced by smooth resin patches. His feathers seemed brighter, his glass eyes sharper. He looked... upgraded.

"Phase One complete," Flavius announced. "Shall we initiate operational testing, sir?" Reynard nodded cautiously. "Proceed, Agent Flavius. But perhaps stand back slightly."

Flavius wound a small, secondary key (the magical spring apparently needing a 'kick-start'). The Admiral whirred, clicked, and stood smartly to attention, its tiny hat perfectly straight. "Admiral Parrot, reporting for duty!" it squawked, its voice clearer now, less tinny. "All systems nominal! Probability drive engaged! Ready to annoy the enemy into submission!"

It launched itself into the air, circling the office not erratically, but with smooth, controlled movements. It hovered precisely over Crispin's head. "Agent Crispin," the parrot declared in a perfect imitation of Reynard's voice, "Your recent complaints regarding coffee quality have been noted and forwarded to the Committee for Frivolous Grievances. Expect a resolution within five to seven working centuries."

Crispin spluttered indignantly. "Hey! It can't do that!" The Admiral then swooped towards the filing cabinet where

Hootington sat. It hovered directly in front of the owl, nose to beak. "Agent Hootington," it stated, now mimicking Flavius's precise tones, "Analysis indicates your pellet-based reporting system requires significant enhancement for clarity and hygiene. Suggest transition to triplicate written reports forthwith."

Hootington merely blinked, radiating waves of silent, owl-based fury.

"Remarkable!" breathed Flavius. "The vocal mimicry upgrade is fully functional! And the Improbability filament seems to have instilled a certain... bureaucratic assertiveness!" The Admiral zipped back to the workbench. "Mission accomplished! Requesting immediate supply of high-grade crackers and lubricant!"

Reynard stroked his chin, watching the parrot preen its resin-patched feathers. "Impressive work, Flavius. Though the personality upgrades may require... adjustment." He eyed the parrot. "Admiral, can you still perform basic reconnaissance?" "Affirmative, Director!" the parrot chirped in its own voice again. "Visual and auditory sensors operating at peak efficiency! Can identify a dropped sou from three rooftops away and analyse the thread count of suspicious undergarments from altitude! Ready for next deployment! Bring on the poodles!"

The SAS Mark II was operational. Quieter, more stable (perhaps), and definitely cheekier. Whether the hint of magic and cheese-based technology would make it more *effective* remained to be seen. But one thing was certain: it was going to

be interesting. Hootington closed his eyes, perhaps in resignation.

Chapter Seven: In Which Royalty Commands Revelry, Camels Consider Protocol, Avians Prepare for Public Appearance, a New Division is Formed (Mostly Out of Desperation), Bassoons Prove Problematic, Poultry Provides Profanity, Felines Face Abduction, and Leadership is Unexpectedly Thrust Upon a Princess

The presence of four large, opinionated camels taking up residence in the small courtyard behind the Special Investigations Bureau headquarters did little to improve the already strained relationship between the Bureau and the Ministry of Urban Aesthetics (a notoriously fussy department whose primary function seemed to be complaining about gargoyles with poor posture). Parisians, while accustomed to a certain level of daily absurdity – this was, after all, a city where statues occasionally went walkabout and pigeons might spontaneously transmogrify into gingerbread – drew the line at camels attempting to form a queue outside the local *boulangerie*.

Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert had claimed the sunniest spot in the courtyard and spent her days regally ignoring everyone, occasionally spitting with unnerving accuracy at pigeons she deemed insufficiently deferential. Abdullah, the existentialist, leaned against the wall, sighing profoundly and contemplating the inherent meaninglessness of cobblestones versus sand. The other two camels, whom Crispin had provisionally nicknamed 'Cheesy' (due to an acquired taste for Roquefort) and 'Marigold' (after the wilted garland he still inexplicably wore), had taken to rearranging the Bureau's carefully sorted recycling bins according to principles only they understood, possibly involving Feng Shui or advanced theories of rubbish distribution.

Procuring appropriate sustenance was proving a logistical nightmare. Hay was grudgingly supplied by the Royal Mews, but the camels treated it with the disdain usually reserved for poorly constructed arguments or weak tea. They showed a distinct preference for exotic fare – dates, figs, Crispin's tactical cheese, and, in Yasmin's case, imported mineral water served at precisely room temperature. Reynard found himself buried under a new avalanche of requisition forms: "Form 9c/Camelid: Request for Non-Standard Forage (Desert Fruits/Artisanal Cheese)", "Appendix IV: Justification for Mineral Water Expenditure (Sentient Transport Asset)", and the dreaded "Ministry of Fauna Interaction Permit (Urban Environment - Dromedary Class)".

"This," Reynard declared one morning, surveying the courtyard scene – Abdullah sighing, Yasmin spitting, Cheesy attempting to unionise the dustbins – "is untenable. We cannot simply maintain four large, philosophical desert quadrupeds as

decorative courtyard ornaments." "Can't we just give 'em back?" Crispin suggested hopefully, dodging a well-aimed gobbet of Yasmin's displeasure. "Send a note to Mr Al-What's-his-name? 'Thanks for the camels, lovely thought, but they clash with the décor'?" "Patriarch Al-Camemberti was quite insistent," Reynard reminded him grimly. "Refusal would have caused a diplomatic incident involving honour, surprised haddocks, and possibly artichokes. We are, for better or worse, stuck with them." He paused, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Which means... we need to make them useful."

Crispin stared. "Useful? Sir, Abdullah spent three hours yesterday contemplating a single paving stone. Yasmin's primary use seems to be intimidating the mail courier. What possible use could they be?" "Ah," Reynard said, a familiar glint of slightly desperate inspiration in his eyes. "That is where innovative management comes in. These are not merely camels; they are... assets. Large, sturdy, surprisingly intelligent assets." He conveniently ignored Abdullah's current existential trance. "They can carry heavy loads. Their sheer presence is... imposing. And," he added, recalling the journey from Le Toucan, "they possess a certain resilience to absurdity." "They *caused* most of the absurdity, sir!" Crispin protested. "Precisely! They are already acclimatised to Bureau operations!" Reynard concluded triumphantly. "Therefore, they shall form a new support division!"

Flavius, who had been attempting to measure Abdullah's sigh frequency with a modified barometer, looked up with interest. "A dedicated logistical unit, sir? Excellent! Their load-bearing capacity is significant, theoretically allowing for transport of heavier field equipment – portable labs, reinforced evidence

containers, perhaps even the Ballistic Turnip launcher itself!" "More than logistics, Flavius," Reynard corrected. "Think broader. Think... unconventional." He surveyed the camels again. "They are observant. They are patient – ridiculously so, in Abdullah's case. They possess a certain... gravity. They shall be our Special *Unmounted* Division." He emphasised the 'unmounted', having briefly pictured Crispin trying to ride Yasmin and deciding the resulting paperwork wasn't worth it.

"A non-mounted camel division?" Crispin asked flatly. "What exactly will they *do*? Stand around looking philosophical? Intimidate suspects with passive-aggressive sighs?"

"Precisely!" Reynard confirmed again, ignoring the sarcasm. "Heavy transport, certainly. Secure portage of sensitive items." He glanced towards the evidence locker where the platter of sheep's eyes was presumably still residing, radiating disapproval. "Crowd observation – their height offers an excellent vantage point. And yes, psychological deterrence. Imagine facing questioning while Abdullah contemplates the futility of your alibi." He clapped his paws together. "Right! Training begins immediately! Crispin, you shall be Drill Sergeant. Your... unique motivational techniques might prove effective." Crispin groaned. "Me? Training camels? Sir, have you seen the way Yasmin looks at me? It's like she knows where I hide my emergency biscuits!"

The training of the newly designated 'Bureau Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit' (BACHSU – a name chosen by Reynard for its satisfyingly bureaucratic thud) proved even more challenging than anticipated. Crispin, armed with a training manual hastily adapted from 'Basic Obedience for Domesticated Rodents' and a pocketful of bribes (mostly

cheese), attempted to instil discipline. "Right, you hairy lumps!" he barked on the first morning. "Formation drill! Line abreast! On the double!" Yasmin flicked an ear dismissively and continued sunbathing. Abdullah sighed and shifted his weight, causing a nearby stack of empty crates to wobble precariously. Cheesy tried to eat the training manual, while Marigold began meticulously rearranging loose cobblestones into what looked suspiciously like a critique of Crispin's leadership style.

Flavius attempted a more scientific approach. He devised a series of cognitive tests involving pattern recognition and spatial reasoning (using different types of cabbage). The results were inconclusive, mainly because Cheesy ate the testing materials. He tried measuring their responses to different musical stimuli; Yasmin showed mild interest only in extremely avant-garde opera, while Abdullah seemed to sink deeper into melancholy when exposed to anything resembling a cheerful tune.

Teaching stealth was a particular failure. Encouraging creatures the size of small sheds, prone to loud sighs and haughty spitting, to move quietly through the alleys of Paris was like trying to teach algebra to a pot plant. Abdullah, when asked to proceed silently, merely looked thoughtful for a very long time before emitting a sigh that rattled windows three streets away.

Integration with the other Bureau units was equally problematic. Agent Hootington simply stared down at the camels from his perch, radiating silent judgment. Admiral Parrot, recently repaired and upgraded, attempted to teach them sea shanties, resulting in Yasmin trying to spit at him and

Abdullah looking even more morose than usual. "Belay that sighing, ye landlubber!" the parrot squawked at Abdullah. "Show some backbone! Hoist the mainsail!" Abdullah responded with a sigh of such profound existential weight it seemed to drain the colour from the immediate vicinity.

Yet, slowly, grudgingly, a semblance of order emerged. Reynard discovered Yasmin responded surprisingly well to blatant flattery regarding her 'superior desert lineage'. Flavius found Abdullah could be motivated by engaging him in deep philosophical debates (though this often left Flavius questioning his own existence). Crispin learned that Cheesy would do almost anything for a piece of aged Gruyère, and Marigold could be persuaded to stand still if allowed to rearrange nearby objects into aesthetically pleasing, if entirely baffling, patterns.

They weren't soldiers. They weren't even particularly cooperative employees. But they were large, surprisingly strong, and possessed unique... talents. Yasmin's intimidating stare proved remarkably effective at clearing unauthorized loiterers from the Bureau's doorway. Abdullah's philosophical presence had an unexpectedly calming effect during tense suspect interviews (suspects often confessed just to escape the profound weight of his silent contemplation). Cheesy's appetite proved useful for disposing of certain types of classified (and possibly edible) waste, and Marigold demonstrated an uncanny ability to create impromptu roadblocks using nothing but street debris and sheer force of will.

Reynard officially commissioned the BACHSU one blustery afternoon. Standing before the four camels (three attentive, one

contemplating a crack in the wall), flanked by his foxes, the owl, and the parrot, he read from a hastily drafted charter. "By the authority vested in me," he declared, trying to ignore Cheesy attempting to nibble the corner of the parchment, "I hereby establish the Bureau Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit. Your duties shall include logistical support, passive surveillance, psychological deterrence, and general..." he paused, searching for the right word, "...camelid duties as assigned. Welcome to the Bureau." Yasmin snorted softly. Abdullah sighed. Cheesy looked hopeful (possibly expecting cheese). Marigold began nudging a loose brick with his nose. The BACHSU was officially operational. Paris had just gained four new, extremely unconventional, and deeply philosophical guardians. The paperwork alone was going to be legendary.

The period of relative calm (measured in Parisian terms, meaning no major buildings had spontaneously combusted or changed species for at least forty-eight hours) was shattered by the arrival of a Royal Edict. It didn't arrive discreetly. Royal Edicts rarely did. This one manifested as a troop of heralds whose trumpets seemed slightly out of tune, possibly due to nerves, accompanied by a very small, very flustered Court Chamberlain who clutched a scroll sealed with enough wax to waterproof a small battleship.

The Chamberlain, a hamster named Monsieur Fichu who perpetually looked like he'd misplaced his spectacles and possibly his sense of purpose, scurried into the Bureau courtyard, took one look at Abdullah the camel contemplating the existential nature of a drainpipe, squeaked faintly, and

nearly fainted into a pile of recently delivered (and camel-rejected) hay. "Director Reynard!" he managed, once revived by Flavius's smelling salts (a potent concoction that could allegedly restart stopped clocks). "A Command Performance! From Their Majesties, King Loo-Eee-By-Gum and Queen Mary-Anne Twinset!"

He unfurled the scroll with trembling paws. "Their Majesties, wishing to celebrate the recent... *ahem*... successful resolutions of various civic disturbances," (Reynard noted the diplomatic avoidance of words like 'conspiracy', 'theft', and 'hallucinogenic fruit') "and to bolster public morale, have decreed a Grand Procession of Unity and Progress through the city streets!" "A parade?" Crispin groaned from the doorway, where he'd been attempting to teach Cheesy the meaning of 'Don't eat the evidence bags'. "Oh, not a parade. Think of the chafing! And the crowds! They *stare*."

Monsieur Fichu ignored him, puffing himself up. "And! By Royal Command! The procession is to be *led* by the esteemed members of the newly formed Special Investigations Bureau!" He beamed nervously. "In recognition of your... unique contributions to civic order!" Reynard felt a familiar headache begin behind his eyes. "Lead the parade? Us?" "Indeed!" chirped the Chamberlain. "Along with," he consulted the scroll, his whiskers twitching, "Her Highness, Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, and," he squinted, "your auxiliary divisions... the, ah... Special Airborne Service and the... Bureau Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit?" He looked up, bewildered. "Forgive me, Director, but the King's handwriting... did that say *camels*?"

Reynard sighed. "It did, Chamberlain. Thank you. Convey the Bureau's profound... honour... to Their Majesties. We shall, of course, comply." As the Chamberlain scurried away, looking profoundly relieved to be escaping the presence of judgemental owls and philosophical dromedaries, Reynard turned to his assembled forces. The three foxes. Princess Lisa (who had arrived earlier to discuss the lingering issue of the highwayman currently residing in the palace dungeons, complaining about the quality of the gruel). The owl, Hootington, watching from his filing cabinet. The upgraded clockwork parrot, Admiral Parrot, perched on Flavius's shoulder. And the four camels, variously sighing, spitting, chewing, and rearranging. "Right," Reynard said, adopting his 'resolute in the face of absurdity' tone. "A Royal Command Performance. We lead the parade."

Preparations began immediately, descending rapidly into chaos moderated only by Flavius's methodical nature and Lisa's surprisingly effective organisational skills (honed, perhaps, by years of managing her father's more eccentric whims). The foxes' armour required polishing to a parade-worthy sheen. Flavius tackled the task with scientific precision, calculating optimal buffing angles. Crispin complained bitterly throughout, applying polish with the enthusiasm of someone scrubbing latrines. Reynard merely ensured his own uniform was presentable and his ceremonial letter opener was suitably intimidating.

Princess Lisa, initially sighing at the prospect of *another* public function ("Honestly, Reynard, the sheer *effort* of looking suitably regal while trying not to trip over cobblestones..."), nonetheless threw herself into the preparations, particularly concerning her own appearance. She selected a gown of royal

blue silk to be worn *over* a discreet but entirely functional mail shirt, arguing that one could never be too careful during public processions, especially ones involving camels. Her tiara was chosen specifically for its 'aerodynamic stability and potential use as a close-quarters defensive weapon'.

Preparing the auxiliary divisions proved more complex. The SAS required coaxing. Admiral Parrot was eager, squawking, "Parade ahoy! Prepare for broadsides of confetti!" Flavius made some last-minute adjustments to its Improbability drive, hoping to minimise spontaneous outbursts of pirate slang or opera singing. Hootington, however, remained aloof on his cabinet. Bribery was attempted – first with biscuits (ignored), then with premium voles (regarded with disdain). Finally, Lisa managed to persuade him by appealing to his sense of superiority. "Agent Hootington," she'd murmured, "imagine the *overview*. The strategic vantage point. You could silently judge the millinery choices of the entire Parisian aristocracy." The owl had blinked, ruffled its feathers thoughtfully, and glided silently to perch expectantly near the window.

The BACHSU, however, was another matter entirely. Crispin's attempts to drill the camels in parade formation resulted in Abdullah sinking into a deep contemplation of the concept of 'left', Yasmin refusing to stand next to Cheesy ('His chewing is simply *déclassé*, darling'), and Marigold attempting to build a small, decorative cairn out of discarded horse manure. Flavius tried applying principles of positive reinforcement using dates, but Yasmin demanded peeled grapes, Abdullah questioned the ethical implications of reward-based motivation, and Cheesy simply ate all the dates before the reinforcement could be applied. Ceremonial harnesses, provided by a bewildered Royal

Mews, were grudgingly accepted only after Lisa adorned Yasmin's with a particularly fine silk tassel and Reynard engaged Abdullah in a lengthy discussion about whether the harness represented societal conformity or merely practical necessity.

Finally, somehow, they were assembled. The starting point of the procession was a chaotic jumble of marching bands tuning up discordantly, nervous officials trying to impose order, and the Bureau contingent looking spectacularly out of place. Three foxes in armour, trying not to trip over their swords. Princess Lisa, regal and armoured beneath her silk. A large owl perched stoically on Reynard's shoulder, occasionally shedding a downy feather onto his epaulette. A clockwork parrot strapped securely to Flavius's backpack, muttering about 'lubbers' and 'bilge rats'. And four camels, draped in slightly crooked ceremonial blankets, looking bored, philosophical, or vaguely hungry. "Right," Reynard muttered, adjusting Hootington's talon placement on his shoulder. "Forward... march? Or... amble, perhaps?"

With a blast of slightly off-key trumpets, the parade lurched into motion. The Bureau contingent, being at the front, lurched first. What could possibly go wrong? Almost immediately, Yasmin decided the tempo set by the Ostrich Cavalry Marching Band was insultingly pedestrian and attempted to overtake the drum major. Abdullah stopped dead three paces in, apparently struck by a sudden, profound thought about the impermanence of parades. Admiral Parrot, perhaps overexcited by the music, began loudly imitating the King's voice, proclaiming, "More cowbell! The procession requires significantly more cowbell!" Hootington swivelled his head, fixing a wealthy merchant's

wife in the crowd with a stare so intense she dropped her parasol and began distractedly confessing to smuggling lace. Cheesy, spotting a particularly lush floral display adorning a balcony, made a determined detour, dragging Crispin (who was holding his lead rope) with him.

The Grand Procession of Unity and Progress had begun. Led by foxes, a princess, two birds (one feathered, one brass), and four camels with minds of their own, it snaked its way into the heart of Paris, a glorious, chaotic, teetering monument to absurdity poised on the very brink of disaster.

The Ostrich Cavalry Marching Band, strutting proudly behind them, launched into a particularly rousing rendition of "March of the Slightly Bewildered Grenadier". It featured a prominent, mournful bassoon solo, intended perhaps to represent the grenadier's feelings about his itchy uniform or the questionable quality of army rations. The sound rolled forth – a deep, resonant *Ooom-paah-paah* that echoed slightly off the tall Parisian buildings. It was the sort of sound that speaks of melancholy, damp cellars, and possibly large, unhappy frogs contemplating their life choices.

To the human, fox, owl, and clockwork parrot contingent, it was merely mediocre parade music. To the camels, however, it was something else entirely.

No one knows precisely why camels harbour a deep-seated, pathological, and utterly visceral hatred for the sound of the bassoon. Perhaps it echoes the droning buzz of a particularly irritating desert fly magnified a thousand times. Perhaps ancient camel prophecies foretold doom arriving on the mournful notes of a double-reed instrument. Perhaps they just have surprisingly

refined musical taste and find the bassoon aesthetically offensive. Whatever the reason, the effect was instantaneous and catastrophic.

The first *Ooom-paah-paah* hit the air. Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert, pride of the Al-Camemberti stables, paragon of dromedary hauteur, reacted as if she'd been simultaneously tasered and insulted by a particularly vulgar pigeon. Her head shot up, her eyes widened in fury, and she let out a bellowing roar that drowned out the entire brass section – a sound not unlike a foghorn gargling gravel. She then bolted forward, scattering startled musicians like ninepins, her decorative tassels flying, clearly intent on silencing the offensive instrument with extreme prejudice.

Abdullah, usually lost in his own philosophical musings, was jolted into stark, unreasoning terror. The *Ooom-paah-paah* apparently resonated with the deepest chords of his existential dread. He didn't run. He didn't rear. He simply... sat down. Abruptly. With the solidity of a collapsing pyramid. Right in the middle of the Rue Saint-Honouré. He then proceeded to bury his head under his ceremonial blanket, emitting low, terrified moans that sounded suspiciously like someone trying to hum the bassoon part backwards.

Cheesy, true to his nature, interpreted the offensive sound as a personal challenge from a large, edible piece of wood. With a glint in his eye, he lunged towards the bassoon section, dragging Crispin (still attached via the lead rope) stumbling behind him. "No, Cheesy! Heel! Drop the musician! Bad camel!" Crispin yelped, skidding on the cobblestones.

Marigold, ever the architect of chaos, responded defensively. The *Ooom-paah-paah* clearly triggered some deep-seated instinct to fortify. He began rapidly nudging spectators, overturned flower carts, and discarded parade banners into a makeshift barricade across the street behind them, seemingly attempting to block the sound's advance through strategic deployment of terrified onlookers and horticultural debris.

The parade dissolved. The marching band scattered, bassoonists fleeing for their lives from a charging Yasmin and a gourmand Cheesy. The crowd surged backwards, hampered by Marigold's instant fortifications and Abdullah's immovable, moaning bulk. Admiral Parrot, caught up in the sonic chaos, shrieked, "Enemy bombardment! Sound the alarm! Repel the low frequencies!" before attempting to mimic the bassoon sound, producing instead a noise like a dying vacuum cleaner that caused Agent Hootington to visibly flinch – the first actual emotion anyone had seen the owl display. Hootington then launched himself silently into the air, not to attack, but to find a higher, quieter vantage point from which to judge the escalating pandemonium.

