

Another memory crawled up from the pit of guilt. “Oh, good grief, did I really call him a long streak of-?”

“Yes,” said his wife. “Fred Colon came round this morning and told me all about it. And a very good description, I’d say. I went out with Ronnie Rust once. Bit of a cold fish.”

Another recollection burst like a ball of marsh gas inside Vimes’s head.

“Did Fred tell you where he said Rust could put his badge?”

“Yes. Three times. It seems to be weighing on his mind. Anyway, knowing Ronnie, he’d have to use a hammer.” - Jingo

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Sybil stood in front of the mirror and tugged at the neckline of her dress. It was mostly a pointless exercise, she knew. No matter what she wore, there seemed to be altogether too much bosom for it, somehow. Even in a turtleneck, a Bosom[1] that size would still manage to *suggest* cleavage, which was the sort of suggestion that makes well-bred young ladies of eighteen turn pink. *Probably as decent as it’s going to get*, she added to herself, smoothing the skirt down over her hips, just for something to do with her hands.

[1] - On a girl of eighteen, an enormous Bosom-with-a-capital-B is usually nothing more than a source of personal embarrassment and extreme self-consciousness, particularly when some ancient little old lady with a measuring tape is fitting you up for a corset and making tutting noises or worse, muttering about the limits of structural engineering. The Ramkins hadn’t exactly bred for beauty, they had gone in more for healthy solidity, big bones and enough common sense to enable the bearer to find their way out of a damp paper bag unaided. The result was actually easy enough on the eyes, it just tended to cater more to a certain taste, say, the discerning city gentleman who might spend a bit longer than average standing in front of Caravati’s *Three Large Pink Women and One Piece of Gauze* in appreciation of figures that had comfortably ample proportions about the hips and the upper story. Or men who, if they had been born nearer the Hub, would have had a certain affinity for pleasant mezzo-sopranos, horned helmets and generously hammered breastplates that could double as a sled in a pinch.

There was a pounding at the door of the bedroom. “Come in, Daddy.”

Lord Ramkin stepped in. “You look... nice. Very nice,” he said in a slightly strangled voice. “You should probably wear a shawl. It’s chilly,” he added, managing to battle down the paternal instinct that was screaming at him to suggest a heavy, button up coat and scarf instead, and not for reasons of the slight chill of an early spring evening, either.

“I already *am*,” Sybil pointed out patiently.

“Oh. So you are,” he admitted, pulling the edges up a little higher on her shoulders and resting broad hands there. “Er...you’ll be fine?” He had always been completely at sea when it came to the frillier bits of having a daughter. The boy had been a doddle by comparison. The girl had been altogether a bigger surprise, and the mere fact of her later arrival had been the least of it. Deidre was supposed to have been around to handle things like this. She would have actually known what to say. Boys... well, boys were *easy*. At least until one of the wretched things wanted to take your daughter out.

“Oh, dear. We’re not about to have a Talk before I go out the door, are we?” Sybil clearly pronounced the capital letter, looked up at him and suppressed a laugh. The girl didn’t need to look up at many people. Lord Ramkin was a big man and the top of her head still came up just over his shoulder.

“Bloody hell, we don’t *need* to, do we?” he asked, looking slightly panicked.

Sybil shook her head and gave him the same, slightly pitying yet amused look Deidre had oftentimes given him. Usually accompanied, for some reason, by the phrase “like a bull at a gate”. “It’s only the opera house and dinner. And it’s only Ronnie. You’ve known Ronnie his whole life.”

“Right. Only Ronnie.” *Only Ronnie, who is quite a bit older than you and probably thinks of himself as a bit of a man of the world, now, my girl, just because he’s got a pip and a crown on his shoulder and some shiny armor and can finally grow a whole mustache. Only Ronnie, who thinks he can have a jolly brandy with me in the sitting room, twirl his fussy mustache, bring up a regimental name or two and get the unconditional nod. Only Ronnie, who was either too thick or just too self-absorbed to know a good paternal stare-down when he was on the receiving end. Only Ronnie, who I just bet **thinks** of Only Ronnie, when he bothers to think much at all.* He couldn’t help but feel it was a terribly unfair thing for the world to do to a man, letting him get to the age where he could have a daughter who had gone through puberty and out the other side before he himself had gone through mild senility and out the other side. For one thing, you could still clearly remember what you and your peer group had been like after having been in the regiments a few years and coming back home. And mentally putting anyone from *that* peer group anywhere in the vicinity of said daughter didn’t bear thinking about. It was bad enough wincing at the recollection of how *you* had once behaved around her mother, much less what some of the jackanapes you served with had done.

