

## **Chapter 4**

### **Austrian Ball**

The Ailendron affected Axyelle the same way as she first saw it. She was not able to explore the magnificent structure during her last visit, but after her recent success she looked forward to experiencing everything the palace had to offer. The three proceeded towards Lady Seibhlin's office in unceremonious silence when Axyelle spoke.

"It is strange how we seemed to achieve many things in our voyage yet my scroll now has more spaces than scribbles," Axyelle lifted the parchment for her company to see. "In earnest, I believe the humans did all the hard work."

"You are being too modest, Gene...er...Axyelle," Arqris replied. "For starters, we oversaw the Archduke's voyage, established an alliance between Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and Franz."

"How about the time we provided the ship safe passage to Austria from Yokohama to Vancouver through the United States?" Axyelle remembered after her aide-de-camp's recollection.

"I say we put up a worthy front in combat considering the peculiar circumstances," Arqris added. "We barely escaped unscathed."

"Not to mention we forged lasting friendships along the way," chirped Xixanthe.

The Captain agreed, “I admit that I am the one with the most lessons learned, new things experienced, and without question, the most sorry that this assignment is over.”

Xixanthe and Axyelle both smiled at this summary of their thoughts. The three recounted their fondest memories in their short trek to the Hashmal’s quarters. Axyelle pounded the knockers against the wood of the massive doors calling to mind the only occasion she met Lady Seibhlin. How things have changed much since then.

“Come in,” the comforting voice called from inside. The Hashmal was behind her desk as usual attending to the pile of scrolls, a permanent feature on her worktable. The Hashmal took one good look at the three. Each had a palpable surge in their powers, attesting to the excellent training they obtained from the assignment. The strong bond which she felt between them pleased her. They will be ready for more complicated tasks which will test their skills and their loyalty sooner than she assumed.

“Exalt the Ineffable One! Your Excellence,” greeted the three in unison as they performed the customary obeisance.

“You look like you are about to pop unless I start listening to your adventures. Let us find good seats in the garden. I believe that is best suited for what I am about to hear. Tell me everything.”

Once seated in the choicest spot, the Hashmal was at an instant drawn in by the excitement which once Axyelle started, was like the drop of rainfall that broke the floodgates.

“I did not envision such perils for this journey. Despite that, you gave an exceptional performance. I cannot help but be proud of my selection, I am almost sorry to see you off again to your new assignment.” Her audience exchanged joyous looks. “It does not hold as much promise of adventure as your last but it has every potential to be more entertaining. Franz accepted an invitation to attend a ball and will depart for Prague in a few days. Travel by train for a fortnight

from Vienna. There is a slight element of danger from rebel-assassins who want the monarchy toppled, but it is not a serious threat.

The Hashmal handed a scroll to each eager hand, read with gusto and the occasional pause to look at each other as if they were reading off the same page. “Your ward should be primed so acquaint yourselves with the details of this mission. I will not detain you further as much as I would prefer to keep you here. I am sure you have better use for a needed break.”

\*\*\*

“Settle down, Franz,” Otto was unable to contain the annoyance at his brother’s reluctance. “It is not as taxing as it seems. If you invest even a pinch of effort, you might even enjoy yourself. The Empire’s most esteemed society will be in attendance, including that jolly Russian Ambassador. Aleksey...something or other. Perhaps I can challenge him to a drinking game! As for you, if you harnessed some of that enthusiasm you have for hunting to your social affairs then we would all be better off! You look about as keen as a child headed for the dentist’s chair.”

“If it helps, think of them as game,” Karl encouraged over Franz’s shoulder. “There will be a few elephants about, but there is the occasional peacock hoping for some royal attention.”

“Some help you two are,” Franz replaced the last button before straightening his collar. “I ran out of animals some time ago. So would you if you endured as many dances.”

“You are aware that had you chosen a princess or archduchess earlier on, you would have no need to attend this gathering.”

“Yes, Karl I know.”

“Well, pick one then, any will do. There is that, that,” Otto snapped his fingers to every ‘that’ to jog the name to memory. That Spanish princess? You know the name, Karl. She seemed keen. She is eligible, and...”

“... Will never be enough to tempt me. I cannot devote the rest of my life to loving someone who is not,” Franz continued not seeing his brother's mouth the words behind him, “my emotional and intellectual equal. Listening to what these girls have to say is almost painful. Especially since their only concern is breeding. It is not that easy.”

“It is! Trust me. We are not Habsburgs for nothing. Our status is enough to attract any blue-blooded female.” Karl retorted as he helped his brother negotiate with a cufflink. “You are not getting any younger Franz. Before long even the best of heritages cannot help you.”

“I have had enough of this conversation.”

Otto and Karl exchanged glances as they listened to the speech they heard countless times.

“You have made yourself quite clear. Sadly, marriage is the only thing nobles obsess over and the more you resist, the further they will pry.”

A dejected Franz slumped in his armchair. “I did not mean to raise my voice. I do my best. I still try, do I not?”

“We only want your happiness, Franz.”