Lisa drew her sword, not entirely sure who or what she intended to fight but feeling that *something* needed to be decisively swiped at. "Reynard! Control your camels!" she yelled over the din. Reynard, meanwhile, was trying desperately to reason with Abdullah. "Up, camel! There's no existential threat! It's just poorly played woodwind!" Abdullah responded by moaning louder and trying to burrow deeper under his blanket. Flavius, consulting a small manual titled 'Emergency De-escalation Techniques for Agitated Ungulates', was attempting to apply calming pheromones (derived from

fermented cabbage) to Yasmin as she tried to trample the sousaphone player, with predictable lack of success.

The scene on the Rue Saint-Honouré had shifted from 'chaotic procession' to 'multi-species riot with musical accompaniment'. Yasmin was now attempting to perform an impromptu flamenco on a discarded trombone. Abdullah remained firmly seated, emanating waves of pure ennui. Cheesy was being physically restrained by Crispin from 'retrieving' a bassoonist's toupée, and Marigold had constructed a surprisingly sturdy barricade out of flower tubs, stray hats, and a deeply offended Alderman.

High above the chaos, perched on a strategically advantageous gargoyle overlooking the parade route, King Loo-Eee-By-Gum and Queen Mary-Anne Twinset observed the unfolding disaster from the Royal Balcony. The King, initially viewing the camelid revolt as an 'unexpected but vigorous example of performance art', was beginning to suspect that perhaps this wasn't part of the planned festivities. Queen Mary-Anne, the epitome of regal composure, merely adjusted her signature triple-strand pearl necklace and raised a delicately quizzing eyebrow, radiating silent inquiry about whose budget would cover the inevitable damages.

It was into this maelstrom of activity that Admiral Parrot, still strapped to Flavius's back, chose to make his contribution. Perhaps it was the stress of the situation. Perhaps the lingering effects of the Refined Improbability filament chose this moment to cascade. Perhaps the residual magic simply had a terrible sense of humour. Whatever the cause, something deep within the Admiral's newly repaired cheese-and-clockwork

brain clicked, whirred, and went spectacularly, profanely wrong.

His vocal mimicry unit, recently demonstrated with such alarming clarity, seemed to fuse with his core 'pirate vocabulary subroutine' and cross-pollinate with something else entirely – perhaps stray thoughts overheard from Crispin, or maybe just the latent aggression inherent in improperly calibrated machinery.

Suddenly, amidst the roaring, sighing, yelping, and frantic parping of the scattered musicians, the Admiral's voice cut through, amplified by Flavius's backpack acting as an impromptu sounding board. **"BUGGERING BISCUITS!"** it shrieked, the sound echoing off the surrounding buildings. Flavius froze, nearly dropping his tuning fork. Reynard winced. Crispin choked back a snort. **"GET YER BLOOMIN' HOOVES OFF THE COBBLES, YE HAIRY GREAT OAF!"** the parrot continued, apparently addressing Abdullah's inert form. Then, its head swivelled, its glass eyes fixing on the Royal Balcony high above. **"AND YOU!"** it screeched, its voice now taking on a disturbingly accurate imitation of a particularly sarcastic fishwife. **"NICE HAT, QUEENIE! DID YER PINCH IT OFF A PIGEON?!"**

Queen Mary-Anne Twinset went rigid. Her perfectly manicured hand flew to her pearls, clutching them as if they might spontaneously combust from sheer vulgarity. A faint gasp escaped her lips – the closest she ever came to losing her legendary composure. King Loo-Eee stared, aghast. His jaw dropped. Even his usual appreciation for the avant-garde had its limits, and clockwork parrots insulting his wife's millinery

choices clearly exceeded them. **"Good Heavens!"** he boomed, genuinely shocked. **"Such language! From... from poultry! Is this part of the artistic statement? It feels unnecessarily personal!"**

The Admiral was just getting started. Its vocabulary, freed from the shackles of mere pirate clichés, unleashed a torrent of creative, bizarre, and occasionally anatomically improbable insults, directed seemingly at random towards the crowd, the architecture, the concept of parades, and several specific members of the aristocracy whose lineage it questioned with surprising historical accuracy. It mixed archaic nautical curses ("Avast, ye barnacle-bottomed bureaucrats!") with startlingly modern-sounding complaints ("This whole parade lacks synergy! Needs more proactive stakeholder engagement, blast yer eyes!").

"Flavius!" Reynard hissed desperately. "Deactivate it! Now!" Flavius fumbled frantically with the parrot's controls, hindered by the fact it was strapped to his own back. "Trying, sir! The Improbability drive seems to be stuck in... 'Aggressive Honesty' mode!" Crispin, abandoning Cheesy for a moment (who was now trying to eat a dropped drumstick), doubled over, trying to stifle laughter behind his paws. Lisa rolled her eyes skyward. "Oh, for goodness sake," she muttered, wondering if her questionable lineage somehow attracted malfunctioning, foul-mouthed machinery.

On the Royal Balcony, Queen Mary-Anne had closed her eyes, appearing to be counting silently to ten thousand. The King looked utterly bewildered, turning to his advisors. "Did... did that parrot just question the legitimacy of the Duke of

Pomegranate's birth certificate? Highly irregular! Someone make a note!" The parade, already a disaster, had now acquired a soundtrack of spontaneous, high-volume clockwork profanity, broadcast directly towards the horrified monarchy. The SAS, in its first public outing, had not only failed to control the situation but had actively contributed a whole new layer of diplomatic incident.

Upon the Queen's lap, seemingly oblivious to the pandemonium below and the parrot's shocking critique of aristocratic fashion, sat Seraphina Cloudpaws the Fourth, Her Majesty's prize-winning, blue-blooded Persian lap-cat. Seraphina was a magnificent creature of pure white fluff, possessing eyes the colour of expensive sapphires and an expression of serene condescension that suggested she believed the entire universe was merely a slightly inconvenient cushion created for her napping pleasure. She wore a delicate collar studded with tiny diamonds, a recent gift from the Ambassador of Somewhereveryhotandprobablyfullofsand.

Agent Hootington, perched high on his gargoyle, observed the scene. He watched Yasmin's assault on the woodwinds. He noted Abdullah's profound inertia. He registered the parrot's escalating insults. He saw the glittering diamonds on Seraphina Cloudpaws' collar catching the light. And perhaps, in the unfathomable depths of his owl-brain, a thought process occurred. It might have been complex strategic analysis ('Acquiring the feline asset could create a diversionary tactic'). It might have been simple predatory instinct ('Fluffy... looks slow... possibly edible'). Or, perhaps most likely, it might have been sheer, unadulterated owl boredom coupled with a sudden, inexplicable urge to see what would happen next.

With the terrifying silence that was his trademark, Hootington launched himself from the gargoyle. He didn't flap frantically like the disgraced Admiral; he simply *fell* into a controlled dive, wings tucked, a feathered projectile dropping towards the Royal Balcony. No one noticed until it was too late. The King was trying to signal to Reynard below (using semaphore flags he inexplicably produced from his sleeve). The Queen was attempting deep breathing exercises, eyes closed. Seraphina Cloudpaws was delicately grooming a paw.

Hootington arrived not with a crash, but with the faint *whoosh* of displaced air. Talons, surprisingly gentle yet inescapably firm, closed not on the cat itself, but around the diamond-studded collar. Before Seraphina could even register the indignity of being levitated by her neckwear, Hootington beat his powerful wings once, twice, arresting his dive and ascending rapidly back into the Parisian sky, the fluffy white cat dangling beneath him like an extremely surprised, expensive pendulum. Seraphina let out a single, indignant "Mrrrow?!" of outraged feline majesty.

The Queen opened her eyes just in time to see her beloved pet ascending towards the heavens in the grip of a large, stoic owl. The sight of her sapphire-eyed companion, her fluffy confidante, her prize-winning pedigreed furball being abducted by rogue Bureau ornithology, combined with the lingering shock of the parrot's insults and the general camel-induced mayhem, proved too much for even her legendary composure. "My... my Seraphina!" she gasped, her voice barely a whisper. Her hand fluttered to her chest. Her eyes rolled back in her head. With a sigh as soft as falling silk, Queen Mary-Anne Twinset executed a perfect, textbook swoon, collapsing

gracefully onto a nearby velvet chaise longue that the King usually used for mid-afternoon naps.

"Good heavens! Marie-Anne! And the cat!" the King exclaimed, momentarily forgetting the parade. He rushed to his wife's side, fanning her face frantically with his semaphore flags. "Appalling! Utterly appalling! First the language, now avian kidnapping! Is there no decorum left in this city? Someone fetch the royal smelling salts! And apprehend that owl!"

Below, the Bureau members stared upwards, dumbfounded by this latest development. "Did... did Hootington just...?" Crispin stammered, forgetting entirely about Cheesy and the bassoonist's toupée. "Affirmative," Flavius confirmed, already making notes. "Agent Hootington has deviated from observational protocols and initiated an unscheduled asset acquisition – Target: Royal Feline, High Value. Motive: Currently undetermined, possibly kleptomania or extreme interpretation of 'securing the perimeter'." Admiral Parrot chose that moment to add, "**Shiver me fluffy knickers! The feather duster's turned pirate!**" Lisa watched Hootington winging his way towards the distant spire of Notre Dame, the indignant white furball still dangling below. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Right," she said, her voice dangerously calm. "So, we have rampaging camels, a foul-mouthed clockwork parrot, a swooning Queen, and now a catnapping owl operating under Bureau authority." She looked at Reynard. "Director, your Special Airborne Service appears to be exceeding all expectations... primarily in the field of generating catastrophic international incidents."

Reynard could only groan.

It was at this moment that Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude decided she'd had quite enough. Years of navigating court intrigue, dealing with her father's eccentricities, living underground, developing unnervingly impressive upper body strength, and possessing a mind that could calculate seventeen simultaneous chess outcomes had forged a personality that reacted to utter chaos not with panic, but with focused, slightly terrifying, irritation. Her questionable lineage also meant she had less patience for protocol and more willingness to simply *get things done*, however unconventionally.

"Right!" Her voice wasn't a shout, but it possessed a quality of command honed by generations of telling people what to do, even if some of those ancestors were merely telling people where the royal commode was. It cut through the Admiral's ranting and Abdullah's moaning like a well-sharpened blade through slightly stale cheese. **"That's quite enough!"**

Ignoring the flailing musicians and panicked onlookers, she strode purposefully towards Flavius, who was still trying to reason with the parrot strapped to his back. "Agent Flavius!" she commanded. "Execute Emergency Procedure Omega-Seven: Percussive Obscenity Deactivation!" Flavius blinked. "P-procedure Omega-Seven, Your Highness? That's merely a theoretical protocol involving kinetic realignment!" "Theory," Lisa stated firmly, snatching a stray baguette from Marigold's partially constructed barricade (dislodging a protesting Haberdasher), "becomes practice when faced with foul-mouthed clockwork!" With surprising force and impeccable aim, she brought the baguette down squarely on top of the

Admiral Parrot's tiny hat. There was a *thwack*, a shower of clockwork sparks, a final squawk of "**Barnacles!**", and then blessed silence from the parrot, save for a faint, defeated *whirr...*

Next, the camels. Reasoning had failed. Pheromones had failed. She needed a different approach. Marching up to the still-seated Abdullah, she leaned down close to his blanket-covered head. Instead of shouting, she spoke in a low, intense whisper, pitched just for his large, melancholy ears. "Abdullah," she hissed conspiratorially. "I understand. The futility. The inherent meaninglessness of parades. The crushing weight of existence represented by that truly dreadful bassoon music." She paused. "But consider this: If you remain seated here, you *prove* the futility. Rising, moving forward despite the absurdity... *that* is the true existential rebellion. Stand up, Abdullah. Stand up and *defy* the meaningless void... and the bassoons!" There was a long pause. A faint sigh echoed from under the blanket. Then, slowly, ponderously, with the air of a philosopher reluctantly conceding a point in a particularly tedious debate, Abdullah began to unfold himself, rising to his feet. He still looked miserable, but he was upright.

Yasmin was another challenge. Still enraged, she was now trying to forcibly rearrange the percussion section. Lisa planted herself directly in the camel's path, holding up a hand. Yasmin snorted, preparing to charge. "Yasmin!" Lisa called out, her voice sharp but strangely calm. "I saw that acceleration! Magnificent! Truly impressive speed for a creature of your... refined build." Yasmin hesitated, momentarily distracted by the flattery. "However," Lisa continued smoothly, "this chaotic charging is beneath you. A creature of your pedigree requires a

proper challenge. A race! Me, against you. Later. On the Champs-Élysées. If," she added pointedly, "you cease attempting to head-butt that kettle drum *this instant*." Yasmin stared at Lisa, snorted again, tossed her head (dislodging the silk tassel), but visibly calmed, her competitive spirit apparently overriding her bassoon-induced fury. She allowed Flavius (who looked immensely relieved) to gently lead her aside.

Now, the foxes. Lisa turned to Reynard, who was staring at the now-standing Abdullah with baffled respect. "Director!" she snapped, all business. "Stop gaping! Secure the perimeter – use Marigold's barricade, it's surprisingly effective! Get the Gendarmerie organised, assuming they haven't fainted. Flavius! Retrieve the Admiral – check for baguette-related damage – and triangulate Hootington's position! I want that cat back before the Queen requires stronger smelling salts!" She pointed at Crispin, who was trying to retrieve his cheese stash from Cheesy. "Crispin! Forget the cheese! Round up the musicians, point them *away* from the camels, and tell them to play something bland and inoffensive! A waltz, perhaps! Vivaldi! Anything without a bloody bassoon!"

Her orders, delivered with rapid-fire precision and semi-regal certainty, had an immediate effect. The foxes, grateful for clear direction amidst the chaos, sprang into action. Even the scattered musicians seemed to respond, vaguely regrouping and tentatively starting a slightly shaky rendition of a minuet. The King, seeing Lisa taking charge, stopped flapping his semaphore flags and nodded approvingly. "Excellent initiative, my dear! Very... decisive!"

Lisa stood in the centre of the somewhat subdued chaos, hands on her hips, the slightly crumpled baguette still in one hand. Her gown was askew, her hair escaping its pins, her mail shirt visible, but she radiated an undeniable authority. The parade was still a mess. A Queen was still unconscious. A cat was still missing, presumably contemplating Parisian architecture from a great height. But the immediate panic had subsided. Control, of a particularly absurd and Princess-Lisa-shaped kind, had been asserted. The situation was still ridiculous, but it was now, at least, *managed* ridiculousness.

She took a deep breath, the air thick with the scent of agitated camel, confused perfume, and lingering notes of clockwork profanity. Her carefully constructed public persona – the one that was particular about appearances – felt stretched thin, like cheap parchment left out in the rain. This day had comprehensively shredded protocol, dignity, and several municipal bylaws.

She lowered the baguette, suddenly feeling the need for something familiar, something grounding, something utterly inappropriate for a princess leading a royal procession. She scanned the faces of her slightly stunned vulpine allies. Reynard looked like he needed a strong drink and a long nap. Flavius was already trying to diagnose the parrot's baguette-induced malfunction. Crispin was attempting to discreetly retrieve cheese crumbs from Cheesy's whiskers.

Lisa cleared her throat. "**Right,**" she said again, her voice quieter now, laced with fatigue but still carrying. She ran a hand through her dishevelled hair, smearing soot across her forehead. "**Well, that was... bracing.**" She looked directly at

Reynard, then Flavius, then Crispin. A small, almost desperate sigh escaped her.

"Does anyone," she asked, her voice pitched just loud enough to be heard over the mournful waltz and Abdullah's occasional sigh, **"happen to have a spare St Moretitz handy?"**

She didn't usually smoke in public. It wasn't seemly. It invited commentary. It clashed terribly with tiaras and state occasions. But this, she reasoned, gazing at the general wreckage of the parade route, the swooning Queen, the lingering scent of outraged camel, and the distant memory of a parrot questioning the structural integrity of ducal undergarments, definitely wasn't usual. This was a 'break glass in case of utter absurdity' kind of moment, and right now, the glass was lying in tiny fragments all over the Rue Saint-Honouré. All protocols were off. A cigarette felt less like an indulgence and more like a necessary piece of emergency equipment.

Crispin blinked, momentarily forgetting the camel cheese. "A... what, Your Highness? Coordinator?" Reynard just closed his eyes for a brief second, accepting this final surrender to the bizarre with the weary resignation of a man whose job description clearly needed a new appendix titled 'Dealing With Royal Nicotine Emergencies During Camel Riots'.

The morning after the Grand Procession of Unity and Progress dawned grey and smelling faintly of damp camel, burnt toast (a residual aroma from Admiral Parrot's electrical issues), and profound municipal embarrassment. Crews were dismantling Marigold's surprisingly resilient barricades on the Rue Saint-

Honouré, street sweepers were dealing with unfamiliar forms of organic deposit, and several bassoon players were reportedly seeking trauma counselling or considering emigration.

At the palace, Queen Mary-Anne Twinset had regained consciousness, thanks to the liberal application of smelling salts potent enough to wake Napoleon and make him apologise. Her first action was not to demand retribution, but to calmly request a cup of Earl Grey tea and inquire, with icy precision, about the health and whereabouts of Seraphina Cloudpaws the Fourth. (Reports were filtering back that Hootington had eventually deposited the indignant feline, unharmed but deeply offended, onto the Archbishop's balcony at Notre Dame, seemingly deciding that ecclesiastical surroundings were more appropriate for a creature of such fluffy dignity).

Meanwhile, at Bureau headquarters, the atmosphere was thick with the fug of stale coffee, anxiety, and Crispin's socks (which he claimed were merely 'strategically airing'). Reynard was staring grimly at a fresh pile of forms relating to 'Inter-species Public Disturbance' and 'Unauthorised Deployment of Clockwork Profanity'. Flavius was running diagnostics on the now-silent Admiral Parrot, muttering about 'positive feedback loops in the vulgarity matrix'. Lisa paced restlessly, polishing her armour with unnecessary vigour, the memory of asking for a St Moretitz in public weighing heavily on her sense of propriety. The camels were confined to the courtyard, looking bored or philosophical by turns, while Hootington perched above, radiating silent judgment on them all.

The inevitable summons arrived just before noon. Monsieur Fichu, the hamster Chamberlain, appeared at the Bureau door

looking smaller and more terrified than ever. He didn't even attempt to enter the courtyard this time, merely thrusting a scroll at Reynard from a safe distance. "His Majesty King Loo-Eee-By-Gum," he squeaked, his voice trembling, "requests – nay, *commands* – the immediate presence of the Director, agents, and all auxiliary personnel of the Special Investigations Bureau at the Palace. Throne Room. *Immediately*." He emphasised the last word with a gulp. "To provide... explanations." He shuddered visibly. "Regarding yesterday's... festivities." He then turned and bolted, presumably before any camels could sigh at him.

Reynard read the scroll, his expression grim. "Right. Royal carpeting. The entire Bureau." He looked around at his eclectic command. "That includes," he sighed, "the SAS and the BACHSU." Crispin choked on his coffee. "The camels? And the owl? In the Throne Room? Sir, are you sure? Abdullah might start contemplating the divine right of kings! Yasmin might spit on the royal rug! Hootington will probably try to perch on the throne!" "The summons was specific," Reynard stated flatly. "The entire Bureau. Besides," he added darkly, "His Majesty hasn't yet decided whether to disband us entirely after yesterday's... performance. Perhaps the sheer, overwhelming absurdity of our full complement will confuse him into forgetting."

Getting the entire Bureau to the palace Throne Room was an exercise in logistics that would have made Hannibal weep. Hootington simply flew ahead, presumably to secure a good vantage point for judgment. Flavius carried the deactivated Admiral Parrot carefully under one arm. Lisa, Reynard, and Crispin marched with as much dignity as they could muster.

The camels proved more difficult. Yasmin initially refused to enter the palace grounds, deeming the gravel insufficiently prestigious. Abdullah had to be coaxed forward via a complex philosophical argument presented by Flavius concerning the subjective nature of royal summonses. Cheesy and Marigold were bribed with wilted lettuce leaves from the palace kitchens. They were eventually persuaded into a large, echoing antechamber adjacent to the Throne Room, under strict instructions (mostly ignored) not to eat the tapestries or contemplate the transient nature of monarchical power too loudly.

The Throne Room itself was vast and imposing, all gilt edges, red velvet, and portraits of stern-looking ancestors who looked like they disapproved of breathing too loudly. King Loo-Eee sat upon his throne, looking unusually stern, though his crown was still slightly askew. Queen Mary-Anne sat beside him, restored but radiating an icy displeasure that lowered the ambient temperature by several degrees. Various ministers and advisors hovered in the background, looking smug or apprehensive depending on their allegiance.

Reynard, Lisa, Crispin, and Flavius lined up before the throne. Hootington swooped in silently and perched high up on the marble bust of King Dagobert the Deranged, surveying the proceedings. From the antechamber, Abdullah let out a low, resonant sigh that echoed through the vast room. The King fixed Reynard with a steely gaze. "Director Reynard," he began, his voice lacking its usual jovial eccentricity. "Yesterday. Our Grand Procession. Explain."

Reynard took a deep breath. "Your Majesty, unavoidable external stimuli triggered an unforeseen reaction in certain... auxiliary assets..." He was interrupted by a sudden, loud squawk from under Flavius's arm. "**Avast, ye upholstered popinjay!**" yelled Admiral Parrot, inexplicably reactivating itself. "**Stop yer caterwauling!**" Flavius frantically muffled the parrot, his face flaming red. The Queen raised a single, perfectly sculpted eyebrow. The King blinked. "...as I was saying," Reynard continued, sweat beading on his brow, "unforeseen reactions. Combined with a minor malfunction in... experimental communications equipment." He decided not to mention the bassoons directly. Or the catnapping.

"Malfunction?" the King repeated sharply. "Calling Her Majesty's hat pigeon-adjacent is a 'malfunction'? Inciting dromedary panic is an 'unforeseen reaction'? Having one's prize Persian abducted by an oversized owl is 'civic disturbance'?" He leaned forward. "Director, your Bureau, your... *unique* personnel... caused chaos, diplomatic embarrassment, and," he glanced at the Queen, "considerable feline-related distress! Frankly, I am considering whether this entire 'Special Investigations' experiment has run its course. Whether Paris might be safer *without* your particular brand of 'protection'."