Sybil stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, laying a cheek against his chest. “Daddy, stop worrying. I’ll be fine. Anyone would think you were shipping me off to be executed instead of... out for a few hours.”

He hugged back. “Look, I *do* want you to have a nice time. But I’m your father. It’s my *duty* to worry, *especially* about things like this, and-”

“Daddy?”

“What?”

“I love you, too, but you’re crushing me. It’s *Ronnie*, not someone fresh from the Tanty.”

“Sorry.” Lord Ramkin stepped back. He very carefully bit his tongue and pointedly did *not* suggest that, possibly, upon further reflection, it might not be such a bad idea if someone relatively fresh from the Tanty, e.g. the Boy, went along as a chaperon. Aside from being quite handy about the house assisting Forsythe and Cook, the Boy was adaptable, quick on the uptake and could carve more than a turkey or a ham up a treat. He should know. He had seen the other lad at the lockup. Willikins might have the nasty disposition typical of the Shades when cornered in a fight, but at least all the tattoos - usually covered these days by the spectacularly crisp dress shirt - were spelled correctly and he had the loyalty and good sense to not bite the hand that fed him. Nor the one that had occasionally bailed him out for worse

than biting. Cleverness, loyalty and just the right kind of carefully directed viciousness that could be turned on and off like a tap was what made Lipwizgers prize guard dogs. The trick was getting them properly trained, and the lad was proving more than capable in that department. He could already iron a crisper collar than Forsythe and mix a better cocktail four times out of five. "You've got some money? Just in case? I mean, in case of emergencies and such-like? I've got some—"

"You insisted on giving me some earlier, remember? To go with what I already said I had in my handbag?" Sybil interrupted, holding up the wrist with the delicate strap around it and giving it a slow shake. "I have all possible emergencies covered, including the need to pick up a new carriage and a team of six horses plus driver on the spur of the moment because the wheel's come off, the horses have exploded, the carriage has burst into flames, the driver's run away and every cab for hire in the city is permanently engaged for the night. I *might* not have enough on me for getting a barber-surgeon to pop the dislocated shoulder back in if I forget to keep switching arms with this whacking great bag of cash, though," she added primly, successfully managing to keep a straight face. "On the bright side, if I should happen to get mugged, the poor bugger will have a fatal hernia before he gets half a block."

Lord Ramkin wagged a warning finger. "Don't you use sarcasm on me, my girl, this is serious business," slightly less successful at keeping a straight face.

"Technically, it wasn't sarcasm, it was hyperbole. Before you ask, yes, I have a clean hankie. I've got everything short of a loaded crossbow and a change of socks. Anything else?"

"Okay, fine. Enjoy yourself," he said, only a little begrudgingly, steering her toward the staircase by the elbow. "Only not too much."

"Daddy!" Sybil scolded under her breath.

Ronald Rust was standing in the front hall by the door, discreetly preening the curly bits of his mustache in the mirror, newly minted Major insignia with crown flashing on a spotless, creased uniform. You could very likely shave in the reflection on his boots. "You can blame any tardiness on me. Delaying the inevitable," Lord Ramkin said, letting go of Sybil's elbow.

"Plenty of time. I'm sure *Le Petit Bouchon* accounts for arriving fashionably late, what? I trust Quirmian cuisine suits the young lady this evening?" He was already steering her out the door.

"Sounds lovely. I'm sure it will be," she said, casting one last, slightly warning glance over her shoulder on the way out to the carriage parked in the drive.

"Get a move on, man! You're supposed to be opening the door, not standing there with your mouth open! Look smart!" Rust barked at the footman, who already had a hand on the latch. "I tell you, it's getting so a gentleman can't get proper help. They'll do as little as they can get away with and you have to stay at their heels the whole time to get anything out of them," Ronnie groused as he settled into the carriage seat after her. "Between the recruits and the servants you get these days you might combine the best of ten and get one that's half decent if you're lucky." The gravel crunched gently under the wheels and horse hooves.

"Surely things aren't as bad as all that?"

"Count it a blessing you don't have to worry yourself over dealing with the sort of rabble that's about these days, Sybil. I swear, there are parts of the city that could do with nothing less than

a good fire. It could be nothing but an improvement, especially if it motivated some of them to have a bit more pride and self-respect.” He huffed indignantly, but not so hard as to muss his carefully combed blond mustache.

“I imagine it’s difficult to have much self-respect when you’re busy wondering where the next meal might be coming from,” Sybil pointed out.

