

Chapter 22. Count Pietro revisits the palace

Count Pietro had not enjoyed his stay in the Departement de Londres. It was colder than his home, the streets were full of horse manure and he did not find the smell as healthy as some claimed. However, before he was due to leave, he paid another visit to the palace thinking he was bound to find the Empress without her young attendants.

‘She will surely want to see me again,’ he mused as he announced his arrival to a royal staff member. He was in luck. There was a window of opportunity before she was due to visit the university.

“Count Pietro is on his way,’ she said to an aide, “has Antoinette returned?” When the answer was in the affirmative she continued, “can you ask all my Ladies and Chevaliers in waiting to attend? We will be in the same room as before.”

The aide left but no one had appeared by the time the Count was announced.

“Your Majesty!” he cried as he bowed and scraped.

“Your Excellency,” she replied, “We hear that you must soon return to your country.”

“Yes your Majesty, but of course I had to visit again before that unhappy occasion. You must be aware how much I have enjoyed my visit to your fair land so it is with a heavy heart that I turn my head in order to return to my home.”

“I am sure you will visit us again at some point in the not too distant future.”

“Your Majesty! I would indeed wish to do this very thing if it is your wish that I should.”

The Empress knew instinctively where this was going but had to tread carefully. She chose to be diplomatic so as not to offend this important visitor.

“Your Excellency, although it will mean a sacrifice for us our wishes must not be allowed to interfere with your important work in your own country. I am sure you are being sorely missed there even as you are gracing us with your presence here.”

The Count’s expression swung from confident to earnest.

“Your Majesty, I will certainly not hesitate to make that sacrifice if it is your wish that I...”. He stopped mid sentence because he heard footsteps and whispering behind him. He turned to see Antoinette leading all the Ladies, Chevaliers and Nicky into the room. His earnest expression faltered then changed to one of frustration.

“Bonjour your Excellency Count Zuchoni Permia.... Parmiagi!” cried Meldy.

“Do you not mean Count Zuchini di Parmigano?” replied Sophie.

“I thought it was Count di Parmiagano Zuchini,” said Raoul.

Count Pietro’s expression of frustration struggled with a counter attempt to show that he was actually amused by these attempts to pronounce his name.

“I assume,” he asked without much enthusiasm, “that I finally have the honour of meeting Lady Esmeralda?”

Meldy curtsied in acknowledgement, not because she wanted to but because it was what one did in such situations.

The Count, with the briefest of bows, switched his attention to Antoinette. “My Lady, such exquisite virtuosity! Your talent has captured the hearts of the world! You will have a brilliant future!”

“Thank you for your kind words your Excellency. However, my future will forever be entwined with that of our people. I will be staying here, at home in my own land.”

“But you could have a glittering future in my country, in any country.”

“What good is a glittering future when there is so much to do here?”

“We are grateful,” said the Empress, “that Lady Antoinette has chosen to use her undoubted talent for the good of our people.”

“If your Majesty wishes then of course such is the wisest of decisions.” While saying this Count Pietro was looking away from the twins. Kick nudged Popster and they exchanged a smirk.

“Your excellency,” said Kick, “when you were searching for our sister and her friends, did you manage to help the police in their work?”

“Ah yes my Lady, I spent many hours in the streets of this fair city, tirelessly searching and denying myself rest while looking for any small snippet of information that could possibly help in facilitating the liberty of these brave young people. Unfortunately, much to my distress, nothing I found was able to be of much use.”

“Your Excellency,” added Popster, “we were indeed fortunate to have had you dedicating yourself to this difficult task. We are certain that, if they had not found a way to scare their captors, you would have provided the police with some vital pieces of information.”

“I am indeed gratified, my Lady, that my efforts have been acknowledged.”

“Of course,” said Kick, “it was Baron von Kühlschrank who was able to identify Madame du Malcontent in the crowds watching the procession.”

“And,” added Meldy, “don’t forget Parsley Pierre, he diffused the bomb!”

They could see the mention of the Baron and Pierre did not sit well with Count Pietro. No doubt he thought he would be the hero, he would be waving to the cheering crowds.

“Oh yes,” he said, “the Baron and the man with the shovel.”

“We are,” said the Empress, “most grateful for the bravery shown by the operatives of the Bureau de Sanitaire. They faced great danger but had no thought for their own safety.”

At that point a palace staff member entered. “Your Majesty,” she said, “his excellency the Baron von Kühlschrank has requested an audience.”

“Ah! The Baron,” she replied, “Please, show him in.”

Count Pietro was not pleased because it was obvious that someone else was more favoured than him. “Your Excellency,” she said to the Baron, “once again we are in your debt.”

“Thank you your Excellency,” added Meldy, “for saving Antoinette and my sisters from the witch lady’s horrible sister.”

Count Pietro silently fumed while the Baron bowed in acknowledgement. “It is indeed fortunate,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “that Maxine du Malcontent chose that precise moment to launch her kidnap attempt.”

“Maxine?” asked Count Pietro, “she is here as well?”

“Yes,” replied the Empress, “she now occupies a prison cell with her sister Myrtille thanks to Baron von Kühlschrank.”

“It is easy I think,” mused the Count, “to capture women.”

“Oh no it isn’t,” cried Meldy, “they told me all about it! She blocked up the carriage and grabbed at my sisters and wouldn’t let go even when he jumped out from underneath and climbed in and grabbed her and they were chased by four men with swords and...”

“Your Excellency,” said Antoinette addressing the Baron, “we are indeed in your debt.”

“Yes your Excellency,” added Kick and Popster, “thank you once again.”

“Your Excellency,” said the Baron to Count Pietro, “both our countries have previously underestimated the capabilities of these three truly evil sisters. They are tenacious and have an extraordinary ability to bend others to their will. I advise you to communicate this fact to your government because who can tell where they will strike next.”

“Ha ha your Excellency,” sneered Count Pietro, “you have forgotten one simple fact. Two of them will be in prison.”

“And you, your Excellency, have forgotten that they both escaped from a prison in your own country just over one year ago.”

“Baron von Kühlschrank,” asked the Empress, “what advice would you give to our prison authorities? They will be required to look after these two for at least ten years.”

The Baron bowed. “Your Majesty, I will be happy to meet with whomsoever you might think would wish to converse with me on this subject.”

“In the first instance, we will arrange a meeting with Commissioner Duplessis. Now however, I must prepare for my visit to the university. It is my wish that Ladies Antoinette, Catherine and Patrice should accompany me.”

The three bowed to acknowledge their assent to the Empress’s wishes and left to get ready. The Baron and the Count were about to be ushered out of the palace but Meldy and Sophie asked the Baron a question.

“Are you a secret agent?”

Count Pietro laughed. “Of course not,” he sneered. “Does he look like one?”

“But your Excellency,” mused Nicky, “it could be a really clever disguise. If he looked like a secret agent then it wouldn’t be a secret would it!”

“Master Nicholas is correct,” said the Baron. “But Ladies Sophie and Esmeralda, I regret to say that I am no such thing. I am just someone who wishes to assist whenever and wherever I can.”

“Well your Excellency,” said Paul, “you have definitely done that!”

“Your Excellency, please make sure the witch lady twins do not escape again,” added Raoul.

“I will try my best,” said the Baron as he bowed to the two Chevaliers.

Count Pietro laughed while he thought, ‘You will have to do much more than that!’