The threat hung heavy in the air, thick as the dust motes dancing in the throne room's sunbeams. The fate of the Bureau hung by a thread, threatened not by criminals or conspirators, but by rampaging camels, swearing parrots, catnapping owls, and the distinctly unfunny consequences of absurdity colliding with reality.

The King's threat of disbandment hung in the air like the smell of damp camel – pervasive, uncomfortable, and difficult to

ignore. Reynard stood stiffly, trying to project an image of competence fundamentally undermined by the knowledge that one of his key assets was an owl currently perched on a mad king's bust and another was a deactivated parrot that had recently offered fashion advice to the Queen. Lisa held her breath, acutely aware that her own position was often as precarious as her lineage. Crispin shuffled his feet, wondering if unemployment benefits for guards included an allowance for armour polish. Flavius nervously adjusted the silent Admiral Parrot under his arm. From the antechamber, Abdullah sighed again, a sound that seemed to say, 'Disbandment? Continued existence? Is there truly a meaningful distinction?'

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum glared at the assembled Bureau. He tugged at his beard, dislodging a crumb from breakfast which bounced unnoticed off his royal sceptre. He adjusted his crown, which immediately settled back to its previous jaunty angle. He looked at the Queen, who met his gaze with an expression that managed to convey both regal support and a clear desire for the immediate and permanent removal of Agent Hootington. He looked at the bust of Dagobert the Deranged, where Hootington blinked back owlishly. Several long minutes passed, filled only by the ticking of a large, ornate clock (which, according to the dial, believed it was currently half-past Tuesday in Ostend) and Abdullah's distant, mournful sighs.

Finally, the King let out a sigh of his own, a gusty sound that ruffled the lace at his cuffs. "Confound it all," he muttered, slumping slightly on his throne. "Disbandment. So simple. So neat. Would significantly reduce the budget allocation for... for 'Investigative Root Vegetables' and 'Camelid Emotional Support'." He frowned. "But..." He paused, tapping a finger

against the throne's armrest. "But... chaos, isn't it? Follows you lot around like wasps at a picnic. Always something. Sentient chess, squirrels with strawberries, badgers, now this... parade debacle." He sighed again. "And while it's infernally inconvenient, and frankly terrifying for poor Seraphina... one must admit, things rarely get *boring* when the Bureau is involved."

He straightened up, trying to recapture his earlier sternness. "Very well," he declared, his voice regaining some of its regal boom. "Against... possibly... my better judgment, and Her Majesty's entirely understandable desire for owl-free balconies... the Special Investigations Bureau shall continue." A collective, almost inaudible sigh of relief went through the foxes. Lisa allowed herself a small, controlled breath.

"HOWEVER!" the King bellowed, making everyone jump (except Hootington, who merely blinked). "This cannot happen again! This... *level* of public spectacle! The diplomatic apologies alone will require weeks of grovelling and several crates of the good champagne!" He fixed Reynard with a sharp look. "You have **one** more chance. Just **one**. To redeem the Bureau's reputation. To prove you are capable of resolving crises without simultaneously *creating* three new ones involving livestock, machinery, and unexpected profanity."

He waved a dismissive hand. "We shall manage the public perception, of course. A minor adjustment to the narrative is required." He puffed out his chest. "**We'll tell the public the events of yesterday were merely a practice!** Yes! An emergency drill! A simulation! Testing the city's readiness in the face of... unorthodox invasion tactics!" He nodded, warming to his theme. "Precisely! Who knows when Paris

might face an enemy deploying... weaponised bassoons! Or airborne feline abduction! Or... aggressively opinionated camels! We must be prepared! Yesterday was merely... Exercise Absurdity! Yes, that sounds suitably official."

He leaned forward again, his expression deadly serious despite the utter lunacy of his words. **"One more chance, Reynard. But things *have* to change.** I want protocols! I want risk assessments! I want guarantees that my wife's pets will not be used for aerial reconnaissance and that mechanical parrots will refrain from critiquing the Archbishop's sermons! Is that understood?"

Reynard bowed low, profoundly grateful but also acutely aware of the near impossibility of the task. "Perfectly, Your Majesty. Protocols shall be drafted. Assessments shall be risked. Changes... shall be attempted." "Good." The King sat back, looking exhausted. **"Wait! One more thing!"** he added, just as the Bureau thought the audience was over. **"This... *change*... requires proper leadership!"**

He surveyed the line-up before him. Reynard, looking dutiful but undeniably frayed around the edges. Crispin, looking like he urgently needed a biscuit and possibly a new career. Flavius, looking fascinated by the structural integrity of the deactivated parrot under his arm. And Lisa, standing tall despite the soot and the lingering scent of baguette, radiating a kind of weary competence.

"Reynard," the King declared, pointing a slightly wavering finger at the fox. "You're a decent fellow. Loyal. Good with paperwork, mostly. But let's be honest, the sheer *volume* of weirdness this city throws up seems to leave you slightly..."

flummoxed. We need someone at the helm who doesn't just react to absurdity, but anticipates it! Someone who can handle rogue haberdashers and philosophical camels with equal aplomb! Someone," he added, nodding towards the baguette Lisa had discreetly tucked into her belt, "who isn't afraid to employ unconventional methods when dealing with malfunctioning machinery!"

He shifted his gaze, his finger now aimed squarely at his daughter. "**Princess Lisa!**" he boomed, causing a nearby tapestry depicting a particularly dull coronation to ripple slightly. "**You're in charge! Effective immediately!**"

A collective intake of breath seemed to suck the remaining air out of the Throne Room. Lisa froze mid-step, startled. Reynard's ears twitched, but his expression remained professionally neutral. Crispin's jaw dropped. Flavius looked intrigued. Hootington blinked, very slowly.

"You," the King continued, clearly warming to his decision, "will be the **top dog! El supremo!** The pointy end of the stick! You will assume immediate control of, and responsibility and accountability for, *all* Bureau operations – vulpine, avian, camelid, clockwork, the lot! **More in charge than before!** No more 'liaison' nonsense!" He waved a dismissive hand. "You run the show now. Entirely. Completely." He paused, then added magnanimously, "**You can create your own 'title' if you must. Something suitably impressive. 'Grand High Coordinator of Chaos Containment'? 'Supreme Inter-species Wrangler'? Whatever takes your fancy. Just... sort them out! Make them less likely to cause international incidents involving livestock or insults to visiting royalty's**

headwear! That's a royal command! Now, out! All of you! Before I change my mind or Abdullah sighs again!"

The Bureau filed out of the Throne Room in a state of collective shock, overlaid with varying degrees of relief, bewilderment, and, in Crispin's case, cautious optimism about potential improvements to the biscuit rota. The heavy doors closed behind them, muffling the King's renewed muttering about 'avian larceny' and 'bassoon accountability'. They stood blinking in the relative quiet of the antechamber, where the camels observed their return with varying levels of interest. Yasmin sniffed disdainfully, Abdullah sighed, Cheesy looked hopefully towards Crispin's pockets, and Marigold had started arranging discarded nutshells into a complex mosaic on the marble floor.

Reynard, the former Director, turned immediately to Lisa. Years of military discipline and pragmatic vulpine sense asserted themselves. He executed a crisp, formal bow – deeper and more deferential than before. "Your Highness," he began, then hesitated over the title. "Coordinator-General? El Supremo? Pending clarification on nomenclature... your command is acknowledged. The Bureau, myself included, stands ready to execute your orders." There was, perhaps, the faintest hint of relief in his voice, the sound of a fox gladly handing over responsibility for explaining camel-related budget overruns.

Lisa met his gaze, acknowledging his professionalism with a slight nod. The absurdity of her new position – Princess, illegitimate daughter of the King, resident of underground tunnels, and now Supreme Commander of foxes, avians, and

dromedaries – was not lost on her, but years of navigating impossible situations had taught her to accept the bizarre and get on with it. "Thank you, Reynard," she said, her voice steady. "Your experience will be invaluable. For now, 'Coordinator' will suffice. 'El Supremo' sounds like something one orders in a dubious tavern."

Crispin sidled up, trying to look respectful while simultaneously assessing if Lisa's promotion came with enhanced snack privileges. "So, er, Coordinator," he ventured. "Does this mean... operational procedures will change? Less rooftop chasing, perhaps? More... strategic biscuit acquisition?" "Operational procedures," Lisa stated firmly, casting a critical eye over the assembled unit, "will involve significantly less public chaos, fewer incidents requiring flimsy cover stories about 'invasion drills', and an absolute ban on antagonising woodwind instruments when camelids are present." She turned her gaze towards the courtyard camels. "Starting with BACHSU."

She strode into the antechamber, projecting an aura of command that even Yasmin seemed to grudgingly acknowledge by pausing mid-spit. Lisa stopped before Abdullah, who was still contemplating the fundamental nature of grout between the flagstones. "Abdullah," Lisa said, her tone lacking the pleading Reynard had employed. "The parade is over. The bassoons are gone. The existential threat level has returned to 'baseline Parisian'. Your continued inertia is now merely... inconvenient. Stand aside." Abdullah blinked his long lashes, seemed to consider her words from several philosophical angles, and then, astonishingly, took a slow, deliberate step sideways, clearing the path.

Lisa nodded curtly. "Excellent. See, Reynard? Directness." She then addressed the group at large. "Right. New directives. Flavius!" "Coordinator!" Flavius snapped to attention, nearly dislodging the still-silent Admiral Parrot. "Priority one: Retrieve Agent Hootington and the Royal Feline. Use any means necessary short of causing another diplomatic incident or employing baked goods as projectiles. Report status ASAP." "At once, Coordinator!" Flavius dashed off, already calculating trajectory vectors and potential owl-persuasion strategies.

"Crispin!" "Coordinator?" Crispin responded, hastily swallowing a biscuit crumb he'd managed to sneak. "Supervise BACHSU. Return them to the courtyard headquarters. Ensure they are adequately fed – consult Flavius's notes on acceptable forage, avoid cheese unless absolutely necessary – and try to prevent Marigold from redesigning the palace plumbing system." "Right-o, Coordinator. Come on, you hairy lummoxes! Back to your existential contemplation station!" Crispin began attempting to herd the camels, with predictable results involving Cheesy trying to eat his bootlace.

"Reynard!" "Coordinator?" "Assemble all reports pertaining to yesterday's... 'drill'. I need a full accounting of damages, scattered musicians, traumatised onlookers, and any lingering bassoon fragments. We need to quantify the disaster before we can effectively minimise it in future." She paused, then added, almost as an afterthought, "And see if you can find out who supplies my father's semaphore flags. They seem remarkably durable." "Understood, Coordinator," Reynard said, already mentally bracing himself for the mountain of paperwork.

With her initial orders issued, Lisa stood for a moment, surveying her new command. The foxes scurrying to obey, the camels reluctantly shuffling under Crispin's haphazard direction, Hootington presumably somewhere over Paris contemplating cat psychology, the deactivated parrot under Flavius's arm... It was, objectively, ridiculous. And yet... it was *hers* to command. A challenge. A responsibility. Perhaps even, in a strange way, exactly what she'd been looking for, even if she was wary of the connections it forged.

She took another deep breath, squared her shoulders, and adjusted the slightly battered baguette still tucked in her belt. First order of business completed. Second order of business: finding a St Moretitz. And perhaps, just perhaps, drafting some truly intimidating job descriptions for her new auxiliary divisions. The Special Investigations Bureau, under new management, was ready for whatever fresh absurdity Paris decided to throw at it next.

Chapter Eight: In Which Leadership Involves Nicotine, Paperwork Propagates Purposefully, Camels Consider Contracts, an Owl Offers Opinions (Unsolicited), and the Bureau Contemplates the Existential Dread of Filing Systems

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude sat behind the desk that, until roughly teatime the previous day, had belonged solely to Director Reynard. It was a solid oak affair, scarred by years of vulpine frustration, spilled ink, and the occasional desperate attempt to find a regulation that covered sentient topiary. Now, it bore the additional indignity of supporting a delicate porcelain ashtray, currently hosting the smouldering remains of Lisa's third St Moretitz cigarette of the morning.

The office – *her* office, a thought that still felt slightly itchy, like wearing armour someone else had sweated in – was small. Cramped, even. Its single window looked out over a Parisian street currently preoccupied with arguing about the correct way to stack cabbages. Inside, the air hung thick with the scent of old paperwork, dust motes performing intricate ballets in the sunbeams, the faint aroma of damp fox fur (mostly Crispin's), and now, the incongruous, sharp tang of historically impossible tobacco smoke.

Lisa leaned back in the chair, which creaked ominously, perhaps protesting the sudden shift in bureaucratic weight class. She took a long drag from her cigarette, exhaling a plume of

smoke that curled towards the ceiling with philosophical intent, possibly contemplating the chipped plaster or the futility of ambition in a world containing King Loo-Eee-By-Gum.

Coordinator. El Supremo. Grand High Coordinator of Chaos Containment. Her father's titles, tossed out with the casual disregard of a monarch whose grasp on reality occasionally took brief holidays. It was absurd. She, Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude – daughter of the King (probably), former resident of subterranean tunnels, possessor of unnervingly impressive upper body strength and a lineage best described as 'creatively sourced' – was now in charge of Paris's premier (and only) agency dedicated to tackling problems too weird for anyone else.

Her 'command' consisted of three foxes of varying degrees of competence and cynicism: Reynard, the pragmatic (now) Deputy Coordinator who had accepted her promotion with worrying grace; Flavius, the earnest young agent whose technical skills were matched only by his burgeoning, embarrassing crush; and Crispin, whose primary contributions seemed to be complaining, shedding, and possessing an uncanny ability to locate biscuits.

Then there were the auxiliary units. Agent Hootington, the Eurasian eagle-owl, currently perched atop the filing cabinet labelled 'PENDING – URGENT (Possibly Sentient)', radiating silent, feathered judgment upon the entire office. Admiral Parrot, the clockwork avian menace, thankfully deactivated for now after its spectacular display of public profanity, lay in pieces on Flavius's workbench awaiting a robust vulgarity filter. And outside, in the courtyard, resided the BACHSU: four

large, opinionated camels acquired through questionable diplomacy and now demanding hay, dates, and possibly better working conditions.

Lisa took another drag. Responsibility. It wasn't a concept she actively courted. She preferred action, strategy, the clean lines of a chess problem, or the satisfying *thwack* of a sword hitting something deserving. Leading this... menagerie... felt different. Messier. Laden with potential for emotional entanglement and bureaucratic sludge. She was wary of connections, wary of expectations. People who got close to her tended to end up dead, disgraced, or developing peculiar obsessions with root vegetables. Still, the King's command had been clear. And perhaps, just perhaps, a tiny part of her relished the challenge.

A hesitant knock interrupted her contemplation. Reynard entered, balancing a precarious stack of parchment that threatened to spill onto the floor like a papery avalanche.

“Coordinator,” he began, navigating carefully around a floorboard that had achieved sentience last Tuesday and occasionally tripped people on purpose. “The initial reports regarding... *Exercise Absurdity*... are coming in. The damages assessment for the Rue Saint-Honouré, preliminary costings for bassoon replacement therapy, and seventeen different memos from the Ministry of Urban Aesthetics complaining about ‘unauthorised camel congregation’.”

He deposited the stack on the corner of Lisa's desk, where it immediately slumped sideways with a sigh. “And,” Reynard added, producing a single, slightly singed document from his tunic, “this just arrived via pigeon post. Marked ‘Most Urgent – Eyes Only – Contains Existential Dread’.”

Lisa looked from the teetering stack of parchment threatening imminent collapse on one corner of her desk, to the single, singed missive Reynard held out, purportedly containing existential dread (which, frankly, seemed redundant in an office already grappling with camel logistics). She reached, not for the stack, but for the single sheet. Existential dread was at least usually concise.

Before taking it, however, she paused. Her gaze drifted past Reynard towards the window, towards the courtyard where, presumably, Abdullah was contemplating the inherent meaninglessness of Parisian pigeons and Yasmin was demanding mineral water with the air of a deposed monarch.

She reached instead for the small, battered tin beside the inkwell, extracted another St Moretitz, and lit it with a deliberate click of her flint and steel. The flare briefly illuminated the determination in her blue eyes. She inhaled deeply, letting the smoke settle her thoughts, a familiar ritual amidst the encroaching absurdity.

“Reynard,” she said, the smoke momentarily obscuring her face before she waved it away impatiently. “I’ve been thinking...”

Reynard waited patiently, accustomed to the Princess’s contemplative pauses, which could precede anything from a brilliant tactical insight to a request for stronger coffee or the location of the nearest badger-proof filing cabinet. The pile of paperwork in his paws shifted slightly, threatening to achieve cascade failure.

“...the camels,” Lisa continued, fixing Reynard with a sharp, analytical gaze that could probably assess the structural

integrity of his arguments at fifty paces. “They are undoubtedly a burden on the department’s budget for hay, artisanal cheese, and, apparently, mineral water. The paperwork alone,” she gestured vaguely at the teetering stack he held, “is likely generating its own gravitational field.”

Reynard nodded grimly. “The Ministry of Fauna Interaction is demanding triplicate forms justifying their continued presence within city limits, citing potential violations of the Urban Ungulate Accord of ’88, Coordinator.”

“Precisely,” Lisa agreed. “Bureaucratic nonsense. However...” She leaned forward, tapping ash into the porcelain tray with unnecessary force. “I think they are a useful strategic asset, if handled correctly.”

Reynard blinked. Useful? Abdullah, whose primary activity was sighing profoundly enough to rattle the windowpanes? Cheesy, whose main strategic input was attempting to eat classified documents? Yasmin, whose spitting accuracy rivalled that of veteran artillerymen? Marigold, who treated street furniture like a personal Lego set?

“Useful, Coordinator?” Reynard ventured carefully, shifting the paperwork slightly. “In what capacity, precisely? Beyond, perhaps, intimidating suspects through sheer philosophical weight or providing impromptu barricades?”

“Their potential is untapped!” Lisa insisted, warming to her theme. “Think, Reynard! Heavy transport. Elevated surveillance platforms. Psychological warfare via existential sighs! But they lack... direction. Discipline. Specialist handling.”

She took another decisive drag from her cigarette. “They need proper management. Someone who understands the camelid psyche. Someone who can channel their unique... talents... towards Bureau objectives rather than unscheduled courtyard rearrangement.”

She fixed Reynard with a look that suggested she had reached a profound strategic conclusion, the kind that usually involved seventeen hypothetical chess moves and possibly a catapult.

“I’m going to recruit a Head of Camelids,” she announced. “Someone experienced in the art, who can be accountable for them. A dedicated specialist.”

Reynard stared. He opened his mouth. He closed it again. He considered the pile of paperwork in his paws, which now included justifications for owl pellets and cheese-based clockwork repairs. He thought about adding ‘Recruitment Budget – Head of Camelids (Species: TBC)’ to the list. He wondered, briefly, if his own sanity was merely pending, rather than fully operational.

“A... Head of Camelids, Coordinator?” he managed, his voice admirably steady. “An experienced professional in... dromedary management? Here? In Paris?”

“Exactly!” Lisa confirmed, clearly pleased with her own logic. “We need someone who speaks their language, understands their needs, and can integrate them effectively into Bureau operations. Find me candidates, Reynard.”

Reynard swallowed. “Candidates, Coordinator. For... Head of Camelids.” He pictured the job advertisement. *Wanted: Individual skilled in motivating philosophically inclined*

dromedaries, negotiating with haughty matriarchs, and preventing the consumption of official documents. Desert experience preferred but not essential. Must be tolerant of occasional spitting and existential dread. Salary negotiable, includes hazard pay.

“I shall... make enquiries, Coordinator,” Reynard said, the weary resignation settling back over him like a familiar cloak. “Though the pool of qualified applicants within the Paris metropolitan area may be... limited.”

“Expand the search if necessary,” Lisa waved dismissively, already turning her attention back to the singed message marked ‘Existential Dread’. “Now, what fresh horror has the universe sent us via pigeon post today?”

While Lisa frowned over the potentially dread-filled missive, Reynard retrieved the hefty stack of forms from the desk before gravity inevitably won the argument. The task of drafting a job description for a Head of Camelids fell, naturally, to him. He retreated to his own smaller desk (recently vacated by Flavius, who now preferred tinkering amidst the controlled chaos of his workbench), dipped his quill in ink, and began.

Position Vacant: Head of Camelids (Ungulate Resources Division – Provisional) Department: Special Investigations Bureau (Ref: SIB/BACHSU/001) Reports To: Coordinator (Currently: Princess Lisa B. De M-P)

Responsibilities Include (but are not limited to):

- *Strategic deployment and operational oversight of four (4) Dromedary Assets (henceforth referred to as ‘The Unit’). Assets possess unique temperaments ranging*

from haughty disdain (Asset Y) and profound existential angst (Asset A) to chronic kleptomania regarding cheese (Asset C) and compulsive environmental rearrangement (Asset M).

- *Procurement of appropriate forage, including negotiation with suppliers regarding non-standard items (dates, figs, mineral water - specified temperature, artisanal cheese – Roquefort preferred by Asset C).*
- *Development and implementation of motivational strategies beyond philosophical debate or bribery.*
- *Mitigation of inter-species conflict (primarily involving spitting, judgmental staring, and attempted consumption of official documents/equipment).*
- *Liaison with Ministry of Fauna Interaction regarding Urban Ungulate Accord compliance.*
- *Accountability for all Unit actions during field operations and courtyard containment.*
- *Optional: Basic first aid for victims of unexpected spitting incidents.*

Qualifications:

- *Extensive experience managing large, temperamental mammals (desert experience advantageous but not essential; experience with Parisian bureaucracy considered equivalent).*
- *Demonstrable ability to communicate effectively with non-verbal, potentially philosophical subjects.*

- *Strong negotiation skills (essential for dealing with both camels and forage suppliers).*
- *High tolerance for absurdity, existential sighs, and proximity to large quantities of camel.*
- *Proficiency in triplicate form completion highly desirable.*

Reynard paused, reading it over. It seemed... accurate, if somewhat alarming. He showed it to Lisa.

She scanned it quickly, cigarette dangling from her lips. “Excellent, Reynard. Concise. To the point. Add a line about ‘Must possess own hat – non-edible preferred’.” She nodded. “Advertise it.”