He looked at her and gave her hand a dismissive little pat, like an overenthusiastic nursery school teacher might give a child when trying to convince them of the exciting possibilities of being able to count past five. “Oh, of course, you *would* have pity, terribly sweet of you, you’re such a kindhearted gel, Sybil, but they don’t need our pity. They need the motivation to pull themselves up by the bootstraps.”

She stiffened slightly. “That’s no mean feat when you’ve had to eat your boots, Ronnie. Do you imagine they save just the bootstraps because they’re too tough to eat?”

Ronnie gave a short, barking laugh. “Oh, I say, dashed amusing,” he said, shaking his head and turning his icy blue stare out the window. “Too tough to eat. It would toughen *them* up, do them some good if Lord Winder would just require the lot of them without proper jobs to do mandatory service in the regiments. Make real men out of ‘em, what?”

“Should come as quite the surprise to all the *women* without proper jobs, I imagine, having real men made out of them, too.” Sybil observed.

“It’s not at all proper of me to even *mention* what some of the women of *that* class get up to for the sake of a penny in the presence of a well-raised young lady. I think I had best steer the conversation back to something more fit for polite company,” Ronnie sniffed. “The honor and gallantry of this uniform would be besmirched if I were as ungentlemanly and uncivilized as all that.”

Sybil relaxed tense shoulders slightly and gave a politely inviting smile. “Tell me all about becoming a Major and what that’s been like. I expect that’s a huge responsibility.”

Ronnie’s chest inflated visibly beneath the presumably unbesmirched uniform and that endlessly fascinating[2] topic easily carried the conversation through the rest of the ride to the restaurant and well past the vigorous berating of the *maitre’d* for both the sluggishness of his service and the suitability of the table.

[2] - At least to Ronnie. Ronnie could talk about Ronnie simply all day. And quite often, any other subject you could think of could, by dint of some effort, be brought back around to Ronnie.

“The first table was just fine,” Sybil said apologetically, aiming this statement as much at the *maitre’d* and *monsieur* hovering somewhat anxiously in the middle distance as at Ronnie.

“Nonsense, Sybil, if you let them mess you about with an inferior table, they think you can be given inferior service, too. Quirmians can be altogether too arrogant for their own good, you have to put them in their place right away.” Ronnie sat and impatiently snapped his fingers over his shoulder in the vague direction of the waiter. “Garçon!” She winced slightly at the rudeness of this.

The waiter stepped over smartly, offering a wine list. The *maitre’d* turned just as smartly on his

heel and gave a slight eye roll before walking away. “*Oui*, could I perhaps recite the evening’s specials and describe the *vin du la maison*–”

“Don’t bother with the house wines,” Ronnie interrupted.

“But, my lord, several of the vineyards do a private bottling, an exclusive label, for us. I can recommend–”

“I can read,” Ronnie insisted, not looking up from the list. “Do I *look* like I need to buy a *house* wine?”

Sybil gave the waiter a helpless little smile and shrug. “*Je vous prie de m’excuser. Que recommandez-vous pour le vin avec le repas, s’il vous plaît, monsieur?*”[3]

[3] - I apologize. What do you recommend for the wine with the meal, please, waiter?.

The waiter smiled a genuine smile. “*Très bon! Vous parlez la langue du la Quirm très bien. Vous prononcer choses merveilleusement. Où avez-vous appris? Beaujolais paires très bien avec le cassoulet du poulet et saucisses.*”[4]

[4] - Very good! You speak Quirmian very well. Your pronunciation is wonderful. Where did you learn? Beaujolais pairs very well with the chicken and sausage cassoulet.”

Sybil went slightly pink at the compliment. “*Merci. Académie pour Jeunes Filles du Quirm.*”

“And you can stop being too lazy to speak decent Morporkian. The young lady doesn’t want to listen to you gabbling in Quirmian all evening. Bring us the duck a l’orange and a bottle of the Castle Coch, Year of the Apprehensive Squirrel,” Ronnie said, putting the wine list down.

“*Très bon. And for mademoiselle?*”

“I believe I just ordered for the both of us. My ears heard me do it and I felt my lips move.”

“I thought the *cassoulet* sounded interesting,” Sybil protested.

“Gods know what Quirmians put in their sausage. It’s like as not to be cats. It’s very hard to botch duck.”

“Gracious. One wonders how Quirmians have managed their meals all those centuries before coming here to open restaurants and learn proper cuisine,” Sybil said, sharing a look with the waiter. “I suppose I had better have the duck, then,” she added reluctantly.

“And pour the wine at the table. None of this business with pouring something less expensive in the back and pocketing the difference, what?” Ronnie managed to inspect the waiter, seemingly with his nostrils. Given that he was seated, this was no mean feat.

