

Chapter 18. The Baron comes to visit

Antoinette and the twins were at breakfast with Princess Augustine and the Emperor while Amelie was helping Sophie upstairs.

“Who is Bruno Kühlschrank?” she asked.

“Well,” replied Amelie, “he is important enough to have been invited to the Coronation.”

“But it is not till next week.”

“He has come early Miss Sophie. You must refer to him as Baron von Kühlschrank.”

“Does Kühl mean cool?”

“I think it might do, yes.”

“Is he cool?”

“I do not know. But you must not be rude to him.”

“Does he want to marry Princess Augustine?”

“Possibly, I do not know. I think she will have many suitors now.”

“Well I will not like him. If he can find my friends then I will change my mind.”

Downstairs, the breakfasters had also heard about the Baron’s visit.

“Who is he?” asked Antoinette.

“And why is he coming here?” asked Princess Augustine.

“He is important in his own country,” replied the Emperor. “I think we must accept that he will be the first of many my dear.”

“Father, you do not mean?”

“I am afraid I do. You will soon be Empress. There are many single males with titles on the other side of the French channel. You are now, I think, what is known as ‘a catch.’ ”

“How old is he your Majesty?” asked Popster.

“I am not sure but we will soon find out.”

“Father, do I have to meet him?”

“I think so my dear but do not think you have to comply with any wishes he might have. You must stay in control.”

Two hours later Princess Augustine sat in the grandest of palace reception rooms. Antoinette and Sophie sat to her right and the twins sat on her left. The four ladies in waiting were eagerly watching the double doors at one end to catch a first glimpse of the visitor. How would he react when he saw them?

They did not have long to wait. After he was announced, he strode into the room and bowed to the Princess. He looked quizzically at the four extra pairs of watching eyes but was much too diplomatic to show any displeasure.

“Your highness, I am pleased to see you are in excellent health.”

“Thank you your Excellency. May I present my ladies in waiting?” This she did.

“I am honoured to be in your presence, Lady Antoinette. Your fame precedes you, I have heard about your exceptional musical ability. I hope to hear you sometime soon?”

“Thank you your Excellency,” she replied. “It will be an honour to sing for you and the other guests at the Coronation.”

“That is indeed good news but I hear Ladies Patrice and Catherine have recently had bad news.”

“Yes your Excellency,” cried Sophie, “my friends have been kidnapped!”

“Yes, Lady Sophie is correct your Excellency,” added the Princess. “That would be Ladies Patrice and Catherine’s younger sister, Lady Esmeralda, and her three friends.”

“I am shocked that this can happen. Who are these people that do this to children?”

“Baron von Kühlschrank,” asked Sophie, “can you help find them? They should be with us at the Coronation not with Madame du Malcontent.”

“Ah! So she is behind this. In my country many would spit on her name!” The twins were expecting him to demonstrate this custom but fortunately he didn’t. “Your

highness,” he continued, “I must start my investigations. There is no time to lose. I bid you all good day.” He bowed to the Princess and the four ladies in waiting and was gone.

“Do you think he will find them your highness?” asked Sophie.

“Lady Sophie, I think he will try.” Antoinette and the twins could tell by her expression she wondered how successful he would be.

That afternoon, another visitor was announced. “Count Pietro Parmiagano di Zuchini your highness.”

Count Pietro swaggered into the room with a confident expression on his handsome face. Perfectly groomed, his highly polished boots glinted in the light from the large windows. Tossing his cloak over his left shoulder, he bowed in an exaggerated show of respect.

“It is truly a great honour your Highness,” he proclaimed, “for my country and I to be included in your Highness’s Coronation ceremony.”

“The honour belongs to us your Excellency,” she replied.

It was clear by his expression that he was expecting to be alone with the Princess or at least in the presence of one elderly dozing chaperone. Four extra pairs of eyes seemed temporarily to confuse him.

“Your Excellency,” ventured the Princess, “may I present my ladies in waiting?” This she did once again.

“Ah,” he replied, “Lady Catherine and Lady Patrice I understand that we are indebted to you for...”

“Your excellency,” said Kick, “do not forget Lady Sophie.”

“Of course, yes. Ladies Patrice and Catherine, we are indebted to you for the rescue of our esteemed Empress.”

“Your Excellency,” replied Popster, “it was Lady Sophie and our sister Lady Esmeralda together with Chevaliers Raoul and Paul who went into that dark and I must say rather scary tunnel to find her first.”

“Your Excellency,” asked Sophie, “are you going to find my friends?”

He ignored this request and looked with some confusion to Princess Augustine. She confirmed the truth of what had been said while Sophie sat patiently waiting for an answer to her question.

“Your excellency,” said the Princess, “Lady Sophie’s friends have been kidnapped and we all eagerly look forward to the time when they will be free.”

“Who has done this thing?” he cried in mock outrage, “they should be horsewhipped!”

“Maybe, but we do not do such things now,” replied the Princess. “They will spend a very long time in prison when they are caught. And they will be caught. Madame du Malcontent is, we believe, behind it.”