Advertising the position proved challenging. The official *Gazette* refused the notice, citing ‘implausibility and potential risk to public sanity’. Posting notices on church doors resulted in several being removed by scandalised priests. Crispin’s attempt to utilise town criers led to one being intimidated into silence by Yasmin’s glare and another developing a stutter after trying to explain the role to Abdullah.

Eventually, notices were pinned up in the seedier dockside taverns, the waiting rooms of questionable veterinary surgeons, and slipped discreetly into the saddlebags of visiting spice merchants, on the off-chance they knew someone back home looking for a career change involving less sand and more paperwork.

The response was... varied.

The interview process began the following week in the Bureau's cramped meeting room (formerly a broom cupboard). Lisa presided, flanked by Reynard (taking notes) and Flavius (monitoring candidates for anomalous energy signatures). Crispin was tasked with keeping the actual camels quiet in the courtyard, a job involving much strategic cheese deployment and low muttering.

Candidate the first was Gaston Periwinkle, a former ringmaster whose circus had gone bankrupt after the elephants unionised and the clowns developed philosophical objections to greasepaint. He arrived wearing a threadbare top hat and carrying a whip, which Yasmin immediately tried to eat through the window. He proposed managing the camels through 'firm vocal commands and the strategic application of sequins'. He was politely declined.

Candidate the second was Professor Phileas Foggbottom, an expert in 'Interpretive Zoology'. He attempted to communicate with Abdullah by performing a complex modern dance routine intended to convey 'interspecies solidarity and shared existential burdens'. Abdullah responded by sighing so profoundly it extinguished a candle across the room. Foggbottom left in tears, convinced he'd failed to connect on an artistic level.

Candidate the third was Sergeant Major Grumbles (Retired), formerly of the King's Own Inexplicable Infantry. He believed camels, like recruits, responded best to parade ground drills, excessive shouting, and the threat of latrine duty. His demonstration involved bellowing "ATTEN-SHUN, CAMEL!"

at Cheesy, who promptly ate the Sergeant Major's meticulously polished boot. He was helped out, minus one boot.

Several other applicants followed, including a hypnotist who claimed he could make the camels believe they were chickens (rejected due to potential collateral damage), a poet who wanted to write odes to their melancholy (rejected due to impracticality), and a very confused cheese merchant who thought he was applying for a bulk supply contract.

Lisa was beginning to despair, contemplating simply assigning the camels to permanent guard duty outside the Ministry of Urban Aesthetics as a form of passive protest, when the final candidate arrived.

He was announced by the slightly terrified concierge as "Monsieur Mustafa Pu". He entered quietly, a man of indeterminate middle age, with weathered skin, dark, intelligent eyes that seemed to miss nothing, and an air of calm competence that felt utterly out of place in the Bureau. He wore simple, clean clothes that spoke of travel – loose trousers, a sturdy tunic, and soft leather boots. He carried no whip, no sequins, no interpretive dance shoes.

"Monsieur Pu?" Lisa inquired, intrigued by his quiet presence.

"Indeed, Madame... Coordinator," he replied, his French accented but clear. He bowed slightly. "I saw your notice near the spice market. I understand you require someone... familiar with camels."

"We require someone who can manage four of the most opinionated, stubborn, and philosophically inclined

dromedaries this side of the Sahara,” Lisa stated bluntly. “Do you have such experience?”

Mustafa Pu smiled faintly. “I am from Tunisia, Coordinator. Where I grew up, camels were not merely beasts of burden; they were colleagues. Neighbours, even. One learns to... *liaise*.”

Reynard leaned forward. “*Liaise*? Monsieur Pu, with respect, these are not ordinary camels. One contemplates the void, another negotiates via expectoration...”

“All camels have their ways,” Mustafa said calmly. “One must simply listen.”

Lisa raised an eyebrow. “And you believe you can listen to *these* camels? Abdullah hasn’t uttered a comprehensible sentiment since he arrived, unless you count sighing as a valid form of philosophical discourse.”

“Perhaps,” Mustafa suggested, “no one has asked him the right questions. Or listened in the right language.” He paused. “I speak Arabic, Coordinator. Often, the desert remembers its tongue.”

Lisa considered him. He seemed entirely unfazed by the inherent absurdity of the situation. There was a stillness about him. “Very well, Monsieur Pu. A demonstration seems in order. If you can successfully ‘*liaise*’ with Abdullah, convince him to perform a simple task – say, moving three paces to the left without sighing – the job is yours.”

Mustafa Pu simply nodded and followed Reynard out into the courtyard. Lisa, Flavius, and a now bootless Sergeant Major

Grumbles (who had refused to leave until his footwear was retrieved from Cheesy's digestive tract) watched from the window.

Abdullah was leaning against the wall, seemingly absorbed in contemplating a particularly stubborn patch of moss. Yasmin watched Mustafa approach with narrowed eyes, but surprisingly, did not spit. Cheesy and Marigold paused in their respective activities (eating Crispin's spare tunic and building a small pyramid out of discarded ink pots).

Mustafa stopped a respectful distance from Abdullah. He didn't shout or dance or brandish anything. He simply stood quietly for a moment, then began to speak. His voice was low, melodic, the sounds utterly foreign to the Parisian air – the soft, guttural flow of Arabic.

He spoke for several minutes, his tone conversational, occasionally gesturing slightly. Abdullah's ears twitched. The camel slowly lifted his head, his large, liquid eyes fixing on Mustafa. He remained still, listening. The usual profound sigh seemed held in abeyance.

Then, Mustafa fell silent. He gave a slight, respectful bow towards the camel.

Abdullah blinked his long lashes. He shifted his considerable weight. He looked at the spot three paces to his left. He looked back at Mustafa. Then, slowly, deliberately, without a single audible sigh, Abdullah took three shuffling steps to the left. He then lowered his head and appeared to resume his contemplation of the moss, but now from a slightly different angle.

Back in the office, Lisa stared. Flavius gasped softly, scribbling notes. “Interspecies communication achieved via linguistic specificity! Remarkable!” Even Sergeant Major Grumbles looked impressed, muttering, “Never would have got recruits to move like that.”

Mustafa Pu returned to the office, his calm expression unchanged.

Lisa looked at him, then back out at the slightly-less-inert Abdullah. “Mustafa Pu,” she said, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Welcome to the Special Investigations Bureau. You’re hired.”

Mustafa Pu, newly appointed Head of Camelids (a title Reynard was still struggling to write on requisition forms without his quill shaking slightly), did not approach his task with whips, shouts, or promises of extra rations (though he did quietly confiscate Crispin’s ‘emergency’ Roquefort, replacing it with a small bag of dried figs, much to Cheesy’s initial confusion and eventual delight). Instead, he began with observation.

He spent the first two days simply sitting quietly in the courtyard, seemingly doing nothing but occasionally murmuring soft phrases in Arabic and sharing his own lunch (simple flatbread and olives) with whichever camel happened to be nearest and least inclined to either spit or sigh with soul-crushing ennui.

The Foxeteers were baffled.

“Is that it?” Crispin complained, watching from the office window. “He’s just... sitting there! How’s that going to train

them? At this rate, Abdullah will have achieved enlightenment and transcended the need for physical movement entirely before Mustafa gets him to fetch a bucket!”

Flavius, however, was intrigued. “Observe, Crispin. Note the subtle shifts in The Unit’s posture. Yasmin’s ears are angled towards him – a sign of grudging attention. Marigold has only rearranged the recycling bins twice this morning, and in a distinctly less aggressive pattern. And Abdullah... Abdullah’s sighs seem marginally less... apocalyptic.”

Mustafa’s first active training exercise involved requesting Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert to walk from one side of the courtyard to the other and back. He didn’t command; he requested, in melodic Arabic, presenting the exercise as a demonstration of her superior grace and lineage, ideally suited for showcasing the elegant movement inherent in the Al-Camemberti line.

Yasmin considered this, flicked an ear dismissively at Crispin (who flinched instinctively), then rose with the fluid motion of poured sand and proceeded to walk the requested path with the hauteur of a queen processing down an aisle, deliberately ignoring a small puddle that Mustafa had hoped she might step over. Progress, of a sort.

Training Abdullah required a different approach. Mustafa engaged him in quiet, lengthy discussions while leaning against the same wall. Onlookers couldn’t hear the words, but occasionally Abdullah would nod slowly, or blink his long lashes thoughtfully, before Mustafa requested a simple action – like shifting his weight, or turning his head. Abdullah complied, slowly, ponderously, but without the usual

accompanying sigh that could curdle milk at fifty paces. It seemed philosophical accord was the key.

Cheesy responded, predictably, to food. Mustafa introduced dates and dried apricots alongside the figs, using them to reward basic commands like ‘stay’ (difficult, when cheese was nearby) and ‘don’t eat the evidence bags’ (extremely difficult). There was a minor incident when Cheesy mistook Agent Hootington, momentarily swooping low, for a large, feathered date, resulting in ruffled owl dignity and a brief, pointed lecture from Hootington consisting entirely of intense staring.

Marigold proved the most creatively challenging. Mustafa didn’t try to stop his rearranging habit; he channelled it. Using hand signals and softly spoken Arabic, he began teaching Marigold to rearrange specific objects – buckets, spare shields, Crispin’s abandoned boots – into designated patterns. The first attempts resulted in abstract sculptures of dubious tactical value, but gradually, Marigold learned to construct surprisingly effective, if aesthetically unique, barricades on command.

The results weren't always smooth. There was the day Abdullah, asked to ‘remain vigilant’, spent six hours staring intently at a single cloud, refusing to move even when it rained. There was the time Yasmin, complimented on her 'regal bearing', interpreted it as permission to demand peeled grapes from a passing magistrate. And the less said about Cheesy’s attempt to ‘retrieve’ a dropped croissant from a nearby café, resulting in a frantic chase through three arrondissements, the better.

Yet, slowly, an understanding formed. The camels seemed calmer under Mustafa’s quiet authority. They responded, albeit

in their own distinct ways. Yasmin carried designated items with disdainful grace; Abdullah stood guard with profound stillness; Cheesy learned to fetch specific (non-edible) items; and Marigold could assemble a defensive position out of discarded fruit crates faster than a squad of trained engineers.

After two weeks, Mustafa Pu requested a formal meeting with Coordinator Lisa and Deputy Coordinator Reynard. He arrived precisely on time, calm and composed as ever.

“Coordinator, Deputy Coordinator,” he began with a slight bow. “The BACHSU Unit is progressing. Their integration requires further steps.”

Lisa leaned forward, intrigued. “Excellent work, Mustafa. What do you require?”

“Resources, Coordinator,” Mustafa stated simply. “Firstly, uniforms.”

Reynard choked slightly on his tea. “Uniforms? For the... camels?”

“But of course,” Mustafa replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “A unit requires identity. Cohesion. Pride. I propose simple, durable saddlecloths in Bureau colours – Stealth Fawn, perhaps? – with the Bureau insignia embroidered. Tastefully, of course. And perhaps small, ceremonial tassels for Yasmin. She appreciates adornment.”

Lisa hid a smile. “Embroidered saddlecloths. Go on.”

“Secondly, sustenance,” Mustafa continued. “The current forage is... adequate. Barely. For optimal performance and morale, The Unit requires superior fodder. Fresh alfalfa,

imported dates of the Medjool variety, occasional figs, purified water for Yasmin, and,” he glanced meaningfully towards the door where Crispin was presumably guarding his cheese stash, “a controlled, supplemental allowance of high-quality Gruyère for Cheesy, administered strictly as a training reward.”

Reynard was already mentally drafting Form 11-Omega: Request for Luxury Camel Feed & Haberdashery.

“And thirdly,” Mustafa Pu concluded, his gaze steady, “working conditions. These are not mere animals, Coordinator. They are colleagues. They require rest and respect. Therefore, I must insist on appropriate time off for The Unit, and for myself as their Head. Every other weekend should suffice. Friday sundown to Sunday sundown.”

Lisa considered this. Bureau regulations on weekends off were notoriously vague, mostly because threats to Paris rarely checked the calendar. But Mustafa’s quiet insistence, backed by his undeniable success with the previously unmanageable camels, carried weight. Plus, the image of Abdullah the camel demanding union-mandated weekends was simply too delicious to resist.

“Uniforms, premium fodder, and alternate weekends off,” Lisa summarised, a twinkle in her eye. “Highly irregular, Mustafa. But,” she glanced at Reynard’s slightly overwhelmed expression, “given the unique nature of your division, and the results you’ve achieved... approved. Reynard, see to the necessary forms.”

Reynard sighed, reaching for a fresh quill. The Bureau Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit was not only

operational, it was apparently negotiating for better benefits. The paperwork was going to be utterly, spectacularly absurd.

Procuring uniforms for the newly integrated Special Investigations Bureau proved a logistical and existential challenge that made Reynard long for the relative simplicity of fighting badger bandits in burning taverns. Mustafa Pu's request for embroidered saddlecloths, premium fodder, and alternate weekends off had been approved by Coordinator Lisa with a wave of her hand, leaving Reynard to navigate the labyrinthine corridors of Royal Procurement.

The requisitions officer, a badger named Monsieur Pincenez whose spectacles magnified not only his eyes but also his inherent scepticism, initially refused the request for 'four (4) Camelid Saddlecloths, Stealth Fawn, with embroidered Bureau insignia (dragon optional, tassels mandatory for Asset Y)'.

"Camels?" he'd sniffed, peering over Form 11-Omega. "In Paris? Wearing *uniforms*? Preposterous! Regulations clearly state official saddlecloths are only sanctioned for equine units and, in exceptional circumstances, royal corgis participating in state funerals."

It took Reynard three days, five supplementary forms (including Form 11-Omega/Stroke-Gamma: 'Justification for Non-Standard Ungulate Haberdashery'), a vaguely threatening memo citing 'Coordinator's Prerogative (Royal Assent Implied)', and the subtle suggestion that Agent Hootington might be persuaded to take up residence on Monsieur Pincenez's filing cabinet, before the order was grudgingly approved.

Getting the uniforms *made* was another trial. The Royal Tailor fainted outright when presented with the measurements for Yasmin's tassels. Flavius attempted to assist using his Incremental Material Accretion Device, proudly producing several Bureau insignia badges crafted from hardened casein polymer. These were rejected after Cheesy attempted to eat his own badge during a preliminary fitting.

Eventually, a seamstress known only as Madame Duboiselle (rumoured to have once crafted a camouflage tea cosy for a particularly shy Brigadier) was located who, for an exorbitant fee and a vow of silence, agreed to undertake the commission.

The day the uniforms arrived was one of memorable chaos.

Lisa decreed an immediate Bureau-wide 'Uniform Inspection Parade' in the courtyard.

The foxes grumbled as they donned the new additions. Their standard armour remained, but now sported slightly ill-fitting Stealth Fawn sashes and the new cheese-proof Bureau badges pinned awkwardly to their breastplates.

"Stealth Fawn?" Crispin complained, trying to adjust his sash, which kept slipping off his shoulder armour. "Makes me look like a poorly upholstered armchair! And this badge clashes terribly with my natural colouring!"

Flavius, however, polished his badge enthusiastically. "I think it lends a certain... esprit de corps, Crispin! We look quite unified!"

Agent Hootington refused point-blank to wear anything. Attempts by Flavius to attach a small, embroidered bib were

met with a level of icy disdain that could freeze boiling water. Eventually, a compromise was reached: a small, Stealth Fawn cover was draped over his usual perch on the filing cabinet, which Hootington ignored with magnificent indifference. For the parade, he would be represented by his perch.

Admiral Parrot, still deactivated pending the installation of the profanity filter, was simply propped up on Flavius's workbench with a tiny Stealth Fawn sash draped over its clockwork chest.

Then came the BACHSU. Under Mustafa Pu's calm supervision, the camels were attired. The Stealth Fawn saddlecloths, surprisingly well-made, were fitted. The Bureau insignia (a stylized fox head peering suspiciously over a crenelated wall, embroidered in gold thread) gleamed against the fawn background. Yasmin surveyed her reflection in a puddle, tossed her head approvingly as the ceremonial tassels (deep crimson, as requested) swung, and emitted a sound that might have been a pleased snort. Abdullah sighed, presumably contemplating the fleeting nature of fashion. Marigold immediately tried to rearrange the fringe on his saddlecloth into a more aesthetically pleasing spiral. Cheesy, finding the Gruyère allowance temporarily suspended during fitting, attempted a nibble of his own uniform before being gently dissuaded by Mustafa.

"Alright!" Lisa called, stepping into the courtyard, looking impressively Coordinator-like despite the absurdity unfolding before her. "Bureau! Fall in! Inspection formation!"

What followed resembled less a military parade and more an attempt to herd cats using interpretive dance during an earthquake.

Reynard, Flavius, and Crispin lined up smartly enough, though Crispin kept fidgeting with his sash.

Mustafa Pu stood calmly beside them.

Getting the camels into anything resembling a line proved... taxing.

“BACHSU, line abreast!” Mustafa commanded softly in Arabic.

Yasmin, interpreting ‘abreast’ with regal latitude, simply moved to the sunniest spot. Abdullah shuffled vaguely sideways, then stopped to consider the philosophical implications of ‘lining up’. Cheesy, distracted by a dropped biscuit crumb near Reynard’s boot, wandered out of position. Marigold began nudging a loose paving stone with his nose, apparently feeling the current arrangement lacked artistic merit.

Mustafa sighed, a sound infinitely gentler than Abdullah’s, and tried again, murmuring quiet encouragements and strategic compliments. Slowly, agonisingly, the four camels formed something that might, in poor light and with considerable goodwill, be described as a line. It wobbled slightly. Abdullah looked mournful. Yasmin looked impatient. Cheesy looked hungry. Marigold looked thoughtful (about the paving stones).

“Representing the Special Airborne Service...” Reynard announced formally, gesturing towards Flavius’s workbench where the sash-draped Admiral lay silent, and then towards the filing cabinet now visible through the office window, adorned with its Stealth Fawn perch cover, upon which Hootington sat, utterly immobile, staring into the middle distance as if contemplating the heat death of the universe.

Lisa surveyed the scene. Three foxes in armour and slightly skewed sashes. A calm Tunisian man. Four enormous camels shuffling impatiently in embroidered saddlecloths. An inanimate clockwork parrot. And a judgmental owl represented by a draped filing cabinet.

This was her command. The newly uniformed, highly specialised, utterly baffling Special Investigations Bureau.

She took a deep breath. She caught Reynard's eye; he gave a microscopic, almost imperceptible shrug that spoke volumes of shared suffering under the weight of Parisian absurdity.

"Bureau!" Lisa declared, her voice carrying across the courtyard, firm and clear, betraying none of the internal monologue questioning her life choices. "You look... cohesive. Ready for duty." She paused, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Dismissed. Crispin, you're on tea duty. And try not to let Cheesy eat the sugar bowl this time."

The first parade of the newly uniformed Bureau dissolved, not with smart salutes, but with camels sighing, foxes muttering about tea, and the lingering question of how exactly one filed requisition forms for camel tassels.

Chapter Nine: In Which Paris Receives Unexpected Visitors, Gravity Takes Mild Offence, Tents Defy Geometry, the Concept of 'Subtlety' Decides to Take an Early Lunch, Royalty Commands Oversight, Camels Contemplate Disguises, and Badgers Lurk with Intent

Paris, having recently endured tribulations involving sentient chess sets, reverse decapitations, hallucinogenic strawberries, projectile vegetables, and rogue camelid-based diplomacy, was enjoying what passed for normality. This largely meant that the River Seine was flowing in roughly the correct direction, the gargoyles on Notre Dame had ceased offering unsolicited architectural advice, and the number of spontaneously generated bureaucratic forms required to justify existence had dipped back below 'existentially terrifying'.

It was, therefore, inevitable that something new and profoundly weird would arrive to fill the void.

The arrival of *Cirque Magique Volkovich* wasn't announced with gaudy posters or boisterous parades. That would have been far too sensible. Instead, it manifested overnight in the Champ de Mars – a patch of green usually reserved for military reviews, picnics involving questionable cheese, and dogs contemplating the deeper meaning of lamp posts.

One minute, the field was empty save for dew and the lingering memory of yesterday's arguments about cheese etiquette. The

next, under a moon that looked suspiciously like it was smirking, the circus simply... *was*.

It didn't arrive; it *coalesced*. Like damp forming on a forgotten cellar wall, or like a poorly considered metaphor suddenly achieving physical form. First came the smell – a peculiar mixture of sawdust, ozone, burnt sugar, vague disappointment, and something that might have been boiled cabbage but refused to commit. Then, the sounds: a discordant symphony of off-key calliope music that seemed to actively resent being played, the distant roar of something large and possibly furry expressing profound dissatisfaction with its living arrangements, and the faint, rhythmic *thwack* of what could only be a rubber chicken hitting something solid, repeatedly.

Finally, the visuals solidified. Tents bloomed across the grass like improbable, stripy fungi. They weren't just canvas structures; they were affronts to Euclidean geometry. Angles curved where they shouldn't, stripes pulsed with faint, internal light, and the main Big Top seemed to lean nonchalantly against the concept of gravity itself, occasionally twitching as if shrugging off a particularly tedious law of physics. Pennants fluttered from peaks that defied perspective, displaying symbols that looked vaguely menacing if you squinted, or like badly drawn teacups if you didn't.

Strange wagons materialized alongside the tents. Not brightly painted circus wagons, but hulking, slightly menacing contraptions of dark wood and tarnished brass, pulled by creatures that resolutely refused to be identified. They might have been horses that had lost an argument with a wardrobe, or possibly very large, hairy slugs wearing ill-fitting hats. They

stood steaming faintly in the pre-dawn chill, looking deeply unimpressed by Paris.

And observing this burgeoning chaos, standing beside the slightly-too-small main entrance flap of the Big Top (which seemed to be frowning), was the ringmaster himself: Vladimir 'Vovo' Volkovich.

'Vovo the Voluminous' was a descriptor that barely did him justice. He wasn't merely large; he occupied space with a belligerent sense of entitlement, as if air itself was trespassing on his personal property. He wore a coat that might once have been crimson velvet but now looked like it had been used to put out several small fires, possibly involving disgruntled badgers. His vast waistcoat strained valiantly against buttons the size of saucers, hinting at a stomach that had consumed not just meals, but entire menus, possibly including the waiters. A thick moustache, the colour and texture of neglected Brillo pads, drooped mournfully over his mouth, occasionally twitching as if receiving signals from a distant, equally gloomy, planet.