The waiter stiffened, clacked shiny heels together with the precision of a ballet dancer and said

through gritted teeth, “*Habitant non informé du Societe des Joyeux*.<sup>[5]</sup>”, prompting Sybil to hide the first flicker of a laugh behind her hand for an instant, then to feel slightly guilty about it.

[5] - Roughly, “Ignorant fool.” The once independent Quirme Société Joyeux at La Sorbumme had long since become a satellite campus of the Fools Guild.

“You will speak civilized Morporkian.”

“I said, my lord, it gives me *such* great joy. I shall make it a *point* to check the label for tampering *personally*, just in case some scallywag has switched it in anticipation of *pocketing the difference*. In fact, I shall make sure to send the *sommelier*, that would be the wine steward in *civilized* Morporkian, to the cellar to fetch it and deliver it to your table *himself*. In fact, if you do not enjoy the wine he chooses for you, you are not obligated to pay for it.” Then he strode off.

“I *know* you probably whiled away some nice years at school there with the other gels, and the Rodleys are a fine old family of good class, of course, but real Quirmians can be insufferable. They just put on the oh so quaint act for tourists and parents. It’s a pretty enough place around the school and the floral clock, but not a patch on the country around the Quire.”

“Oh, the Quire’s beautiful, I’ll grant you. But I found Quirm to be extremely charming in the years I was there. Including the people. And the language can make just about anything sound gorgeous. It was my favorite.”

“Sounds nice, but Quirm just isn’t a political mover any more. Hasn’t been for centuries. You notice most of them can speak perfectly good Morporkian, even if they insist on talking behind your back in their lingo. And they’ll do it right in front of you. It’s good enough for schoolgirls to mess about with, helps with the Latatian, I suppose.”

“Well, seems to me if they make the effort to learn our language, the least we could do is return the favor. It’s only polite. Thank you,” Sybil added to the *sommelier*.

“I’ve no doubt the Quirmian classes made for a nice change from the classes on entertaining and doilies and things.”

“We took some classes on history and political science and maths, too, you know. There was even a bit of natural philosophy. And other languages. Latatian, Dwarfish, even, since it went with the music appreciation. And Brindisian. It wasn’t *all* giggling and writing notes to each other on pink writing paper.” *Enough of it was, and gods know the curriculum featured a lot of doilies and flower-arranging, but I was bloody good at some of the things, like history and maths.*<sup>[6]</sup>  
“Miss Turpitude always liked to say a girl who knew how to use a set square and a protractor would go a long way in life.”

[6] - If she had been more closely questioned, Sybil, who was at heart just as basically honest

as she was disposed toward thinking kindly of people, would have admitted that Quirm had been fine. School, even, had been fine, such as it was, though it also gave you a probably unintended insight into the benefits of a good library, not letting schooling interfere with your actual education and being at least moderately accomplished at the extracurricular activity “escapology”. Being part of a society of girls when you were given to being large, kind and excelling at subjects that required more thought than where to snip the stems wasn’t always so pleasant. It was downright amazing how a certain type of gel could cunningly interpret the combination of the first two things as evidence of being “stupid”, and worse, “deaf”, no matter how much that interpretation flew in the face of the third thing.

“I shouldn’t think she would have to go any further than knowing how to use a pencil and keeping up the basic household accounts if her husband’s taking proper care of her. And as for the politics, he should be handling those as well. Can you imagine what the world would be like if the wives were dictating the politics?”

“Improved a great deal, possibly?” Sybil pointed out, quite serious, but Ronnie seemed to have heard it, analyzed it, and decided it couldn’t possibly have been said in the first place because the opinion didn’t fit into any of the available mental slots on his personal planet, assuming there were any available.

“World would be in a right mess if the gels were in charge of it. Probably try to organize a light lunch and drinks in response to all this business that’s come up just during Lord Snapcase’s tenure rather than see the beauty of the true gentleman’s art of diplomacy.”

The duck arrived and was acknowledged, even if Ronnie’s acknowledgment only extended to giving the waiter a curt nod when asked if it was to his satisfaction. “I thought Lord Snapcase went in for the art of war over the art of diplomacy.”

“War is a continuation of diplomacy by other means,” Ronnie recited, as though quoting an internal manual. “When two equals have discussed things, of course, they try to work things out peaceably, first, like gentlemen. But when the discussion runs dry, it’s time for good breeding and leadership to come to the fore. That’s when things need to be settled on the field, a test of strength between *men*.” Sybil tried to mentally sum up all of the female forebears she knew about who had ended up in the middle of some of those tests of strength between men in some fashion, usually a lot less spectacularly armed, and quickly lost count[7]. “And of course, some of the more *backward* sort of Johnny Foreigner we have to deal with are *never* going to understand anything other than the taste of cold steel. Still, one must still strive to show one’s fitness.”