“Then I will not rest until she is caught and the brave rescuers of your Highness are back with their families. This evil woman is known in my country. She is, how do you say, ah! that is it. She is a trickster in confidence.”

“Thank you for your offer of support your Excellency. It is comforting to know that your thoughts are with us at this difficult time.”

“Now I will take my leave but I sincerely hope, your Highness, that I may visit again soon?”

“If you bring good news,” replied the Princess, “we will be pleased to see you.”

After he had gone, the five discussed the visitors.

“Well,” asked the Princess, “what do you all think?”

“I preferred Count Bruno,” said Kick.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t say so,” added Popster, “but Count Pietro reminded me of a pantomime villain!”

“I do not know what a pantomime is,” replied the Princess, “but I can guess what you mean.”

“Your highness,” mused Sophie, “he did not listen, I think he likes himself too much.”

The other four laughed. “Yes,” replied the Princess, “it does look that way. Is it not interesting that Madame du Malcontent is known in both their countries. What term did he use to describe her?”

Popster laughed. “A trickster in confidence your Highness.”

“I think he meant to say a confidence trickster your Highness,” added Kick.

“Yes. A confidence trickster. I think they are often good at disguising themselves.”

“True,” said Antoinette, “and adopting different voices as well.”

“Will she have a false beard?” asked Sophie.

“She might well do,” said Antoinette as she put her arm round her. “Do not worry Sophie, I am sure they will be rescued soon!”

Baron von Kühlschrank was soon walking the streets of Londres. He was thinking.

‘It is evident that Princess Augustine wants Lady Esmeralda and her friends to be found. I must help if I can. But what, if anything, can I do?’

He stood at the curb waiting for a manure wagon to pass. Then he crossed the road.

‘Myrtille is behind this,’ he thought, ‘I am convinced they are right. She wants to disrupt the Coronation. How will she do it? If I was her, what would I do?’

Soon another manure wagon passed by, its two blinkered horses plodding along a well travelled route. Bruno nodded to the driver and her assistant. ‘These wagons are everywhere and the operatives seem very polite,’ he thought, ‘the Bureau de Sanitaire must be a very large employer.’

It wasn’t long before another wagon passed. Then it hit him.

“Now I see. That must be part of their plan! These vehicles are everywhere and they go about their business almost invisibly. No one takes much notice of them. It would be very easy to use one of these wagons and.... but what? What exactly is her plan?”

He turned the corner and entered a square. There was yet another wagon with some operatives nearby who were cleaning the area and carefully loading the manure. Bruno ambled over and spoke to the nearest operative.

“Good morning to you. Is it not a very fine day?”

“Bonjour Monsieur,” he replied.

“I have noticed your wagon has a picture of an owl. Is there a reason for this?”

“Yes Monsieur. All our depot’s wagons have owls together with a serial number. To the east you will see herons and to the west there are swans.”

“I assume there is a reason for this. There are quite a few different depots?”

“Of course Monsieur.”

“So you each have clearly defined areas?”

“That is correct.”

“And a swan wagon would not be tolerated in your owl area?”

“We would challenge them. They would need special authorisation from head office. We would inspect their paperwork because we are all responsible for our own areas.”

“Ah, from head office. Who is in charge there?”

“The Chef de Sanitaire. Monsieur Henri Court Manteau.”

“Is he related to Ladies Sophie and Antoinette?”

“Yes Monsieur. He is their father.”

“I have met them at the palace.”

A female operative wandered over to join the conversation.

“Claudette,” said the operative, “this gentleman has met Lady Sophie at the palace.”

“Monsieur,” said Claudette, “it is a scandal that her friends have been kidnapped.”

“Yes, a scandal indeed. I think the kidnappers may be planning to use one of your wagons as part of their plot, whatever that might be.”

“Monsieur, are you a detective?” asked Claudette.

“No. I am a visitor to your country but I want to help these children if at all possible.”

“Pierre,” said Claudette as she looked at her colleague, “has met Lady Sophie’s friend Lady Esmeralda.”

“Yes I have met her. The Emperor awarded her a very prestigious medal for her bravery.”

“I think I can detect an English accent?”

“Yes, I was a government minister there but now I am doing a real job. An important job. And I am working with honest people Monsieur. I think these children will find a way to escape if at all possible. They are very resourceful. But if we can help...”

“Thank you. Let us hope they will find a way. Let me show you a picture of the woman I think is behind all this, Madame Myrtille du Malcontent.”

“So that is what she looks like,” sighed Claudette. “I first heard of her many years ago.”

“But,” added Pierre, “I have seen her very recently. She was riding on a swan wagon and I asked to see their authorisation. They apologised and left the area.”

“So,” replied Bruno, “I was right, she is indeed planning to use one of your wagons but I will yet have my revenge.”

“Monsieur,” asked Claudette, “what did she do that makes you so angry?”

“Madame, she stole from my sister and she has kidnapped four children. That evil woman is a criminal.”

“I suggest Monsieur,” said Pierre, “you take your photograph to the swan area. It is only a few streets west of here. Show it to some of their operatives.”

“An excellent idea. Monsieur, Madame, I thank you. You have been most helpful.” After bowing he went on his way.