He surveyed his newly appeared domain, hands clasped behind his back, radiating an aura of profound, world-weary gravitas mixed with the faint scent of borscht and impending doom. He looked like a man who had wrestled bears, argued with physics, and possibly tried to short-change Death itself over a game of cards, and had come away only slightly worse for wear (mostly in the waistcoat department).

As the Parisian dawn reluctantly revealed the full extent of the *Cirque Magique Volkovich's* overnight occupation, the true nature of its attractions began, quite literally, to emerge. It wasn't so much a gradual unveiling as a series of perplexing

occurrences that made early-morning dog walkers question their life choices and local bakers wonder if someone had spiked the sourdough starter again.

First came the **Poodles of Paradox**. Emerging from a tent striped in colours that actively clashed with the laws of optics, these weren't the pampered lapdogs of Parisian aristocracy. These were existential poodles. One trotted backwards with flawless precision, seemingly convinced that time was merely a suggestion. Another appeared to be simultaneously chasing its own tail and contemplating the duality of being, occasionally pausing to issue mournful yaps that sounded suspiciously like philosophical queries. A third poodle simply faded in and out of existence, leaving only the faint scent of lavender and existential doubt.

Then, lumbering from one of the slug-drawn wagons, came **Boris the Bear**. Boris wasn't just any bear; he was a bear who believed, with profound conviction, that he was a highly qualified accountant. He wore a tiny pair of wire-rimmed spectacles perched precariously on his snout and carried a battered leather ledger under one arm. He shuffled towards the Big Top, occasionally stopping to sniff suspiciously at discarded cabbage leaves as if auditing their nutritional value, muttering figures under his breath in ursine grumbles that sounded remarkably like complaints about unfiled tax returns.

From another tent, marked with a symbol resembling a pretzel trying to tie itself in a knot, emerged **The Magnificent Marconis**. This wasn't a family of acrobats, but a troupe of sentient, surprisingly agile *mannequins*. Dressed in slightly-too-tight spangled leotards, they performed intricate pyramids

and improbable balancing acts with the eerie silence and fixed smiles of beings who hadn't quite grasped the concept of blinking. Their movements were fluid but unnerving, like animated shop displays plotting world domination through coordinated gymnastics.

The animal acts defied conventional zoology. There were **Synchronised Slugs**, leaving glistening trails in perfect figure-eight patterns while humming discordant harmonies. There were **Hypnotic Hamsters** who could allegedly persuade audiences to reveal their deepest secrets or suddenly develop an overwhelming craving for sunflower seeds (results varied). There was even rumour of **Invisible Elephants**, whose presence was indicated only by the sudden, inexplicable flattening of nearby objects and the faint smell of peanuts.

The human (or humanoid) performers were no less bizarre. **Irina the Indescribable**, whose act reportedly involved interpretive dance combined with advanced plumbing techniques, could occasionally be glimpsed practising near a suspiciously gurgling fountain. **Fedor the Flatulent**, a clown whose primary comedic tool was olfactory rather than visual, fortunately remained unseen (but occasionally, faintly, detected) within his wagon. And then there were **The Brothers Grimalkin**, identical twins who performed feats of alarming juggling, using objects like flaming teacups, bewildered ferrets (rumoured to be suffering from ennui), and philosophical treatises on the nature of gravity (which seemed particularly offended by the whole affair).

Overseeing this gradual unfurling of organised chaos, Vovo the Voluminous remained by the Big Top entrance, occasionally

issuing commands in a voice like rocks tumbling down a well. His pronouncements seemed less like directions and more like suggestions offered to a universe that wasn't entirely listening. The 'magic' of the *Cirque Magique* wasn't about sparkling illusions or cheap tricks; it was woven into the very fabric of its performers, a strange, unsettling energy that hinted that the laws of nature were merely guidelines, and Vovo Volkovich possessed a well-thumbed copy with copious annotations suggesting 'improvements'. Paris was in for a show, whether it wanted one or not.

The news of a circus appearing overnight on the Champ de Mars reached the Palace of Verse-Isle with the speed of panicked gossip, which is only marginally slower than light speed but carries considerably more misinformation. King Loo-Eee-By-Gum, whose attention span had recently been preoccupied with designing a self-peeling grape (a project currently stalled at the 'convincing the grape' stage), was immediately intrigued.

A summons, delivered by a breathless Monsieur Fichu who looked suspiciously like he'd run all the way from the Ministry of Urban Aesthetics (possibly pursued by an angry camel), arrived at the Bureau headquarters shortly after elevenses. It demanded the immediate presence of Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude and her senior staff.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, Reynard, and a slightly biscuit-crumb-dusted Crispin presented themselves in the King's Lesser Informal Audience Chamber (a room only slightly smaller than a cathedral, decorated primarily with rejected tapestries depicting unsuccessful royal hunting

trips). Flavius remained behind, attempting to calibrate the absurdity meter which had started smoking gently upon news of the circus's arrival.

King Loo-Eee sat upon a chaise longue upholstered in startled-looking otters, wearing his Hat of Wisdom (currently resting after its alleged involvement in the sentient chess incident) and holding a half-finished diagram for the grape-peeler.

"Ah! Coordinator! Reynard! Other one!" the King boomed, beaming. "Excellent timing! Have you heard? A circus! Materialised! Right on the Champ de Mars! Splendid! Haven't had a decent circus since that unfortunate business with the juggling llamas and the Minister of Finance's toupee."

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude inclined her head. "We have received preliminary reports, Your Majesty. Tents defying geometry, performing mannequins, possibly an accounting bear..."

"Marvellous!" The King clapped his hands. "Exactly the sort of spontaneous cultural enrichment Paris needs! Which brings me to the point! This 'Cirque Magique Volkovich'... sounds intriguing. Possibly volatile. Definitely requires... oversight."

He fixed Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude with a surprisingly sharp look, the eccentricity momentarily receding. "Coordinator, your Bureau – your newly organised, newly *uniformed* Bureau," he added, clearly recalling the recent awkward parade, "needs a chance to prove itself. To demonstrate it can manage... unconventional situations... without resulting in city-wide confectionery conversions, reverse decapitations, unexpected knitting obsessions,

hallucinogenic strawberry pandemics, or avian-based larceny involving prized royal pets!"

He shuddered slightly at the memory of the Queen's swoon. "And absolutely *no* malfunctioning clockwork parrots insulting the diplomatic corps!"

He leaned forward, pointing a finger that still had a smudge of grape juice on it. "Therefore! I am tasking the Special Investigations Bureau – *you*, Coordinator – with full and total responsibility for this circus!"

Reynard's ears twitched. Crispin choked back a groan. Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude maintained her composure, though her eyebrow arched slightly.

"Responsibility, Your Majesty?" Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude queried carefully.

"Complete responsibility!" the King confirmed grandly. "You will stand guard. You will ensure its success – we need the boost to public morale! You will prevent *any* public disorder stemming from it – no riots, no panics, no citizens suddenly believing they are cheese!" He paused, thinking back. "Unless it's *good* cheese, perhaps? No, definitely no cheese-related incidents."

"Furthermore," he continued, his voice taking on a more serious tone, "this circus is described as 'Magique'. Magic, my dear Coordinator, is notoriously leaky. Like faulty plumbing, but with more tentacles and existential dread. Your Bureau will contain it! Any spells, enchantments, paradoxes, or rogue probabilities attempting to escape the confines of the Champ de Mars are *your* problem! Understood?"

He surveyed them sternly. "After the parade debacle, the Bureau is on its last chance. This is your opportunity to demonstrate competence, control, and a distinct lack of airborne profanity or turnip-based ballistics."

"The success of this circus," he concluded, gesturing emphatically with the grape diagram, "and the continued tranquillity of Paris in the face of performing slugs and existential poodles, rests entirely upon the shoulders of the Special Investigations Bureau. Your foxes, your camels, your owl, your peculiar Tunisian camel-whisperer – all of you. Don't mess it up. That's a Royal Command!"

He beamed again, satisfied. "Now, off you pop! Keep me informed! And try not to let the accounting bear audit the royal treasury – Pincenez gets frightfully agitated."

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude exchanged a look with Reynard – a silent acknowledgment of the impossible task just assigned. Guarding an absurd, possibly dangerous, geometrically unsound magical circus, with the Bureau's very existence hanging in the balance.

It occurred to Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, somewhere between the third memo regarding camel-related property damage and the fifth request for clarification on the Bureau's policy regarding philosophical badgers, that she was smoking far more than usual. The delicate porcelain ashtray on Reynard's—*her*—desk seemed to fill itself with alarming speed, each stubbed-out end of a historically impossible St Moretitz marking another small absurdity confronted, another layer of bureaucratic nonsense navigated, another moment where reaching for the familiar ritual felt less

like an indulgence and more like essential equipment for maintaining sanity.

Coordinator. The title felt heavy, like damp armour, and the responsibility seemed to generate a near-constant low-grade stress that demanded frequent, nicotine-laced punctuation. She'd always enjoyed a smoke after a fight or during contemplative moments, but this felt different. This was... industrial quantities. Leadership, she mused, stubbing out another cigarette with unnecessary force, was apparently terrible for one's health, lungs, and supply of anachronistic tobacco products. She made a mental note to have Reynard investigate alternative suppliers, perhaps someone less likely to raise eyebrows at the temporal paradox.

A week remained until the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* was scheduled to inflict itself upon the paying public of Paris. The intervening days had seen the geometrically challenging tents solidify further, the strange smells become marginally more identifiable (though no less worrying), and the general level of ambient absurdity around the Champ de Mars increase significantly, monitored closely by Flavius's perpetually twitching absurdity meter.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude stood with her Deputy Coordinator, Reynard, near the edge of the sprawling encampment, observing the preparations. The late afternoon sun cast long, slightly wobbly shadows from the improbable tents. The off-key calliope music was mercifully silent for now, replaced by the sound of rhythmic hammering (possibly constructing something, possibly just hitting things

for emphasis) and the occasional existential sigh drifting from the poodle enclosure.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude drew deeply on a St Moretitz, the smoke momentarily obscuring her view of a mannequin acrobat apparently attempting to teach a bewildered slug the principles of double-entry bookkeeping.

"Seven days, Reynard," she murmured, exhaling slowly.

"Seven days until Vovo the Voluminous unleashes... whatever this is... upon the city. The King was quite clear: no disorder, no escaping magic, total responsibility rests with us."

Reynard nodded grimly, adjusting the Stealth Fawn sash over his armour. The uniform still felt vaguely ridiculous, but orders were orders. "Indeed, Coordinator. The potential for chaos is... significant. We need constant surveillance. Eyes everywhere."

"Precisely," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude agreed. "Which brings us to deployment. Agent Hootington," she nodded towards the sky, though the owl was currently nowhere in sight, "is our primary aerial asset. He will maintain high-altitude observation during daylight hours. His reports," she sighed, recalling the owl pellet incident, "may lack conventional clarity, but his vantage point is unparalleled. Instruct him to focus on unusual energy fluctuations, unlicensed geometric anomalies, or any bears attempting to access accounting ledgers."

"Understood, Coordinator," Reynard noted mentally. Communicating complex instructions to Hootington usually involved pointing, interpretive gestures, and hoping the owl didn't mistake the orders for suggestions about lunch.

"Admiral Parrot," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude continued, "remains... undergoing repairs and extensive re-programming of its vulgarity matrix. Hopefully, Flavius can install a filter strong enough to prevent further diplomatic incidents involving insults to royal headwear."

"Flavius is optimistic, Coordinator," Reynard reported. "He mentioned something about utilising 'residual politeness siphoned from theological debates'."

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude raised a sceptical eyebrow but moved on. "The Foxeteers – yourself, Flavius, and Crispin – will rotate ground patrols. Standard plainclothes observation where possible, though blending in might be difficult if Boris the Bear decides to conduct an audit."

"And the BACHSU?" Reynard asked, glancing towards the far side of the Champ de Mars where Mustafa Pu was patiently attempting to explain the concept of 'not eating the surveillance equipment' to Cheesy the camel.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude allowed herself a small smile. "Ah, yes. Our Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit. This requires... subtlety." She took another drag from her cigarette. "Direct surveillance by camel tends to attract attention, even in Paris. Therefore, Mustafa has devised disguises."

Reynard blinked. "Disguises? For the camels?"

"Indeed," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude confirmed, the corner of her mouth twitching. "Abdullah, given his philosophical nature and profound stillness, will be

disguised as a statue. Specifically, 'The Thinker Contemplating Lunch'. Mustafa is sourcing a suitable plinth and some strategically applied pigeon droppings for authenticity."

Reynard processed this. "A statue."

"Yasmin," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude continued, "with her regal bearing, will pose as an exotic travelling throne, temporarily abandoned by a visiting potentate. We're working on tassels and cushions."

"A throne," Reynard repeated faintly.

"Cheesy will be disguised as a large, unusually hairy pile of laundry awaiting collection."

"...Laundry."

"And Marigold," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude finished, "given his talent for rearranging things, will be disguised as a mobile, avant-garde topiary display. Mustafa is currently weaving branches into his harness."

Reynard stared out at the bizarre circus encampment, then back at his Coordinator, who was calmly smoking her impossible cigarette while outlining plans involving camels disguised as furniture, laundry, and shrubbery.

"Coordinator," he said carefully, "while I applaud the... creativity... are we entirely sure that disguising four enormous dromedaries as inanimate objects in the middle of Paris constitutes effective, low-profile surveillance?"

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude waved a dismissive hand, scattering ash. "Reynard, this is Paris. And *this*," she gestured towards the circus, "is Vovo Volkovich's

Cirque Magique. If a camel disguised as a thinking statue is the strangest thing someone sees on the Champ de Mars next week, I'll consider our operation a resounding success. Now, coordinate with Mustafa on the pigeon dropping logistics, would you? Authenticity is key."

Reynard sighed, the weary resignation settling over him once more. Surveillance. Camels. Statues. Laundry. Topiary. It was going to be a long week.

(Aside)

Where there is sawdust, dubious candy floss, and the faint possibility of witnessing a bear audit accounts, humanity (and various other species) will inevitably gather. The arrival of Vovo Volkovich's circus didn't just bring geometrically challenging tents and performing mannequins; it acted as a powerful magnet for the rich ecosystem of opportunists, entrepreneurs, and general oddbods that thrived in the city's margins.

Almost overnight, the periphery of the Champ de Mars transformed into a bustling, makeshift marketplace of questionable legitimacy. Hawkers materialized, seemingly conjured from the Parisian fog, selling wares of dubious origin and even more dubious utility. There was **Jean-Pierre the Purveyor of Pre-Owned Pigeons**, offering birds that looked suspiciously like they'd been hastily repainted and came with no guarantee of returning (or indeed, flying in the correct direction). Beside him, **Madame Duboiselle** (rumoured to have once crafted camouflage tea cosies for Brigadiers) now offered "Genuine Circus Souvenirs," consisting mainly of bent spoons, suspiciously sticky horse brasses, and small, knitted effigies of

Vovo the Voluminous that bore an unfortunate resemblance to disgruntled potatoes.

Food stalls sprouted like weeds after a rainstorm, each vying for attention with competing smells. You could purchase "**Saucisses Mystérieuses**" (Mystery Sausages), rumoured to contain actual mystery rather than meat; "**Pommes d'Amour**" (Love Apples) coated in a candy shell so resilient it could allegedly survive re-entry from orbit; and "**Crêpes Incertaines**" (Uncertain Crêpes), cooked on a griddle that occasionally displayed alarming temporal anomalies, sometimes serving you tomorrow's crêpe, slightly cold.

Naturally, the less savoury elements were also drawn like moths to a flickering (and possibly cursed) flame. Pickpockets, operating under imaginative aliases like '**Fingers**' **Flaubert** (who claimed his dexterity came from years of failed accordion lessons) and '**Silas the Slippery**' (whose main skill seemed to be accidentally tripping over his own feet at inopportune moments), moved through the crowds with varying degrees of competence. There were **charlatans offering elixirs** guaranteed to cure everything from existential dread to embarrassing taches, usually consisting of watered-down wine and optimism. And **game operators** ran stalls involving hoops, coconuts, and principles of physics that seemed determinedly unfair, presided over by men whose faces suggested they'd lost more bets than they'd won, particularly against gravity.

Even the beggars adapted. Instead of simple pleas, they offered performance art – **Jacques the Juggler of Judgements**, who juggled bruised fruit while reciting mournful poetry about societal inequality, and **Marie the Mime of Misery**, whose

silent portrayal of bureaucratic despair was considered by some critics to be the most insightful performance in Paris, including those at the actual Opera House.

This vibrant, chaotic fringe element buzzed around the perimeter of the *Cirque Magique*, a chaotic symphony of opportunism and desperation, adding yet another layer of unpredictable energy to the already volatile mix brewing on the Champ de Mars. The Bureau would have its work cut out distinguishing genuine threats from mere background absurdity.

The royal invitation arrived not via discreet courtier, but via a cannonball delivery system the King had recently installed for 'Express Communications'. The cannonball (fortunately padded and significantly undercharged) landed with a gentle *thump* in the middle of the BACHSU's carefully arranged hay supply in the Bureau courtyard, narrowly missing Cheesy (who immediately tried to eat the padding). Attached was a scroll sealed with the Royal Crest and smelling faintly of gunpowder and raspberries.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude unrolled it in her office, Reynard peering over her shoulder.

"BY ROYAL DECREE!" it boomed in unnecessarily large calligraphy. **"Their Most Exalted Majesties, King Loo-Eee-By-Gum and Queen Mary-Anne Twinset, Intend to Grace the Opening Performance of the Cirque Magique Volkovich with the Illustrious Radiance of Their Presence! Prepare Accordingly! Ensure Ample Refreshments (No Enhanced Strawberries This Time, Ahem)! P.S. The Queen requires assurance that no owls will be involved in aerial reconnaissance of the Royal Box."**

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude slowly lowered the scroll. A single St Moretitz, forgotten between her fingers, dropped ash onto the royal seal.

"Well," she said flatly. "That adds a certain... spice... to the security arrangements."

Reynard closed his eyes for a brief moment, perhaps communing with the patron saint of exasperated vulpine officials. "Their Majesties. Attending *this* circus. After... everything." He gestured vaguely towards the window, encompassing the memory of rogue parades, reverse decapitations, and avian larceny. "The King views this as a chance for the Bureau to redeem itself. If *anything* goes wrong – a single escaped paradox, a philosophically triggered stampede, an incident involving the accounting bear and the royal coffers..."

"...Or if Agent Hootington so much as glances sideways at the Queen's hat," Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude finished grimly, "we'll be lucky if we're merely disbanded. Father might actually try out his experimental catapult again."

The absurdity of the situation was staggering. They were responsible for the safety of the monarchy at an event run by a man named Vovo the Voluminous, featuring existential poodles and potentially sentient mannequins, under the watchful eyes of a King who thought 'leaky magic' was a minor inconvenience and a Queen who had every reason to distrust their operational competence, especially where birds were concerned.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude reached for another St Moretitz. "Right. Security protocols need to be

escalated from 'Cautiously Optimistic' to 'Assume Imminent Existential Collapse'. Reynard, double the disguised camel deployment. And tell Mustafa Pu that Abdullah's 'Thinker Contemplating Lunch' pose needs to look particularly vigilant tonight."

Later that day, amidst the mountains of paperwork threatening to spontaneously generate their own subcommittee, Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude paused her official duties. She retrieved a small, unmarked notebook from a locked drawer – a relic from her time living underground, filled with contacts far removed from the royal court.

Flipping to a specific page, she penned a brief, coded message. It mentioned 'root vegetable preservation supplies', 'urgent requirement', and specified a quantity usually associated with supplying a small army battalion rather than personal consumption. She sealed it not with the royal crest, but with a simple wax seal bearing the image of a slightly disgruntled badger (another souvenir from past adventures).

She then summoned not a royal page, but a scruffy urchin who occasionally ran errands for the Bureau when discretion was paramount and deniability useful. The boy appeared as if summoned from the very brickwork, accepted the note and the proffered coins with a knowing wink, and vanished back into the Parisian alleys as quickly as he'd arrived.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude leaned back, striking a fresh St Moretitz. If she was going to survive overseeing Vovo the Voluminous, preventing magical leaks, managing disguised camels, and keeping the King happy, she would need fortification. Vast quantities of fortification.

Preferably strong, earthy, and smelling faintly of desperation – just like her favoured Turnip Vodka. The 'Export Strength' variety, naturally. One had to be prepared.

The day before the grand opening of the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* dawned not with gentle birdsong, but with the distinct sound of Crispin yelling at a camel disguised as a pile of laundry.

Pandemonium wasn't just knocking at the Bureau's door; it had kicked the door down, moved in, and was currently rearranging the furniture according to principles that defied both logic and gravity. The pressure of the impending royal visit, combined with the inherent weirdness radiating from the circus tents and the King's explicit warning about this being their 'last chance', had frayed nerves to the point where the office coffee tasted less like resignation and more like pure, distilled panic.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude paced the Champ de Mars perimeter like a caged tigress, albeit one wrapped in slightly charred armour and trailing a faint haze of St Moretitz smoke. Her initial orders for surveillance deployment were being implemented, with results that could charitably be described as 'variable'.

Agent Hootington was perched stoically atop the Arc de Triomphe (having decided the nearby rooftops offered insufficient gravitas), occasionally swooping down to deliver cryptic reports consisting entirely of disdainful glances and the occasional regurgitated vole bone dropped precisely onto Reynard's meticulously drawn deployment map.

Mustafa Pu, the picture of calm amidst the chaos, was patiently applying fake moss to Abdullah, who was now positioned on a plinth near the park entrance, attempting to embody 'The Thinker Contemplating Lunch' with profound, sigh-inducing dedication. Yasmin, draped in slightly crooked silks, radiated regal impatience from her designated 'Abandoned Throne' spot, occasionally spitting at passers-by who failed to show appropriate deference to furniture. Marigold was putting the finishing touches to his topiary disguise, weaving stray branches into an abstract shape that vaguely resembled a terrified hedgehog, while Cheesy, disguised as laundry, kept attempting to eat the 'stains' Flavius had painted on his canvas covering (using gravy browning).