[7] - Duty was something that tended to be bred in right at bone level among all the Ramkins for many generations. When duty called, it did not find Ramkin women wanting, either. In fact, when duty called, it usually found them quite prepared to not only follow a husband halfway across the Disc, but to bury a sharp hatchet in a bloodthirsty (and subsequently, rather briefly but very terminally surprised) Klatchian’s face and give birth to members of the subsequent generation in the lee side of a convenient camel if necessary. Occasionally all on the same day.

“Perhaps they just bypass the diplomacy and go straight on to the diplomacy by other means, then,” Sybil pointed out. She smiled the sort of smile that would, in twenty years time, be completely capable of making even the most passionate of arguments on politics come to a screeching halt before it got out of hand, at least if you knew what was good for you[8]. She threw in a conversational bootlegger’s turn for good measure. “I understand the opera house is going to be doing a selection of music from several different works this evening?”

[8] - Or possibly, if you knew what was *not* good for you, i.e. continuing to be rude enough to argue politics within earshot when you had already been given a polite but firm warning shot across the bow.

Ronnie reached into an inner jacket pocket and extracted a small brochure, glancing at it before sliding it across the tablecloth. “*Il Truccatore, La Triviata, The Barber of Pseudopolis* mostly. Some of the lighter pieces. *The Enchanted Piccolo*.”

Sybil ran a finger down the list. “Oh! *Bloodaxe and Ironhammer*, as well. Just an excerpt, obviously, they wouldn’t have time for the full version of anything from that opera.”

“Dwarf opera,” Ronnie said dully.

“It’s just the love duet,” Sybil replied. She looked again. “Abbreviated, at that. Probably just the first chorus.”

“I could do without a couple of dwarfs with beards *courting* one another on stage,” Ronnie said, making a face. “It’s not natural.”

“I gather it might be for dwarfs.”

“Dwarfs are not... our sort. One hears *stories*. And the plain truth is disturbing enough. I mean... you never see their women. More of them are starting to come into the city. Lord Snapcase is said to be formulating a plan to *deal* with them before they become too much of a problem, thank goodness.”

“A diplomatic solution, probably?” Sybil asked, unable to stop herself. It didn’t take much in the way of keen political analysis to see that Ronnie hadn’t meant that Snapcase was likely to deal with them kindly or deal with them in an economic sense.

“I’ve no doubt, unless the dwarfs refuse to see reason about where they *belong*, among their own, away from decent folk,” Ronnie said, missing the extra layer of meaning. “I would not like to think what this city would become if dwarfs were allowed to start trolling the streets wherever they liked, manhandling young ladies and draining the lifeblood of the city like vampires.”

“Not going around actually dwarfing anything, then?” Sybil said lightly. There wasn’t even a



flicker of a laugh in response.

“Your father tells me he’s finished off your little dragon pens for you,” Ronnie said, condescension dripping off of every word.

“Well, no, in actual fact, workmen finished them, because I’ll admit, Daddy might be a fair detail bricklayer and can handle a hammer and even shear a sheep, but he’s absolute pants at building thick clay brick walls. And I designed them and paid for it out of my own money. That was rather the point of training up the last few litters and selling them,” Sybil explained.

“That’s nice,” There was another of those enraging pats on the hand. “It’s wonderful that your father lets you engage in a hobby, though, I have to say, I think you could pick a less dangerous one.”

“It’s more like a business than a casual hobby. Dragon breeders who forget that either end up with far more animals than they can handle properly or end up in a very small decorative urn or laminated to a wall,” Sybil replied. “Besides, I enjoy doing it. Swamp dragons are a real challenge. And there’s so much about them that we don’t even know, yet. Like how they manage to distill flammable liquids from so many different food sources and exactly why they seem to be prone to so many diseases. And how some of them could be treated. They’re so delicate, it seems impossible that they could have survived all this time, and yet, they have. Brenda Rodley said she would let me have her notes on some of the problems she’s seen with her breeding pairs. I’m thinking of putting together a folio of some sort for breeders and owners. There might even be enough for a book.”

“I would think breeding horses or dogs would be challenging enough,” Ronnie added dismissively. “You’ve got a way with animals, I’ve seen that. The horse is a noble animal and we already know how horses work.”

“That’s hardly the point. It’s not like just... picking out a different color dress. They don’t even compare.”

“And with your father liking hunting so much, I should think you might like breeding horses or hunting dogs.”