Flavius himself was darting between stations, his absurdity meter emitting continuous, low-pitched beeps. He was trying to finalize repairs on Admiral Parrot ("Just installing the triple-redundant politeness filter, Coordinator!") while also running diagnostics on the strange energy emanating from the pretzel-shaped tent. He was also attempting to fabricate last-minute components using an array of tiny tools and salvaged clockwork parts: emergency reality anchors (shaped like tiny badgers) and replacement tassels for Yasmin's throne disguise (Cheesy had eaten the originals).

Reynard was attempting to coordinate ground patrols, brief the disguised camels (a process hampered by Abdullah's philosophical objections to the concept of 'suspicious behaviour'), and field increasingly frantic inquiries from Monsieur Fichu about royal seating arrangements that avoided proximity to 'anything potentially magical, loud, or camelid'.

His normally immaculate fur looked distinctly ruffled, and he clutched a thermos of industrial-strength tea like a lifeline.

Crispin, meanwhile, tasked with managing the outer perimeter and liaising with the local Gendarmerie (who regarded the Bureau's presence with deep suspicion and muttered complaints about jurisdiction), was mostly occupied with complaining about his ill-fitting sash, the quality of the street food ("Mystery sausage? The only mystery is how it hasn't achieved sentience and demanded political asylum!"), and the general unfairness of having to guard a circus when he could be enjoying a quiet nap and some biscuits.

Coordinator Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude surveyed the scene – the disguised camels looking deeply conspicuous, the owl radiating judgment from a national monument, Flavius covered in clockwork dust, Reynard wrestling with paperwork and camel psychology, Crispin complaining – and took another deep drag from her cigarette. The vast delivery of Export Strength Turnip Vodka couldn't arrive soon enough. Tomorrow night, under the gaze of the King and Queen, Vovo the Voluminous would open his circus. And the Special Investigations Bureau, Paris's last line of defence against the truly bizarre, was preparing for the onslaught armed with ingenuity, cynicism, disguised camels, and sheer, desperate hope. The pandemonium was merely the overture.

The day of the *Cirque Magique Volkovich*'s grand opening dawned bright, clear, and smelling faintly ominous. By noon, the Champ de Mars and its surrounding avenues resembled less a public park and more a vast, chaotic Petri dish cultivating new and exciting forms of public bewilderment.

The crowds surged towards the geometrically improbable tents, a vibrant, jostling mass of humanity (and other species – several bewildered tourists, a delegation of argumentative pigeons, and at least one badger who claimed to be a theatre critic). They were drawn by curiosity, rumour, and the fundamental human urge to witness something likely to end badly.

The air itself was thick and layered, a veritable casserole of competing aromas. Dominating the blend was the circus's signature scent: sawdust, ozone, burnt sugar, and that persistent, unsettling hint of boiled cabbage. Woven through this were sharper notes from the surrounding stalls: the aggressive sweetness of the gravity-defying Love Apples, the dubious meaty tang of the Mystery Sausages, the slightly alarming fizz of the Optimistic Berry Compote stand (which occasionally launched berries into low orbit), and the pervasive scent of desperation emanating from the perpetually unlucky coconut shy operator. Underneath it all lingered the faint, earthy musk of camel, particularly noticeable near the 'Abandoned Throne' and the 'Pile of Laundry'.

Sounds competed in a frantic symphony. The circus calliope, seemingly having resolved its internal disputes, now blasted out tunes that sounded vaguely like sea shanties being murdered by polka music. Added to this were the hawkers' cries ("Pre-Owned Pigeons! Barely used! Guaranteed... bird-shaped!"), the rhythmic *thwack* of Fedor the Flatulent's unseen performance art, the philosophical yapping from the Poodle of Paradox enclosure, the occasional disgruntled roar from the accounting bear's tent (possibly triggered by an unbalanced ledger), and the

incessant, hopeful rattle of dice from makeshift gambling dens operating out of pushcarts.

The crowd itself was a performance piece. Nobles in silks rubbed shoulders (nervously) with pickpockets in rags. Children pointed excitedly at the Synchronised Slugs, while their parents tried discreetly to calculate the odds of getting their purses back from 'Fingers' Flaubert. Arguments erupted over the rules of games involving suspiciously weighted ducks. Bets were placed on whether the fading poodle would entirely disappear before the main show. It was Paris at its most vibrant, chaotic, and potentially hazardous – a perfect audience for whatever absurdity Vovo the Voluminous was about to unleash.

Amidst the daytime chaos of questionable street food and disguised camels, another, quieter preparation was underway. Unseen by the bustling crowds and the preoccupied Bureau members, under the cloak of the Parisian night, figures watched the burgeoning circus camp from the shadowed eaves of nearby buildings.

They were watchers born of resentment and bruised pride. The surviving members of the badger bandit gang, having regrouped after their humiliating defeat at the hands of the Foxeteers and the sudden, dramatic intervention of Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude, observed the strange tents and bizarre performers with narrowed eyes. They noted the patrols, the peculiar surveillance methods (a statue? Really?), and the general air of distracted security. Their leader might be languishing in a city jail, but revenge, like certain cheeses Crispin favoured, was a dish best served with careful planning and a side order of mayhem. They watched, they

waited, and in the furtive darkness, a new, potentially badger-shaped, plot began to hatch.

Chapter Ten: In Which the Parisian Bastille Proves Less Impregnable Than Reputed (Especially Against Determined Badgers Armed with Spoons), Laundry Plays a Strategic Role, a Leader is Regrettably Reunited with His Hat, Radishes Are Weaponised with Predictable Results, and the Second Night Proves Only Marginally Less Chaotic Than the First

While the Special Investigations Bureau wrestled with the logistical nightmare of disguised camels and the impending royal visit to a potentially hazardous circus, and while Paris buzzed with anticipation and the smell of mystery sausages, other, less savoury, preparations were reaching fruition in the city's gloomier corners.

The Parisian Bastille, a structure renowned more for its menacing silhouette and dreadful plumbing than its actual security efficacy, housed a varied collection of the city's less fortunate or more foolish criminals. Among the current residents, stewing in a cell that smelled strongly of damp stone and regret, was the leader of the badger bandits – a large individual nursing a bruised ego, a significant headache (courtesy of a well-aimed artichoke), and a deep-seated grievance against princesses with superior upper body strength.

His surviving gang members, however, had not forgotten him. Loyalty among badgers is a peculiar thing, often fuelled by

shared resentment, a fondness for digging, and the knowledge that the leader usually knows where the best grub is hidden. Having spent the past week observing the chaos surrounding the circus preparations from the shadowy anonymity of Paris's rooftops and back alleys, they had formulated a plan.

The plan, devised by a badger named Grogg (whose primary contribution to the gang previously involved hitting things very hard and occasionally remembering his own name), was a masterpiece of low cunning and improbable physics. It relied less on intricate timing and stealth, and more on brute force, distraction, and the widely acknowledged fact that Parisian prison guards were often selected for their ability to look intimidating while simultaneously being profoundly distracted by thoughts of lunch, love, or the inherent unfairness of guard duty rotas.

The attempt began shortly after midnight, under a sliver of moon that looked like it had better places to be. The chosen point of entry wasn't a wall or a gate, but the Bastille's laundry chute – a dark, cobweb-festooned tunnel leading from the upper floors down to the steamy, echoing wash-house in the bowels of the fortress. Grogg's logic was simple: where there is laundry, there must be a way out for the dirt, and possibly, a way in for determined badgers.

Armed with little more than pilfered cutlery (including several soup spoons sharpened against paving stones), a large quantity of cheap, pungent soap stolen from a sleeping washerwoman, and a profound disregard for personal hygiene, the badgers approached the chute's external opening, located conveniently behind a large, overflowing rubbish bin.

The entry was... messy. It involved much grunting, shoving, the unfortunate discovery that badger fur is not naturally aerodynamic in confined spaces, and the strategic application of soap to make the descent slightly less abrasive (and considerably more bubbly). One badger became temporarily stuck halfway down, requiring forceful encouragement (mostly kicks) from the badger behind him, before popping out into the wash-house like a soapy, grumpy cork.

The wash-house itself was deserted at this hour, filled only with the ghosts of sweat-stained uniforms and the looming presence of enormous copper washing tubs. The badgers, emerging damply from the chute, regrouped amidst piles of dirty linen, looking less like fearsome rescuers and more like drowned rats who'd gate crashed a laundry convention.

Phase two involved navigating the lower levels of the Bastille. This was achieved primarily through Grogg's patented technique of hitting locked doors very hard until either the lock gave way or the door decided relocation was preferable to further abuse. They encountered only one guard, an elderly stoat fast asleep in a chair, dreaming vividly of cheese-related triumphs, whom they bypassed by strategically piling dirty laundry around him until he was entirely hidden from view.

Reaching the cell block required navigating a corridor known for its loose flagstones and tendency to echo suspiciously. The badgers attempted stealth, tiptoeing with the grace of bricks falling down stairs. Their progress was marked by muffled curses, the clatter of dropped spoons, and the distinct sound of one badger tripping over his own feet and landing headfirst in an empty bucket.

Finally, they reached their leader's cell. He peered out through the bars, his striped snout twitching with hope and irritation. "Took you long enough!" he growled. "I was about to start digging my way out with this rusty nail!"

The lock, unfortunately, proved resistant to Grogg's percussive methods. It was a sturdy, iron affair, clearly installed by someone who actually understood security, unlike whoever designed the laundry chute. Panic began to set in.

It was then that Barnaby, the smallest badger (the one whose primary role involved looking inconspicuous and occasionally remembering where they'd buried things), had an idea. He produced not a sharpened spoon, but a small, intricately carved hairpin he'd 'found' near the Opera House earlier that week. Applying skills learned during a brief, unsuccessful apprenticeship with a locksmith (he'd mostly learned how to apologise for breaking expensive tumblers), Barnaby fiddled delicately with the lock.

After several tense moments, punctuated only by the distant snores of the laundry-covered guard and the leader's impatient tapping, there was a faint *click*. The cell door swung open.

Freedom! Or at least, freedom into the lower levels of a heavily guarded fortress from which they still needed to escape. Their leader retrieved his tricorn hat (which a sympathetic guard, bribed with half a stale croissant, had allowed him to keep) and joined his damp, slightly soap-scented rescuers.

The escape proved as chaotic as the entry, involving more tiptoeing, a brief, confusing encounter with the laundry stoat (who woke up, blinked at the procession of badgers emerging

from his linen barricade, assumed it was another cheese dream, and went back to sleep), and a final, desperate scramble back *up* the laundry chute, which proved considerably harder than coming down, especially for the larger leader.

But eventually, bruised, battered, smelling strongly of soap and mildew, and minus several soup spoons, the badger bandits emerged back into the Parisian night, dragging their newly liberated leader with them. He clapped his tricorn hat firmly onto his head. Revenge was back on the agenda. And somewhere, across the city, the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* awaited its opening night, utterly unaware of the grumpy, recently incarcerated menace now heading its way.

Huddled in the damp, odoriferous confines of an abandoned cheesemonger's cellar (chosen more for its lingering aroma than its strategic value), the reunited badger bandits plotted. Their leader, nursing his freedom and a lingering resentment towards artichokes, presided from atop an overturned barrel, his tricorn hat casting menacing, if slightly lopsided, shadows.

"Right, you lot," he growled, spitting out a stray piece of soap he'd inadvertently swallowed during the escape. "That circus. It's an affront! An insult! And," he added, his eyes gleaming avariciously, "probably full of rich folks with bulging purses just waiting to be... relieved of their burden."

Grogg nodded vigorously. "Hit 'em hard! Smash and grab!"

"No, you oaf!" the leader snapped. "Subtlety! Remember what happened last time? Princess! Foxes! Vegetables! We need a plan that avoids... well, *that*."

Silence fell, broken only by the sound of Barnaby attempting to pick the lock on a fossilised wheel of Brie in the corner.

Then, a badger named Horace, known less for intelligence and more for his unfortunate experiments with pickling root vegetables, cleared his throat. "Boss," he ventured hesitantly, "Remember Old Man Dubois's prize-winning radishes? The ones that could make your eyes water from three streets away if the wind was right?"

The leader frowned. "What about 'em?"

"Well," Horace continued, warming to his theme, "radishes have a certain... potency. Concentrated, like. What if... what if we could extract that potency? Make a sort of... sleeping gas?"

The other badgers stared. Grogg scratched his head. "Gas? Made from radishes?"

"Not just *any* radishes," Horace insisted defensively. "Dubois's Demon Reds! Properly distilled, the fumes could knock out a rhinoceros at fifty paces! Or at least make it feel very sleepy and possibly regret its life choices." He beamed, proud of his dubious alchemical insight. "We could release it into the Big Top! Audience nods off, we nip in, collect the valuables, and slip out before anyone wakes up with more than a headache and a strange craving for peppery salads!"

The leader stroked his scarred snout thoughtfully. It was absurd. It involved vegetables. But it lacked direct confrontation with heavily armed princesses or turnip-launching foxes. "Radish gas..." he mused. "It's mad. It's unconventional." He grinned, revealing sharp teeth. "I like it!"

"But when, boss?" asked Barnaby, abandoning the Brie. "They'll have guards crawling all over the place for the opening night, especially with the King and Queen there."

"Exactly!" the leader declared. "Opening night is for fools and royals. Security will be tight as a drum. But give it a couple of nights... Third night, perhaps? The guards will be bored. Complacent. Thinking the danger's passed. *That's* when we strike! While Paris sleeps off its cheap wine and Vovo counts his ill-gotten gains, we'll fill that tent with the pungent perfume of pilfered prosperity!"

A low chuckle rumbled through the assembled badgers. Radish gas. It was audacious. It was ridiculous. It was perfectly badger. The plan was set.

Acquiring the necessary raw materials proved the first hurdle. Procuring several sacks of Old Man Dubois's legendary 'Demon Red' radishes required a midnight raid on his allotment, an operation hampered less by security and more by Grogg attempting to eat the prize-winning leeks and Barnaby getting temporarily trapped in a cold frame.

Back in the pungent safety of the abandoned cheesemonger's cellar, Horace set up his makeshift distillery. It consisted primarily of a large, stolen copper preserving pan, a tangle of leaky pipework salvaged from a derelict fountain, several empty wine bottles, and a worrying amount of sticky tape. The heat source was a small brazier burning salvaged chair legs, which filled the cellar with acrid smoke and occasionally threatened to ignite the entire operation.

"Right," Horace announced, peering importantly at the bubbling concoction in the pan – a thick, alarmingly purple sludge of mashed radishes. "The key is precise temperature control and careful condensation of the... uh... potent effluvium."

His instructions were largely ignored. Grogg, tasked with stoking the fire, alternated between nearly extinguishing it and feeding it so enthusiastically that flames licked dangerously close to Horace's tail fur. Barnaby, assigned to monitor the leaky pipes, kept getting distracted trying to polish the copper pan with a piece of mouldy cheese rind. The leader mostly offered encouragement in the form of growled threats regarding the consequences of failure, usually involving unpleasant interactions with soup spoons.

The first mistake occurred when Grogg added an entire table leg to the brazier. The resulting surge of heat caused the radish sludge to boil violently, sending a geyser of purple goo erupting from the pan. It narrowly missed Horace but completely coated a slumbering badger named Stinky Pete, instantly dyeing his fur a vibrant, alarming shade of magenta and causing him to wake up sputtering, convinced he was drowning in Ribena.

The second mistake involved the condensation process. The salvaged pipework, inadequately sealed with sticky tape and hope, proved less effective at directing the 'potent effluvium' into the collecting bottles and more adept at releasing it directly into the cellar. Soon, the air thickened with a vapour so eye-wateringly pungent it made strong onions seem like delicate perfume.

The badgers began to experience... effects. Grogg suddenly became convinced he was a teapot and spent ten minutes trying to pour imaginary tea out of his elbow. Barnaby developed an overwhelming urge to confess minor thefts from his childhood (including three buttons and a half-eaten worm). Even the leader found himself momentarily distracted, gazing wistfully at his tricorn hat and wondering if it truly understood his deepest insecurities.

Horace, less affected due to his proximity to the initial geyser (which had temporarily cleared his sinuses, replacing radish fumes with the smell of burnt fur), frantically tried to adjust the pipes, succeeding only in directing a concentrated jet of vapour directly at Stinky Pete, who promptly fell fast asleep again, now dreaming vividly that he was a ballerina performing Swan Lake in a vat of borscht.

Eventually, through sheer luck and Horace occasionally remembering to tighten a valve, a small quantity of greenish, aggressively smelling liquid began to drip slowly into one of the wine bottles.

"Success!" Horace declared triumphantly, holding up the bottle, though his eyes were watering too much to see it clearly.

"Behold! Essence of Demon Red! Concentrated snoozing power!"

The collected gas wasn't exactly copious. It filled perhaps half a wine bottle and smelled like a badger had died and then been pickled in horseradish. But it was theirs. Their secret weapon.

Having successfully (if hazardously) distilled a bottle of Essence of Demon Red, the badgers faced a new, pressing problem: how to deploy the noxious fumes in the circus tent without succumbing to its effects themselves. Recalling Grogg's brief transformation into a teapot and Barnaby's inconvenient bout of confessional honesty, the leader decreed that protective measures were required.

"Masks!" he declared. "We need masks! Horace, figure it out!"

Horace, whose expertise extended only as far as making things smell powerfully unpleasant, looked panicked. "Masks, boss? Like... proper ones? With filters and whatnot?"

"Improvise!" the leader snapped, gesturing around the mouldering cellar. "We're badgers! Resourceful! Use what we've got!"

What they had, largely, was cheese rind, discarded sacking, empty wine bottles, more sticky tape, and the lingering smell of failure. Undeterred, Horace set about designing 'Personal Atmosphere Filtration Devices'.

His first prototype involved stuffing old socks with particularly pungent Gorgonzola, based on the theory that one strong smell might cancel out another. This was abandoned after Barnaby, modelling the prototype, became convinced he was being pursued by giant, angry cheese mites and refused to come out from behind the fossilised Brie.

The second attempt utilized hollowed-out turnips (left over from a failed pickling experiment) fitted with 'filters' made from damp sacking. These proved surprisingly effective at blocking smell, primarily because they also blocked roughly

90% of the wearer's air supply, causing Grogg to turn a worrying shade of blue before managing to rip it off his snout.

Finally, Horace settled on a design involving thick pads of sacking soaked in stale wine (reasoning that the alcohol fumes might counteract the radish vapour, or at least make the user not care), strapped tightly across their snouts with strips of leather salvaged from a disintegrated armchair. For eye protection, they cracked the bottoms off several wine bottles and attempted to fashion rudimentary goggles, held together with yet more sticky tape and a prayer.

The resulting contraptions looked less like protective gear and more like something assembled by deranged squirrels for a particularly bleak fancy dress party. The wine-soaked sacking muffled their breathing and made their eyes water from the fumes, while the bottle-bottom goggles offered a distorted, greenish view of the world.

"Perfect!" Horace declared, peering through his own wobbly goggles, looking like a startled, alcoholic owl. "Rudimentary, perhaps, but functional!"

The leader tried his on. It smelled vaguely of feet and cheap vinegar. "Functional enough, I suppose," he grumbled, adjusting the sticky tape. "Right then. Masks ready, gas ready."

The cellar air still hummed with the aggressive memory of distilled radish. The badgers, masks donned (rendering them even more alarming looking), gathered around the single, precious bottle of greenish Essence of Demon Red.

"Right," the leader growled, his voice muffled by wine-soaked sacking. "Horace's mad radish idea it is. But how do we get *this*," he tapped the bottle, "into *there*," he waved vaguely in the direction of the Champ de Mars, "without gassing ourselves or alerting those jumped-up foxes?"

Horace puffed out his chest, his bottle-goggles steaming up slightly. "Fedor the Flatulent, boss! It's perfect!"

Grogg looked confused, his muffled voice sounding even dimmer than usual. "The smelly clown? How's he gonna help?"

"He's not going to *help*," Horace explained patiently, adjusting his ill-fitting goggles. "He's going to be our... our delivery system. You know his act? The one with the 'Symphony of Suspicious Soufflé' and the 'Ballad of the Boiled Cabbage'?"

The other badgers nodded vaguely, their wine-bottle lenses distorting their vision. Fedor's act was infamous. It didn't involve juggling or pratfalls in the traditional sense. Instead, Fedor consumed vast quantities of specific, scientifically questionable foods – enormous bowls of sulphur-rich devilled eggs, pungent cabbage soup, beans prepared according to an ancient and terrifying recipe – before his performance. His 'comedy' then involved strategically positioning himself near various brass instruments (tubas were a favourite) or specially constructed bellows hidden within oversized props, and releasing... *atmospheric effects*... timed (loosely) to musical cues, creating blasts of sound and scent that audiences found either hilarious, nauseating, or both. It had earned him his nickname and a certain notoriety.

"His whole act is... atmospheric, right?" Horace continued. "If we spike his pre-show meal with a slow-acting dose of the Essence..."

Barnaby shuddered, his voice thin behind his mask. "Spike his food? Sounds risky. What if he tastes it?"

"Needs careful preparation," Horace admitted. "We can't just pour it on his cabbage – even *he* might notice the radish bouquet overpowering the inherent boiled-vegetable aroma. I reckon," he mused, tapping a goggle lens thoughtfully, "a potent gravy. Yes! A thick, peppery gravy designed to accompany his usual pre-show plate of pickled Brussels sprouts. The radish tang will be lost in the spice and the sheer aggressive nature of the sprouts!"

"Sneaking into a circus clown's private wagon to tamper with his gravy sounds... difficult," the leader pointed out, scratching his scar through the sacking.

"That's where Barnaby comes in," Horace declared, pointing at the smallest badger. "You're sneaky. You get the gravy onto his plate. Grogg, you create a distraction – maybe pretend to be auditioning as a strongman? Challenge Boris the accountant bear to an arm wrestle?"

Grogg beamed, his voice booming unintelligibly behind the mask. "Wrestling bears! I can do that!"

"And while Barnaby's gravy-ing the plate," Horace continued, "I'll slip a mild dose into Fedor's usual pre-show beverage – I saw him drinking turnip juice yesterday. Just enough to... enhance his natural talents, make sure the... uh... *distribution* is vigorous enough during the performance."

The leader considered this multi-pronged assault on Fedor's already overworked digestive system. "So, gravy *and* turnip juice? Won't that be too much?"

Horace waved a dismissive paw. "Calculated dosage, boss! The gravy provides the main sleep-inducing agent, slow release via the sprout digestion pathway. The juice just... primes the pump, ensures maximum projection through his... performance apparatus."

"And while the audience is distracted by the... vigorous projection... and slowly succumbing to the *radish* fumes, not Fedor's usual repertoire," the leader clarified, catching on, "we slip in, wearing our highly fashionable wine-soaked masks, relieve the snoozing patrons of their valuables, and disappear before anyone notices anything beyond an unusually soporific clown act."

"Exactly!" Horace confirmed, looking immensely pleased with himself behind his fogged-up goggles.

"What if he doesn't eat the sprouts?" Barnaby asked nervously. "Or drinks the juice too early?"

"What if the wind changes inside the tent?" added Grogg. "Or what if he just has an off night, performance-wise? Not enough... projection?"

"Minor details!" the leader snapped, silencing the doubts. "It's brilliant! Using the circus's own absurdity against itself! Right, Horace, start brewing that peppery gravy. Barnaby, practice looking innocent while carrying suspicious condiments. Grogg, practice wrestling imaginary bears, but try not to break anything important down here *before* the heist. Third night,

remember. We give the foxes and the fancy camels time to get bored."

The badgers nodded, a renewed sense of purpose (however misguided) filling the cellar. Their plan was audacious, disgusting, and relied heavily on weaponising a flatulent clown's internal workings. It was, in short, perfect badger logic.

Dawn was cracking over Paris again, finding the city largely intact but smelling faintly of burnt sugar, confused pigeons, and low-grade existential despair (which was fairly standard, circus or no circus). Back at the cramped headquarters of the Special Investigations Bureau, the atmosphere was one of weary relief mixed with the lingering aroma of damp fox fur and industrial-strength coffee.

The surviving members of the team gathered in the main office, which also served as the meeting room, evidence locker, and occasional drying area for Crispin's socks. Reynard leaned against the filing cabinet usually occupied by Agent Hootington (who was represented this morning by a single, impeccably placed owl feather and a faint aura of judgment). Flavius was attempting to clean sawdust off his absurdity meter with a miniature brush. Crispin was slumped in a chair, attempting to polish his slightly-dented Stealth Fawn sash while simultaneously complaining about the lack of post-mission biscuits. Mustafa Pu stood quietly near the door, radiating calm competence, occasionally exchanging a low murmur in Arabic with Abdullah, whose head was just visible peering philosophically through the courtyard window. Yasmin, Cheesy,

and Marigold remained outside, presumably recovering from the ordeal of impersonating furniture and shrubbery.

Coordinator Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude stood before them, surveying her eclectic command. She had swapped her armour for a practical tunic and breeches, but soot still smudged her cheekbone, and her eyes held the weary intensity of someone who had spent the night preventing leaky magic through sheer force of will (and possibly copious amounts of Turnip Vodka). She lit a St Moretitz with a decisive click, inhaled deeply, and blew a smoke ring that perfectly encircled a fly buzzing near the ceiling.

"Right," she began, her voice raspy but clear. "Post-operational debriefing. Operation: Prevent Circus-Induced Apocalypse, Phase One."

She took another drag. "Assessment: Partial success bordering on catastrophic absurdity, which I believe puts us slightly ahead of usual Bureau performance metrics."

Crispin grunted agreement. Flavius nodded enthusiastically, making a note.

"Royal assets," Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude continued, "were successfully deployed to the event and retrieved without significant physical harm, although His Majesty appears to have recruited the accounting bear for a potential position in the Royal Treasury, which may have long-term fiscal implications we'll ignore for now. Her Majesty," she paused, glancing towards the ceiling as if expecting an owl, "was not visibly accosted by unauthorised avians, fulfilling a key performance indicator."

She consulted a crumpled piece of paper retrieved from her pocket. "Reports indicate minimal escaping magic, limited primarily to spontaneously self-aware sausages and several instances of temporal displacement affecting the crêpe stand. Acceptable losses."

Reynard cleared his throat. "Coordinator, the psychic oyster did predict murky outlooks and advised caution regarding haddock..."

"Noted, Reynard," she waved the concern away with her cigarette. "We'll add 'haddock-related anomalies' to the watch list. Any *significant* breaches?"

Flavius spoke up. "Energy fluctuations remained high but stable around the performers, Coordinator. The mannequin pyramid exhibited minor gravitational defiance, and the fading poodle achieved near-total invisibility for approximately 3.7 seconds, but no uncontrolled dimensional rifts were detected."

"Good," Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude nodded. "Personnel status: Agent Hootington remains... operational, presumably. Foxes sustained minor damage to dignity and uniform sashes. BACHSU unit performed adequately within disguise parameters, although Abdullah requires further philosophical clarification regarding 'lunch'. Admiral Parrot remains offline pending politeness calibration."

She paced the small space, the cigarette trailing smoke. "Overall, we survived opening night without Paris imploding or the King declaring war on molluscs. Well done, team."

She stopped, fixing them with a sharp look. "However. We know the badger contingent remains... at large. Intel suggests a

planned operation on the third night." She tapped ash onto the floor, ignoring Reynard's slight wince.

"Tonight, we maintain vigilance at current levels. Tomorrow, we rest, recuperate, and consume restorative beverages." She glanced meaningfully towards a locked cabinet rumoured to contain her private stash of Export Strength Turnip Vodka. "But the night after tomorrow... we prepare for badgers. And possibly weaponised radishes. Dismissed. Crispin, find some biscuits."

The second night of the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* unfolded under a sky full of slightly dubious-looking stars (one seemed to be winking suggestively). Buoyed by the previous night's chaotic success and the King's enthusiastic (if vegetable-induced) approval, the crowds were even larger, the mystery sausage vendor was doing a roaring trade, and the pre-owned pigeon salesman had actually managed to sell a bird (which promptly flew sideways into a wall).

Inside the Big Top, the performance proceeded with a similar level of organised absurdity as the opening night. Boris the Bear delivered another lecture, this time on the pitfalls of unsecured ursine investments, which several bankers in the audience took copious notes on. The Magnificent Marconis achieved a new level of eerie synchronicity, while Irina the Indescribable managed to assemble a fully functioning, albeit unnecessary, shower cubicle using only U-bends and interpretive dance.

The Royal Box tonight was occupied not by the King and Queen (Her Majesty had reportedly developed a sudden, intense interest in cataloguing the palace doorknobs), but by a glittering assembly of assorted Dukes, Duchesses, Barons, Baronesses, and various minor Lords and Ladies hoping to curry favour or simply witness something bizarre enough to talk about for weeks. They watched the performance with expressions ranging from polite amusement to profound confusion, fanning themselves and occasionally eyeing the tent roof nervously, as if expecting it to violate known laws of physics at any moment (which, to be fair, it occasionally did).

Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude and her SIB contingent maintained their vigilant watch, spread throughout the grounds. The disguised camels remained largely convincing, although Abdullah the Statue appeared to be attracting actual pigeons who seemed to appreciate his stillness, and Cheesy the Laundry Pile had to be subtly dissuaded by Mustafa Pu from consuming a dropped lace handkerchief.

Tonight, however, the absurdity dialled down from 'Existential Threat' to 'Mildly Concerning Eccentricity', with only two notable incidents marring the otherwise smooth running of the show.

The first occurred during an entirely new act, introduced by Vovo as **"Professor Piffle's Patented Portable Precipitation Pouch"**. A small, wizened man with goggles and hair that stood on end produced what looked like a large, deflated leather wineskin. He proceeded to inflate it using a bicycle pump, announcing it was gathering atmospheric moisture for a controlled indoor shower. Unfortunately, Professor Piffle

seemed to confuse 'inflate' with 'over-inflate'. The 'pouch', swelling rapidly, detached itself from his grasp, shot upwards like a startled barrage balloon, bumped gently against the strangely angled canvas roof, and then promptly, and entirely without drama, deflated with a long, drawn-out sighing sound, drifting slowly down to land with a sad *plop* directly onto the head of the Baroness von Schnitzel in the Royal Box, draping her elaborate hairdo in damp leather. She bore the indignity with remarkable fortitude, pretending it was the latest Parisian fashion accessory.

The second incident was less spectacular but more pervasive. Midway through the Synchronised Slugs' mesmerising (if slow) performance, a collective gasp rippled through the audience. Not from the slugs' artistry, but from the sudden appearance of rats. Dozens of them. Not fierce, sewer-dwelling rats, but small, ordinary Parisian rats, emerging from beneath the benches and scurrying across the sawdust, seemingly drawn by the slugs' humming or perhaps just the dropped popcorn. They didn't attack anyone; they merely ran about in a confused, exploratory manner, occasionally stopping to wash their whiskers or critique the structural integrity of the ring fence, before disappearing as quickly as they'd arrived. Vovo shrugged it off as "part of the authentic urban Parisian experience, included at no extra charge."

Despite the deflated balloon and the minor rodent infestation, the night was generally deemed a success. The Lords and Ladies departed, chattering excitedly about the accounting bear and the damp Baroness. The crowds dispersed, mostly content, though several reported an unusual craving for cheese after passing near the laundry pile. Princess Lisa Bearheart De

Monfort-Platitude allowed herself a cautious sigh of relief, stubbing out her fifth St Moretitz of the evening. Two nights down. One to go. And somewhere, in a cellar smelling of horseradish and stale wine, the badgers checked their rudimentary masks and waited.

Chapter Eleven: In Which Radishes Reach Critical Mass, Dreams Turn Absurd, a Bear Balances the Books, Tax Evasion Proves Terminal, and Fiscal Oversight Takes an Ursine Turn

The third night of the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* settled over the Champ de Mars like a slightly grubby velvet curtain, studded with the hopeful pinpricks of Parisian stars and smelling faintly of sawdust, burnt sugar, and lingering existential poodle sighs. Backstage, however, the atmosphere was considerably less whimsical and significantly more badger-shaped.

Huddled near a pile of discarded cabbage leaves behind Fedor the Flatulent's wagon, the badger bandits adjusted their rudimentary masks. The thick pads of sacking, soaked in stale wine, pressed uncomfortably against their snouts, mingling the aroma of cheap vinegar with the sharp tang of nervous anticipation. Their bottle-bottom goggles distorted the flickering gaslight, painting the world in hues of queasy green and making coordination even more challenging than usual.

"Right, listen up," growled the leader, his voice muffled by the damp sacking. "Operation: Pungent Payday is a go. Horace, you got the gravy? And the juice supplement?"

Horace, peering anxiously through his fogged-up goggles, held up two containers. One was a small jar filled with a thick, ominously dark gravy that smelled aggressively of pepper and desperation. The other held a smaller quantity of the greenish,

noxious 'Essence of Demon Red', distilled from Old Man Dubois's prize radishes. "Ready, boss! Gravy's extra peppery, just like Fedor likes with his sprouts. And I added a... generous... amount to the turnip juice phial. Just to be sure of... projection." His voice held a tremor; perhaps the memory of Grogg's temporary teapot impersonation during the distillation process weighed heavily. He'd definitely put *more* than planned into the juice, just to ensure Fedor's internal mechanics received the necessary... encouragement.

"Good. Barnaby," the leader turned to the smallest badger, "you're on gravy duty. Remember, swift and silent. No dropping it."

Barnaby nodded nervously, clutching the gravy jar.

"Grogg," the leader continued, addressing the largest of the gang, "Distraction. Boris the Bear. Go ask him about... about amortisation schedules for performing unicycles! Keep him busy!"

Grogg beamed behind his mask, a muffled sound of pure enthusiasm escaping. "Amortisation! Right!" He lumbered off towards the makeshift tent serving as Boris's office, looking forward to discussing complex financial instruments with several tons of grumpy ursine accountant.

"Right," the leader concluded. "Horace, you handle the turnip juice. Barnaby, the gravy. Meet back here. And try not to gas yourselves before the main event."

With nods muffled by sacking, the three badgers dispersed into the backstage chaos. Grogg found Boris deeply engrossed in a ledger, spectacles perched on his snout. "Excuse me, Mr. Bear,

sir!" Grogg began loudly. "Got a quick question about variable depreciation on..." Boris grunted without looking up, utterly absorbed. The distraction, such as it was, was achieved through sheer disinterest.

Meanwhile, Barnaby scurried towards Fedor's wagon, heart pounding. He located the clown's pre-show plate – a terrifying mound of pickled Brussels sprouts – and, with trembling paws, quickly slathered the peppery, radish-laced gravy over them. Simultaneously, Horace located Fedor's flask of turnip juice cooling on a windowsill and deftly uncorked it, tipping in the *entire* contents of his phial of concentrated Essence. It fizzed slightly, releasing a brief, eye-watering whiff before he quickly replaced the cork.

Mission accomplished, they regrouped, pulses racing, the scent of wine-soaked sacking suddenly feeling very inadequate.

Inside the Big Top, the atmosphere was electric, buzzing with the anticipation of the final act. Vovo the Voluminous had just finished introducing his star olfactory performer. Fedor the Flatulent entered the ring, looking pale and slightly sweaty, clutching his stomach. He'd dutifully consumed his sprouts and gravy, washed down with the unusually potent turnip juice, and was now feeling... strange. Bubblier than usual.

He took his position near a large tuba, part of his "Symphony of Suspicious Soufflé" routine. The music began. Fedor took a deep breath, aimed...

And then it happened.

It wasn't the controlled, timed release the audience (and the badgers) expected. It was a Vesuvius of vegetable vengeance. A

sudden, overwhelming, uncontrollable eruption of compressed radish power blasted forth from the unfortunate clown, not just into the tuba but seemingly from every available pore. A dense, greenish-purple fog instantly filled the Big Top, thick as pea soup and smelling like a horseradish bomb had detonated in a cabbage patch. It carried the unmistakable, aggressive pungency of the Demon Reds, magnified a thousandfold.

The effect was immediate and catastrophic. The laughter died in throats, replaced by choked coughs and then... silence. A wave of profound slumber washed over the audience. Lords and Ladies slumped in their seats, heads lolling. Merchants drooped over their wives. Children curled up instantly, smiles frozen on their faces. The Duchess of Poufflé, known for her stiff upper lip, went down like a felled tree, dreaming instantly that she was leading a squadron of flying teapots into battle against sentient spoons. Monsieur Dubois, the baker, dreamed he was kneading dough made of clouds, only for it to keep floating away. The pessimistic coconut shy operator dreamed he finally won, only for the coconut to award *him* a small, mouldy consolation prize.

Even the usually vigilant SIB contingent, positioned strategically around the tent, were caught off guard by the sheer volume and potency of the gas. Their masks, designed for *expected* levels, were overwhelmed. Reynard felt his knees buckle, his last conscious thought a despairing moan about the inevitable paperwork. Flavius slumped against a tent pole, his absurdity meter spinning wildly before going dark, dreaming of colour-coded owl pellets. Crispin, halfway to complaining about the smell, simply fell asleep mid-sentence, dreaming he was swimming in a vast sea of biscuits. Coordinator Lisa,

perhaps due to sheer willpower or the lingering effects of turnip vodka, fought it for a second longer, vision blurring, before succumbing, dreaming she was trying to arrest King Loo-Eee for illegal possession of existential angst.

Only two figures remained largely conscious. High in the dim rafters, Agent Hootington blinked slowly, the radish fumes apparently failing to penetrate his aura of intense, feathery disapproval. And near the performers' entrance, Boris the Bear stirred from his light, audit-induced daze. He blinked, sniffed the air, wrinkled his snout in distaste ("Sub-optimal air quality," he grumbled), adjusted his spectacles, and seemed mildly confused by the sudden silence. Seeing everyone asleep, he merely shrugged his massive shoulders and opened his ledger again, apparently deciding it was a good opportunity to catch up on some quarterly reports.

Into the silent, sleeping, dreaming Big Top crept the badger bandits, their bottle-goggles gleaming faintly in the dim emergency lights. "Perfect!" hissed the leader, his voice muffled. "Like taking candy from sleeping babies! Spread out! Grab everything shiny!"

They moved through the aisles, clumsy shadows in the eerie quiet. Grogg tried to heft a small, solid gold statue from a Baron's lap, grunting with effort. "Too heavy, you fool!" the leader hissed. "Jewels! Purses! Watches!" Barnaby fumbled with a Duchess's necklace, accidentally unclasping it and scattering pearls across the floor like tiny moons. Horace nervously stuffed glittering rings and brooches into a sack, occasionally pausing to adjust his ill-fitting goggles. Stinky Pete, now awake but still magenta, pocketed anything that

wasn't nailed down, including several half-eaten candied apples.

Soon, their sacks were bulging. Jewellery, coins, silver snuff boxes, even a few elaborate hairpins and a promising-looking pork pie – the haul was impressive. "Right, that's the lot!" the leader whispered hoarsely. "Let's scarper before anyone wakes up smelling of radishes!"

They gathered their loot, sacks heavy, and scurried towards the main tent flap exit, visions of wealth and comfortable burrows dancing in their heads. Freedom and riches were just steps away.

But standing squarely in the exit, blocking their path like a furry, bespectacled mountain, was Boris the Bear. He had closed his ledger and tucked it under his arm, his expression one of mild, bureaucratic concern.

"Halt!" Boris rumbled, his voice echoing slightly in the silent tent. The badgers froze, sacks dropping slightly.

"Unscheduled major asset withdrawal," Boris continued, peering at them over his spectacles. "Significant quantities of undeclared valuables detected." He held up a large paw, gesturing towards their bulging sacks. "As per Municipal Tax Code Appendix Gamma, subsection Rho ('Sudden Windfalls and Ill-Gotten Gains Taxation Act'), I must insist," he announced firmly, "on a full audit of the contents of those sacks for immediate assessment and calculation of applicable duties and levies."

The badgers stared, utterly dumbfounded.

"Audit?" squeaked Barnaby, his voice cracking behind his mask.

"Tax?" growled the leader incredulously. "This ain't income, you furry oaf! This is... aggressive redistribution!"

Boris shook his massive head slowly. "Semantics," he grumbled. "Acquisition of assets constitutes a taxable event. Please present the items for inspection. I shall require details of provenance, estimated market value, and depreciation schedules for any timepieces exceeding fifty years of age." He produced a small pencil and notepad from a hidden pocket in his fur, ready to begin.

The badgers looked at each other, then at the immovable, ledger-wielding bear blocking their escape. This was not in the plan. Nowhere in the Bandit's Handbook did it mention being audited by the potential victim's accountant.

"Now, this diamond tiara," Boris began, pointing at a glittering item poking from the top of the leader's sack. "Assuming fair market value, less a deduction for wear and tear... what is your proposed declaration value for tax purposes?"

While the badger leader spluttered, trying to argue tax law with a bear, a faint groan came from nearby. Coordinator Lisa's eyes fluttered open, followed quickly by Reynard and Flavius. Taking in the scene – the sleeping audience, the badgers cornered by Boris, the sacks of loot – understanding dawned instantly. Agent Hootington, from his perch, gave a single, almost imperceptible nod.

Lisa pushed herself upright, still feeling slightly dizzy but radiating authority. "Boris," she called out, her voice clear

despite the lingering fumes. "Your dedication to fiscal responsibility is commendable, truly."

She fixed the startled badgers with a steely gaze. "However, gentlemen, your unregistered enterprise appears to violate several *other* statutes."

Reynard stepped forward, adjusting his tunic. "Grand larceny, conspiracy, deployment of an unlicensed root vegetable..."

"...And," Lisa added, a grim smile touching her lips as she saw the perfect, absurd conclusion, "failure to declare income."

Reynard nodded. "Special Investigations Bureau. You're all under arrest."

Just then, Crispin sat bolt upright nearby. "Ugh, my head... did anyone save me any biscuits?" He looked around at the sleeping audience, the cornered badgers, and the patiently waiting accountant bear. "Or... perhaps a slightly used tiara?"

The arrest having been made, underscored by Boris the Bear's meticulous notes on undeclared income and Crispin's plaintive query about snacks, the immediate problem became transporting five disgruntled, reeking badger bandits and their sacks of ill-gotten gains back to the palace dungeons.

"Right," Coordinator Lisa declared, rubbing her temples where a radish-gas headache was beginning to bloom. "Reynard, Crispin – escort the prisoners. Flavius, secure the... evidence." She gestured towards the bulging sacks. "And try to air them out first."

The procession from the Big Top was a sight that drew considerable attention, even from the groggily awakening

audience members who were still trying to reconcile their bizarre dreams with the lingering smell of horseradish. The badger bandits, masks now removed to reveal grumpy, soot-stained faces, were prodded along by Reynard and Crispin.

"It's the principle of the thing!" the badger leader grumbled. "Aggressive redistribution shouldn't be taxable! It's practically a public service!"

"Tell it to the bear," Reynard said dryly.

Back at the palace, the dungeons – usually reserved for minor political conspirators or cooks who'd displeased the King – were prepared. King Loo-Eee, having mostly recovered from his own radish-induced artistic fervour, was fascinated by the concept of Boris's audit. "Trial-by-Bear!" he declared gleefully. "Splendid! Much more efficient than those tedious judicial reviews! Pincenez in Treasury will be thrilled!"

Given the unconventional nature of the crime (and the arresting officer being a bear), Lisa decided conventional guards wouldn't do. Instead, she assigned the BACHSU unit to dungeon duty. Abdullah was positioned outside the main cell door, where he immediately began contemplating the inherent paradox of incarceration versus free will, emitting sighs so profound they seemed to leach mortar from the ancient stones. Yasmin patrolled the corridor with regal disdain, occasionally spitting accurately at any rust spots on the bars that offended her aesthetic sensibilities. Cheesy, naturally, was put on 'contraband inspection', which largely involved trying to eat the cell door hinges and any interesting-looking mould. Marigold, meanwhile, meticulously rearranged the straw bedding inside the badgers' cell into complex, unsettling geometric patterns

while they slept. The badgers, faced with philosophical sighs, judgmental spitting, attempted edibility of their prison, and avant-garde straw art, found themselves in a state of bewildered despair far exceeding normal incarceration. The Trial-by-Bear couldn't come soon enough.