Sybil pinched the bridge of her nose. Unfortunately, she had been brought up to be pleasant, helpful and think kindly of people. Some people took this as proof positive that she didn’t do any other kind of thinking. Some people also needed something slightly less subtle than an anvil to the head to take a hint. “Believe it or not, Ronnie, I manage to make the occasional decision about what I do and do not like without consulting someone else, first. I like horses well enough. Even dogs. I still have absolutely no desire to raise either of them.”

There was another of those hand pats across the table. “Of course.” Sybil stiffened involuntarily. “I saw a marvelous game of crockett last time I was out to the Quire...”

Brief societal news bulletins from both sides carried them through the rest of the duck and the pudding, though the pudding was technically a *mousse*. The *monsieur* had drifted by with the bill in a small leather folder, just in time to be upbraided for not bringing it sooner, alternately hovering and not being close at hand when wanted, all in one go. Some money had been tucked into it. Sybil was just breathing a sigh of relief at having escaped the restaurant mostly unscathed onto the cobbles out front when a horrible suspicion arose and struck her, to her own slightly guilty surprise. "I need to go back and powder my nose."

"The opera house—"

"No. I'll go back in," Sybil said firmly.

"I'll walk you—"

"No, no, I'll only be a minute. Have them bring the carriage around, I'll be back by the time it gets here," Sybil insisted. She scurried back inside as briskly as she could manage in the dress and slick-soled satin slippers that went with it. She reached the table just as the *monsieur* was gathering up the money from inside the leather folder.

He smiled, though it looked a little weary and forced. "Has *mademoiselle* forgotten something?"

"I'm afraid someone else might have forgotten something. The gratuity? He *did* remember, didn't he?"

There seemed to be a brief, internal struggle. "His lordship evidently did not feel a gratuity was merited. Nor did he feel the wine was up to his standards. Despite having drunk several glasses. Well over half the bottle."

Sybil could feel the hot, pink flush of embarrassment starting somewhere in the depths of the corset and preparing to storm the slopes like a barbarian horde about to take a citadel. "I'm sure it was just an accidental oversight because he was in a hurry to leave for the opera house. The food and the service were both excellent," Sybil insisted, pressing some money into the waiter's hand. "So was the wine. I'm so sorry."

"I am sorry, as well. *Merci*, it was a pleasure serving *mademoiselle*."

If she had been less kindly inclined, she might have wondered about what *exactly* had prompted the apology from the waiter.

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The portion of the evening spent at the opera house was more tolerable, if only because she came out in time to simply step in the already open carriage door, thus missing any

imprecations as to the footman's job skills, the carriage ride there was mercifully brief, dark and cool, and once the house lights had gone down, even the bits of the audience safely ensconced in the boxes had to stop loudly criticizing the quality of the champagne and chocolates on offer and the smartness of the service that got them there once the bell was rung. Sybil sat to Ronnie's right, leaning forward slightly, engrossed in the performances for the most part, except for those brief times when she felt a proprietary arm around her shoulders, usually followed closely by Ronnie holding forth opinions on the piece in question just beside her ear.

Never one to let a small thing like total ignorance stop him from talking about something, Ronnie said in a sort of lazy yawn, "Never did understand what this song was about," through the strains of *Questa maledetta porta si blocca*, before taking a bite of chocolate.

"This damn door sticks, it sticks no matter what the hell I do," Sybil translated without thinking. She might have been raised to be genteel in an outdoorsy sort of way, but she had also been partially raised by a man who could be quite enthusiastic and creative when it came to swearing. The enthusiasm and creativity in swearing had often come about when he had come into close contact with some of the less pleasant bits of the outdoors, as a matter of fact.

Sybil had to pound Ronnie between the shoulder blades several times to stop him choking in surprise, which was quite difficult when you were also trying desperately not to laugh.

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The late evening was, to their mild shock, actually warmer than it had been before they left. A thick, insulating pile of clouds covered up most of the stars, but the moon shone bright. The crunch of the gravel drive underfoot was loud compared to the other soft noises of crickets and insects in the grass as they walked up toward the house. She invited him in, partly because it was the polite thing to do when someone had dropped you off home, and partly because Ronnie seemed to have taken the invitation as read even before it had been issued. Willikins opened the door for them, checked that they didn't need anything and seemingly disappeared completely. The sitting room was empty and there was no sign anywhere of Lord Ramkin. Sybil didn't know whether to feel grateful or annoyed about that.