Meanwhile, back at the *Cirque Magique Volkovich*, chaos of a different flavour reigned. As the effects of the Essence of Demon Red wore off, the audience awoke *en masse* to confusion, pounding headaches, and the vague, unsettling memory of impossible dreams. The Duchess of Poufflé kept trying to communicate with a discarded teacup, while Monsieur Dubois the baker patted his pockets nervously, convinced they were full of clouds.

Into this sea of bewildered aristocracy and citizenry stepped Flavius, flanked by several SIB auxiliaries (recruited hastily from the palace guard's 'least likely to faint' division). They carried the badgers' sacks, now slightly less pungent after a vigorous airing.

"Mesdames et Messieurs!" Flavius announced, his voice amplified by a repurposed megaphone that occasionally crackled with residual politeness ("*If you wouldn't mind awfully paying attention...*"). "The Special Investigations Bureau has successfully recovered property misappropriated during the recent... unscheduled narcoleptic interlude. Please form an orderly queue to reclaim your valuables."

'Orderly' was, perhaps, optimistic.

The presentation of the loot sparked immediate uproar. A Baron snatched a pocket watch, only to be accosted by a Viscountess

claiming it was her great-aunt's. "Nonsense! See the inscription? 'To Algernon!'" the Baron insisted. "My great-aunt *was* Algernon!" the Viscountess retorted hotly, "She had eccentric parents!"

Two gentlemen began politely duelling with rolled-up opera programs over the ownership of a silver snuffbox, their insults impeccably phrased even as they jabbed inelegantly. A woman shrieked, "My pearls!" grabbing a string from the sack, only for three other women to shriek the same thing, resulting in a brief, undignified tug-of-war that ended with pearls scattering across the sawdust like escaped peas. Crispin, ostensibly supervising, managed to retrieve a half-eaten pork pie from one sack, declaring it "Crucial evidence requiring immediate analysis."

Agent Hootington, having descended silently from the rafters, watched the proceedings, then calmly regurgitated a small, shiny button onto the pile of jewels, apparently deciding to contribute to the repatriation effort. A small child immediately tried to claim it as a lost treasure from his dream about pirate squirrels.

Vovo the Voluminous attempted to impose order, bellowing through a megaphone shaped like a laughing fish, "One at a time! Proof of ownership required! Perhaps a detailed description of your item's existential anxieties?" This only added to the confusion.

Eventually, through a process involving shouting, haggling, minor tussles, and Flavius attempting to apply logical deduction ("Your description mentions three rubies, Madame, this brooch clearly possesses four and a faint aura of regret..."), most of the items were redistributed. Whether they ended up

with their original owners was largely a matter of conjecture, volume, and who gave up arguing first. But eventually, clutching newfound (or reclaimed) treasures, bruised egos, and lingering headaches, the audience stumbled out into the Parisian dawn, leaving the Big Top smelling strongly of radish, sawdust, and profound bewilderment. Another crisis averted, another layer of absurdity added to the rich tapestry of Parisian life.

The following morning dawned over Paris not so much bright and cheerful as grey and regretful, like a guest waking up after a party realising they'd probably insulted the host and definitely spilled wine on the cat. Inside the headquarters of the Special Investigations Bureau, the atmosphere was thick enough to slice, composed in equal parts of stale air, the ghostly aroma of cheap champagne mixed with celebratory Turnip Vodka, and the physical manifestation of multiple hangovers demanding retribution.

Coordinator-General Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude sat slumped behind her desk, sunglasses perched incongruously on her nose despite the gloom. The usually immaculate porcelain ashtray overflowed with the stubs of countless St Moretitz cigarettes, along with several distinctly more ragged-looking roll-ups. Crispin muttered darkly from his corner that they looked suspiciously like those infamous 'Special Mary Du-Anne' spliffs he'd heard whispers about down by the docks – certainly, the Coordinator-General looked more philosophically rumpled and comprehensively knackered than usual, nursing her temples as if trying to physically prevent her brain from attempting escape.

Reynard sat stiffly at his own desk, regarding a stack of fresh paperwork with the weary expression of a man contemplating his life choices and finding them wanting, particularly those involving celebratory vodka. Flavius, admirably attempting to maintain order, was trying to polish the Sad Badger Head badge the King had awarded Admiral Parrot, though the parrot itself remained strategically deactivated on his workbench. Crispin just groaned periodically, clutching his head and complaining that even his *fur* ached.

Mustafa Pu, seemingly immune to the previous night's excesses, calmly sipped mint tea near the courtyard door, occasionally exchanging low murmurs with Abdullah, who was sighing with what might have been sympathetic understanding or merely profound boredom. Yasmin, Cheesy, and Marigold were wisely keeping a low profile outside. From his filing cabinet perch, Agent Hootington surveyed the wreckage of the morning-after with silent, unwavering judgement.

Meanwhile, across the city on the Champ de Mars, the *Cirque Magique Volkovich* was performing its final Parisian act: departure. It wasn't a gradual pack-up; it was more like reality politely folding itself away. The geometrically challenging tents sighed, shimmered, and then imploded neatly into what looked like oversized carpet bags. The strange wagons drawn by slug-like creatures simply faded at the edges before vanishing entirely. Boris the Bear was seen meticulously checking a departure manifest against his ledger before giving a satisfied grunt and shuffling off into a sudden, localised fog bank. The Poodles of Paradox didn't leave; they merely ceased to have ever been there, leaving behind only the faint scent of lavender and unresolved questions. Vovo the Voluminous stood amidst

the now-empty field, gave a final, weary salute towards the north-east, muttered something about "making Brussels sprouts exciting," and then seemed to dissolve into the morning mist, presumably en route to Belgium. The circus was gone, leaving behind only slightly flattened grass and a lingering sense of civic bewilderment.

Back at SIB headquarters, the fragile peace was shattered – quite literally – by the arrival of the King's Express Communications cannonball. This time, slightly off-target, it crashed through the window, ricocheted off Hootington's filing cabinet (earning it an intensely annoyed stare from the owl), and embedded itself firmly in Crispin's emergency biscuit barrel, sending crumbs flying.

"My biscuits!" Crispin wailed, momentarily forgetting his hangover.

Reynard carefully extracted the slightly smoking cannonball, detaching the attached scroll. He unrolled it, scanning the King's looping, enthusiastic script.

"Right," he announced, his voice raspy. "Another summons. His Majesty wishes to formally debrief us on the successful conclusion of 'Exercise Absurdity' and discuss... 'Future Strategic Directions Regarding Root Vegetable Ballistics and Tax-Evading Badgers'." He sighed. "Effective immediately. The *entire* Bureau." He looked pointedly at Lisa's sunglasses and the overflowing ashtray. "Coordinator-General...?"

Lisa groaned softly from behind her sunglasses, stubbing out the latest roll-up with unnecessary force. "Future strategic directions?" she muttered. "My current strategic direction

involves finding stronger coffee and possibly inventing a silent hangover. Very well, Reynard. Round up the troops. Including the ones currently contemplating existentialism in the courtyard. Let's go face the royal enthusiasm."

Dragging the entire Special Investigations Bureau – hungover foxes, stoic Tunisian, vaguely bewildered camels, judgemental owl, and apologetic clockwork parrot – back to the palace Throne Room proved less a military manoeuvre and more like herding existential dread through treacle. They shuffled, they sighed (both fox and camel), they occasionally bumped into suits of armour that seemed to sigh back reproachfully. Coordinator-General Lisa, still behind her sunglasses, maintained a semblance of upright posture through sheer force of will and perhaps the lingering structural support of her armour, though her headache pounded in time with Crispin's low moans about the unfairness of mornings.

They assembled blearily before the throne, the BACHSU unit shifting awkwardly on the slippery marble, Cheesy eyeing a particularly ornate carpet tassel with speculative hunger. Hootington assumed his customary position on the bust of Dagobert the Deranged, looking down as if witnessing the slow heat death of common sense.

King Loo-Eee-By-Gum, however, was radiant. Utterly, bafflingly radiant. He beamed, he bounced slightly on his throne, his crown achieving an angle previously thought impossible without structural collapse. And beside the throne, standing solid and imposing, wearing a surprisingly well-fitting (if slightly snug) court waistcoat over his fur and holding his

familiar battered ledger, was Boris the Bear. He nodded gravely at the assembled Bureau, spectacles glinting.

"Team!" the King boomed, his voice echoing slightly, causing Crispin to wince and clutch his temples. "Magnificent! Excellent work dealing with the Circus Kerfuffle! Badgers apprehended! Taxes potentially recovered! Public morale... well, the public is certainly talking! Capital!"

He gestured grandly towards the bear. "And you've all met the remarkable Boris! The Accounting Bear! Such diligence! Such insight into undeclared asset liquidation!"

The King leaned forward conspiratorially. "Frankly, Pincenez in the Treasury was so impressed with Boris's seventeen-page audit of badger banditry that We've created a new position! As of now, I'm pleased to report Boris now works for the Royal Court as Chief Auditor of Fiscal Unlikelihoods!"

Boris nodded again, adjusting his spectacles. "Standard procedure, Your Majesty. Ensuring accurate reporting of sudden windfalls."

The King beamed again. "Precisely! But his talents are too great to be confined merely to the general treasury! Which brings me to the SIB!"

He fixed his gaze on Lisa, who forced herself to meet it despite the throbbing behind her sunglasses.

"Princess Lisa, Coordinator-General! Your Bureau, while effective, requires... fiscal discipline! Budgets! Accountability! Less expenditure on experimental vegetables and more focus on quantifiable results!" (Reynard visibly paled).

"Therefore!" the King announced with a flourish, "Boris will be assigned to the SIB, effective immediately, as Ursine Head of Finance!"

Silence fell. A thick, heavy silence, broken only by Abdullah sighing softly in the antechamber and the faint *clink* as Crispin dropped his (empty) biscuit tin in shock.

"Boris," the King continued, oblivious to the stunned disbelief radiating from the SIB contingent, "will be responsible for *all* SIB finances! Reporting! Budget planning! Payroll!" He paused for dramatic effect. "Expenses!"

Reynard made a small choking sound. Flavius's jaw dropped, his scientific mind clearly struggling to classify 'bear accountant' within known bureaucratic phyla. Crispin looked utterly horrified, no doubt envisioning bear-audited biscuit expenditures.

"Lisa," the King concluded, pointing a decisive finger. "He will report directly to you, of course. As Coordinator-General, fiscal oversight falls within your purview." He then added, waving a casual hand, "But with a dotted line report into me, personally! One likes to keep abreast of the really interesting expenditures, you understand. Like those camels! Must cost a fortune in... well, whatever it is camels eat that isn't paperwork."

Boris the Bear stepped forward slightly, adjusting his spectacles. "I look forward to reviewing the Bureau's accounts, Coordinator-General. I trust your filing system is adequate? I have developed several highly efficient cross-referencing methodologies involving berry stains and hibernation cycles."

Lisa stared, her mind momentarily wiped clean by the sheer, breathtaking absurdity of it all. A bear. Her finance chief. Reporting to her, and the King. Responsible for the budget that included luxury camel feed, turnip vodka, and potentially hazardous quantities of St Moretitz and 'Special Mary Du-Anne' spliffs. The headache wasn't just blooming now; it was holding a full-blown orchestral performance behind her eyes. This, she thought, was going to require more than just coffee. This might require inventing entirely new forms of paperwork, possibly edible ones, just to satisfy the Ursine Head of Finance. She managed a tight, regal nod. "Welcome aboard... Boris," she said, her voice remarkably steady. "I anticipate... comprehensive fiscal synergy."

The King clapped his hands, delighted. "Splendid! Settled! Now, Boris, about that analysis of squirrel-related strawberry expenditure..."

As the King led the Ursine Head of Finance away to discuss hallucinogenic fruit budgets, the SIB team stood in stunned, hungover silence. Reynard looked faintly green. Crispin appeared close to tears. Flavius was muttering about quantitative analysis of fur shedding. Lisa slowly removed her sunglasses, revealing eyes that held the weary, battle-hardened look of a commander facing her most terrifying campaign yet: the expense report.

The End

Special Investigations Bureau (SIB) - Core Team

- **Coordinator-General Princess Lisa Bearheart De Monfort-Platitude**
 - **Species:** Human (?) (Lineage questioned)
 - **Description:** Daughter of King Pierre (likely King Loo-Eee?), skilled warrior (sword, strategy, chess master), intelligent, decisive leader, wears magnificent armour (sometimes), lived underground. Initially Royal Liaison/Special Operative, later promoted to Coordinator-General in charge of the Bureau. Smokes St Moretitz cigarettes, drinks Turnip Vodka.
 - **Flaws:** Impulsive streak, wary of relationships/emotional connection, can be abrasive/impatient, slightly sensitive about her background, questionable smoking/drinking habits, occasionally relies on flimsy excuses or outright lies to cover embarrassing situations (like the Pamplémoussé affair).
- **Deputy Coordinator Reynard** (Formerly Director/Centurion)
 - **Species:** Fox
 - **Description:** Experienced former leader of the Vulponian Guard/SIB. Pragmatic, loyal, possesses dry wit, competent organiser (though overwhelmed by paperwork). Wears adapted armour.

- **Flaws:** Can be weary/exasperated by constant absurdity, sometimes overly cautious or "flummoxed" by extreme weirdness, struggles with bureaucracy.
- **Field Operative Flavius**
 - **Species:** Fox
 - **Description:** Youngest of the fox trio. Earnest, eager, technically skilled (repairs/invents clockwork/tech using pseudo-science), loyal, takes meticulous notes. Develops an obvious crush on Lisa. Wears adapted armour.
 - **Flaws:** Naive, sometimes overly enthusiastic or easily flustered/embarrassed, his technical creations can be unpredictable.
- **Field Operative Crispin**
 - **Species:** Fox
 - **Description:** Sarcastic, pragmatic member of the guard. Primarily motivated by comfort, food (especially biscuits), and avoiding unnecessary effort or danger. Provides cynical commentary. Wears adapted armour.
 - **Flaws:** Constant complaining, focus on minor discomforts (chafing) or food, can be less brave initially, susceptible to magical/chemical effects (strawberries, radish gas).

Special Investigations Bureau (SIB) - Auxiliary Units

- **Agent Hootington** (Special Airborne Service - SAS)
 - **Species:** Eurasian Eagle-Owl
 - **Description:** Appeared mysteriously at Bureau HQ. Silent, stoic, radiates judgment. Serves as aerial surveillance. Communicates primarily through intense staring or regurgitated pellets.
 - **Flaws:** Uncommunicative reporting style, inscrutable motives, prone to unauthorized actions (catnapping), seemingly ignores direct orders, aloof.
- **Admiral Parrot** (Special Airborne Service - SAS)
 - **Species:** Clockwork Parrot
 - **Description:** Stuffed parrot admiral used by Lisa as a messenger, later reactivated/repaired/upgraded by Flavius with cheese polymer, improbability filaments, residual magic, and vocal mimicry. Intended for reconnaissance/communication.
 - **Flaws:** Mechanically fragile initially, defaults to pirate clichés, post-upgrade develops bureaucratic assertiveness and malfunctions into extreme profanity, requires frequent repairs/recalibration.
- **Bureau Auxiliary Camelid Heavy Support Unit (BACHSU - Group)**
 - **Species:** Dromedary Camels
 - **Description:** Four camels acquired as a "gift" from the Al-Camemberti family. Require specialist

handling (Mustafa Pu hired). Used for heavy transport, guarding, potential psychological deterrence, and disguised surveillance.

- **Flaws:** Generally unruly/stubborn, specific/expensive dietary needs, react violently to bassoons, require constant supervision, questionable effectiveness in disguise.
- **Yasmin the Pearl of the Desert (Asset Y):** Camel. Haughty, regal matriarch figure. Demands respect and luxury (peeled grapes, mineral water). Responds to flattery. Accurate spitter. Flaws: Arrogant, demanding, easily offended, temperamental.
- **Abdullah (Asset A):** Camel. Deeply philosophical, prone to existential sighs and profound inertia. Responds to intellectual debate. Flaws: Extreme inactivity, potentially unreliable under pressure, sighs can be disruptive/unnerving.
- **Cheesy (Asset C):** Camel. Primarily food-motivated, especially cheese. Will attempt to eat almost anything (documents, uniforms, boots, evidence). Flaws: Compulsive eating of inappropriate items, easily distracted by food, potentially compromises missions/evidence.
- **Marigold (Asset M):** Camel. Compulsive rearranger of objects (recycling, cobblestones, furniture, barricades, straw). Can be directed to build structures. Flaws: Obsessive rearranging

habit, potentially destructive or tactically unhelpful creations.

- **Mustafa Pu**

- **Species:** Human (Tunisian)
- **Description:** Hired as Head of Camelids. Calm, competent, patient, speaks Arabic, understands camel psychology and uses quiet methods.
- **Flaws:** None apparent yet; perhaps overly understated?

- **Boris the Bear** (Ursine Head of Finance)

- **Species:** Bear
- **Description:** Initially a circus performer (accounting bear). Highly intelligent, focused on ledgers, rules, and fiscal responsibility. Appointed by the King as SIB Finance Chief.
- **Flaws:** Overly literal and bureaucratic, potentially lacks flexibility, species presents obvious logistical challenges for an office job.

Royalty

- **King Loo-Eee-By-Gum**

- **Species:** Human
- **Description:** Ruler of Paris. Generally jovial and enthusiastic but prone to eccentricity and strange obsessions (Hat of Wisdom, grape-peelers). Appreciates novelty but dislikes disorder that

affects him or the Queen directly. Establishes SIB and appoints Boris.

- **Flaws:** Highly eccentric, easily distracted/influenced (strawberries, knitting spell), potentially poor judgment, relies heavily on others (Lisa, SIB) to manage chaos he sometimes encourages.

- **Queen Mary-Anne Twinset**

- **Species:** Human
- **Description:** Queen of Paris. Possesses extreme outward composure and pragmatism. Fond of knitting and her prize cat, Seraphina.
- **Flaws:** Can be icy when displeased, perhaps overly concerned with decorum, faints under extreme personal stress (cat abduction).

- **Seraphina Cloudpaws the Fourth**

- **Species:** Persian Cat
- **Description:** The Queen's prize-winning, fluffy white lap-cat. Wears a diamond collar. Appears condescending.
- **Flaws:** Pampered, possibly arrogant, victim of Agent Hootington's unauthorized 'asset acquisition'.

Antagonists & Associates

- **Badger Bandits (Group)**

- **Species:** Badgers
- **Description:** Recurring antagonists. Initially motivated by theft, later by revenge. Use brute force and low cunning, often foiled by incompetence or unexpected factors.
- **Flaws:** Poor planning/execution, lack subtlety, prone to panic/infighting, susceptible to intimidation/vegetables.
- **Badger Leader (Scarface):** Badger. Leader of the gang. Large, scarred, wears a tricorn hat. Arrogant and vengeful. Flaws: Overconfident, poor strategist, captured multiple times.
- **Grogg:** Badger. Gang member. Large and strong but dim-witted. Flaws: Clumsy, easily distracted, poor impulse control.
- **Barnaby:** Badger. Gang member. Smallest, possesses minor lockpicking skills. Flaws: Nervous, easily intimidated.
- **Horace:** Badger. Gang member. Devises radish gas plan based on pickling knowledge. Flaws: Questionable scientific/alchemical skills, plan is inherently absurd/risky.
- **Stinky Pete:** Badger. Gang member. Gets dyed magenta, falls asleep easily under gas influence. Flaws: Seems generally unlucky or inept.
- **Squirrels (Group)**
 - **Species:** Squirrels (Eastern Forest Collective)

- **Description:** Antagonists in Chapter 3. Seek political/economic gain through manipulation using drugged strawberries.
- **Flaws:** Overly complex plan, leader escapes but operation is foiled.
- **Baron Bushytail (aka Count Thaddeus Acornswallow):** Squirrel. Leader. Aristocratic bearing, politically ambitious. Flaws: Deceptive, uses criminal methods, underestimates opponents.
- **Filbert:** Squirrel. Assistant. Captured, reveals plan. Flaws: Easily pressured/cooperative when caught.
- **General Hercule de Pamplémoussé (Identity Uncertain)**
 - **Species:** Human (presumably)
 - **Description:** Charming, flamboyant older man with a limp. Introduced as a General. Takes Lisa to Le Toucan. Revealed to be an 'invited guest'/'research subject' of the Al-Camemberti family. Possesses highwayman knowledge/attire.
 - **Flaws:** Deceptive about his identity and situation, motives unclear, possibly a rogue or con artist, easily thwarted by produce (artichoke).

Other Notable Characters

- **Al-Camemberti Family (Group)**
 - **Species:** Human (Implied Arabic)

- **Description:** True owners of the villa in Le Toucan (Burj Al-Haddock Al-Mudahesh). Arrive via camel train. Unflappable, culturally distinct, generous (to a fault?). Conducted 'research' on Pamplemoussé.
- **Flaws:** Possibly naive/overly trusting, their arrival causes chaos, their gifts are burdensome.
- **Vovo Volkovich**
 - **Species:** Human (?)
 - **Description:** Ringmaster of Cirque Magique. Voluminous, gloomy, presides over bizarre circus with potentially 'leaky' magic.
 - **Flaws:** Runs a chaotic/dangerous circus, motives and extent of powers unclear.
- **Fedor the Flatulent**
 - **Species:** Human (?)
 - **Description:** Circus clown whose act involves controlled flatulence based on diet.
 - **Flaws:** Unpleasant act, becomes unwitting weapon for badgers.
- **Monsieur Fichu**
 - **Species:** Hamster
 - **Description:** Royal Chamberlain. Small, nervous, easily frightened (especially by camels or royal commands).

- **Flaws:** Timid, ineffective under pressure.
- **Monsieur Pincenez**
 - **Species:** Badger
 - **Description:** Bureaucratic official (Procurement/Treasury). Sceptical, adheres strictly to regulations.
 - **Flaws:** Obstructive, overly bureaucratic.