Ronnie helped himself to a small brandy and poured a small glass of sherry for Sybil before gracing the cushion beside her with the seat of the unbesmirched uniform. "I speak as I find, Sybil. I strive to be honest and forthright and plainspoken. And direct. I believe we had a nice conversation over dinner."

Sybil took a sip to gather her thoughts. "Of course. It's always nice to chat with friends over dinner," she said warily, not entirely sure if a response was even expected.

"We have a great deal in common. Family backgrounds, upbringing, common interests and culture, education."

Sybil went rigid. "I thought my education was just barely decent enough for a mere gel in your opinion. And as for common interests, name one," she added, feeling slightly rebellious and more than slightly fed up.

There was just a split second of uncertainty in the blue eyes, but the evergreen self-confidence and certainty bounced back. "Well, obviously, our families. We share nearly identical breeding."

"Ronnie, I don't believe getting born actually qualifies as a common interest. Everyone you see walking around has managed it, and not a one of them had any more control over where and how it happened than we did. And while we're on the subject of breeding, do you know what any breeder worth a dollar knows about breeding?"

"Dragon breeders?"

"Dragons, horses, dogs, whatever you like. Sometimes, it's good to mix things up a bit. If you stick with the same old thing for too long, it tends to water the better qualities down eventually. Honestly, name one common interest."

"The opera."

"You said most of the pieces sounded like yowling cats, foreign drivel or dwarf nonsense. I enjoyed it."

"I admit some of the pieces this evening were not among my favorites. I feel there are more important things, surely, than which pieces of music a couple agrees upon. There's commonly held convictions far more important than liking *La Traviata*. A young lady who shares my deeply held convictions is very important to me," Ronnie said, bouncing back, undented, like a rubber ball.

"I'm sure it is, Ronnie. If having someone who agrees with your every word is so important, have you thought about looking for a young lady who shares those convictions?" Sybil asked. Her ears caught up with her brain and tongue just in time to register mild surprise at having said them.

Ronnie didn't look surprised. Nor angry. Nor hurt. He never looked surprised. He just stared. Until he had seemingly mentally erased any possibility that he had just been bluntly told to look elsewhere by a mere cheeky girl of eighteen who should have been jolly grateful for the offer of a relationship with an older, established, cultured, wealthy and above all, well-bred gentleman like himself, from all possible universes. "I really should be taking my leave. It's late. I expect you're just tired. I can see myself out. Goodnight, Sybil," he said, kissing her unresisting hand.

"Goodnight, Ronnie," Sybil replied, feeling equal parts flummoxed and relieved. She sat for a few minutes in the dim sitting room, in the silence after the shutting of the door, before picking up the lamp and walking up the stairs purposefully to her own room. She put the lamp on the

desk while she lit a small lantern and rummaged through the drawers in the dressing room for an old pair of riding breeches and twill shirt in thoughtful silence. She stripped off the dress after some contorting to get at the buttons followed by a brief tussle with them, and draped it carefully over a chair and kicked off the slippers. The shirt was still half unbuttoned and untucked at the bottom and the old work boots still untied when the familiar knock came at the door. She opened it anyway and stood aside to let her father in.

“You’re... going out to the pens at this time of night?” Lord Ramkin asked, flopping into one of the armchairs. “You could send the Boy. Or they could wait until morning, surely.”

“They don’t feed themselves,” Sybil said matter-of-factly, “and they’re *my* responsibility.” There was a lengthy silence as she finished buttoning the long shirt and tucking it into the waistband.

She had already started on threading the belt when Lord Ramkin seemed to come to a decision and ask, “Well, did you at least see him off properly, or am I going to have to threaten to shoot him somewhere painful to make him get the message? He doesn’t like hearing ‘no’, so I imagine he didn’t. Hear it, that is.” Sybil looked up and blinked in surprise. “I didn’t see this being a great success. I *have* known Ronnie his whole life, after all. More importantly, I’ve known *you* your whole life, Sybil. Your eyes and your ears are wired directly to your brain and you bother using it for more than keeping your ears apart and your hat up, which is more than I can say for a lot of gels your age. Or twenty years your senior, for that matter.”

“He’s not *that* thick. I don’t think. Although... I’m not sure what he thinks just happened. I’m not entirely sure he actually thinks it *did* happen. Ronnie’s not a bad sort, exactly, he’s just...” Sybil said weakly, trailing off.

“Oh, Ronnie’s quite shrewd in areas where it benefits Ronnie. He’s brave enough. And a gentleman, I suppose. He has his good points. They just tend to get smothered by the rest of him.”

“But... he’s not a... gentle man.”

“Oh, I might not like him very much when you get right down to it, but he adheres to the gentleman’s code, at least. Sooner die than not be thought of as a gentleman,” Lord Ramkin admitted.

“Not a *gentle man*. I mean he doesn’t give much thought to other people, does he? Nice enough to your face when it doesn’t cost him anything, least of all any effort, but people are all more or less interchangeable to him, aren’t they? He’s not looking for anyone in particular, it’s only another thing to be marked off the list, added to the collection, something else to acquire because you’re supposed to. Just a girl from the right part of the city from the right family with the right qualifications willing to do and say all the right things. All the right things according to Ronnie, of course. Just... Insert Name Here.” Sybil added with a helpless shrug. “I felt as though I was surplus to requirements most of the night, he didn’t even need someone to nod at him to

convince him you agreed with him. He just presumed," she admitted. "Like I should be *grateful* he was even bothering to grace me with his presence."

"That's probably about the size of it," Lord Ramkin agreed. Sybil turned her back on him and planted a foot on the edge of the empty chair, bending over and methodically doing up the laces. "Never marry anyone who isn't more than willing to get behind you, stand beside you, help you up when you're down and give you a hard, swift kick in the arse when you're in need of one," he said, extending one leg and giving her a gentle prod in the backside with the toe of his boot for emphasis. He laughed, a rich, warm chuckle.

Sybil finished tying the bow and said, with mock sternness, "My leg's got enough to do already what with kicking yours, thank you very much. Oh, and you'll appreciate this. It was worth the entire evening just to see Ronnie nearly choke on a chocolate when I told him exactly what the lyrics to *Questa maledetta porta si blocca* meant," she said, tying off the other boot and turning around.

"Ha! That would have been worth at least a dollar in entertainment value and no mistake. Look," he said, sobering and taking her hand before standing, "in all seriousness, do not let the Ronnies of the world make you feel like you have to be something you're not or feel something you don't. Don't settle. Wait for someone who earns it, someone you can actually feel proud of." He kissed her on the cheek. "And for gods' sakes, be careful out there in the pens."

"I will," Sybil replied, standing on tiptoe to kiss him back before picking up the lamp. "I will," she repeated before heading out the door.

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Sybil sat, patiently, in the waiting area just outside the Oblong Office. She had truly meant it when she had said it was entirely up to him, whether or not to accept being a duke, and she knew better than to press him about what the decision had been when Sam came out. He was wearing the faraway, preoccupied expression that meant something had been queued up for some serious mental processing, something that needed to be chewed away at and digested in small chunks, and hadn't quite finished. They had ambled more than a block away from the Patrician's Palace in total silence before he finally said, "I suppose I could get used to being married to a duchess."

"You've more than earned it, Sam. I'm *very* proud of you. Title or no title." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek before climbing into the parked carriage.

They rode in silence for another block before Sam said, with the air of a man who was working a particularly troublesome popcorn kernel from some sensitive and annoying spot, "I've been thinking... I mean... you... went out... with *Rust*?"

Sybil laughed. "I was just eighteen and almost didn't know any better," she said dismissively. "Beforehand, anyway."

"It's just... I can't see that working. What was he like on a *date*?" Sam asked in a kind of horrified

fascination.

“Lucky for both of us, I couldn’t see it working, either. And he was just about like you would imagine. More concerned about his mustache than anything else, horrible to the waiter and too tight to leave a tip or even pay for the wine. On the bright side, I did make him nearly choke on a chocolate because I said ‘damn’ and ‘hell’.” She laughed again, a rich, warm laugh that was contagious and tucked in a little closer. “He didn’t give up all that easily, either. I’ll have to tell you about it, sometime. I’ll also have to look into what makes up the ducal regalia...”

“Oh, *gods*,” Sam moaned, draping an arm around her shoulders, but there wasn’t much rancor in it. “Why do these things always have to come with a damned stupid costume? Is there a vermine-trimmed cloak or something?”

“Probably,” she admitted, idly straightening the edges of the scarf before resting her hand on his knee. “You know why, don’t you? When you’re headed out to kick some arse, you’ve got to wrap up well. Don’t worry, at home it’s optional.”

He put his hand on top of hers and shook his head. “*Rust...*”

“Hush. Ronnie Rust is the *last* thing I want to think about right now.”

“What *do* you want to think about?”

“I *believe* we were trying to have an evening in before we got rudely interrupted. *Twice.*”

“We didn’t even get to *start* dinner this time.”

“There’s such a thing as dinner trays, you know. Trays that can be carried places other than the dining room. The bedroom springs to mind.”

He gave her hand a squeeze. “I like the way you think.”

Sybil smiled softly to herself. “I know. I’ve always said that was one of your better qualities.”