Axyelle was glad that the argument had not affected the general mood of the brothers. Tonight's dance soiree seemed promising. Axyelle remained optimistic that the change of scenery would heighten her ward's enthusiasm. Though too proud to admit it, the Archduke harboured that hope in every man that somewhere out there is the woman intended for him. Axyelle would do her best to keep that hope afloat.

This ball was being hosted by the wealthiest member of the Habsburg dynasty, the illustrious Erzherzog Friedrich von Habsburg-Toscana, third Duke of Teschen. His wife, Isabella, a Princess of Cröy-Dülmen, organised the event. Besides being impeccable, she was recognised for her skills in matchmaking which was put to the most use in the union of the Heir Apparent and her eldest daughter, Maria Christina, the year's most celebrated debutante.

Franz looked into the mirror with an absentminded stare when a hesitant rapping on the door made him self-conscious. “Otto, how do I look?”

“You could have warts and smell downright appalling and your title will still hold higher notice.” It was meant to be a joke but Franz looked desperate for an honest opinion. Otto straightened his brother’s coattails and replaced a tuft of hair already sitting in its rightful place. Grinning, he clapped a gloved hand on Franz’s shoulder and guided him out of the room. “You sir, look like you are ready for a hunt.”

The ballroom was a river of rainbow coloured waves as gowns of every known material swished to and fro to the triple time. Axyelle observed that Franz was in good spirits. She could tell from the modest lilt in his voice, his broad smile. And the slight spring in his step, that the earlier conversation with his brothers encouraged his mood.

Alighting from the stairs, the brothers found Archduke Friedrich and Archduchess Isabella waiting at the entrance to give them an eager welcome into the ballroom. The younger ones, both good-looking with charming and easy manners, had many admirers but Franz held the room captive when he entered.

“It seems,” Xixanthe glowed with pride as she noted to a fellow Emyrean, “the audience thinks the world of our ward.”

“Though I cannot imagine why he would trust their word.” Deiumus countered the Emyreans’ observations. “I am sure the Archduke is aware that he is surrounded by hypocrites.”

As if he heard his Caelumair’s terse comment, Franz’s countenance fell. His change in disposition surprised the crowd, who dispersed within minutes. After more introductions to the women in attendance, Franz addressed only the gentlemen and his conversations to politics and hunting while his once ardent admirers flocked around the Russian Ambassador instead. This did not escape the Archduchess’ observation.

“Friedrich, I think it is about time your daughter and I join Franz. Sophie, go and fetch Maria Christina at once. See to it that someone brings me a glass of red wine while you are at it.”

“Yes, your grace.” Sophie left scurrying to look for the Archduchess’ eldest daughter.

“Try to understand Isabella,” Axyelle overheard the Emphyrean counsel as the lady-in-waiting passed her by. “She has much to deal with. Her daughter must compete with an endless queue of debutantes hailing from the fourteen royal houses, aspiring to be the Archduke’s bride.” Seeing Franz doing well on his own Axyelle found herself joining the search party for the wanted debutante.

“Isabella has my poor ward running to and fro. Sophie is accustomed to her pettiness, she is not one to complain.” The Emphyrean placed a hand on Sophie’s forearm to prevent a collision with a tottering tray as she introduced her human. “Sophie is the daughter of the Chief Equerry Chotek and Countess Kinsky. She may not be from the elite but she is still royalty.”

“Being the lady-in-waiting to Maria Christina was intended to secure her a good marriage?” Axyelle asked.

Sophie’s Caelumair raised an eyebrow. “The only reason that she devotes so much to the Archduchess, I imagine.” He pointed to a displeased Maria Christina as Sophie escorted her off the dance floor.

“Hurry!” Isabella dragged her daughter to where her stern whispers will not be overheard. “This is where your training comes down to. You know what to do. Ruin this and to the nunnery you shall go.”

Mother, daughter and ladies-in-waiting made their way in the direction of Franz who happened to be talking to Archduke Friedrich in a quiet part of the room.

“Ah here you are my lovely wife, and Maria Christina, the jewel of my sceptre,” the Archduke gestured towards his daughter, who bobbed a curtsy.

Isabella recited the various skills of her daughter while Sophie watched with amusement from behind them. Nevertheless Maria Christina was a sister to her, and Sophie hoped she would please the Heir Apparent.

Franz went through the motions of listening in between hidden glances around the room. The sound of merriment and laughter echoing from the halls, the chandeliers flickering with the same joy, was a temptation. However he wondered if it was cynicism that made him judge the young lady with so severity despite her impressive resumé.

He carried on in this manner until his gaze landed on a vision that seemed to rob his lungs of air, his throat of moisture. Struggling to conceal his bliss, he stared at the woman standing only a few paces away. She seemed to be followed by her own pool of light for all else around her dimmed. Her fingers toyed with the violet ribbon in her hair as her eyes trailed after the dancers, unaware of how her very presence affected him. Those irises were bright with expression and a youthful innocence which gave him all the more reason to admire her.

He seemed to be staring for an eternity when her eyes met his and electricity struck him like lightning, lifting the corners of his lips into a giddy smile. Her eyes softened and a pink flush coloured her porcelain cheeks. Franz found it ever more difficult to stay rooted to his spot and avoid rushing towards her with reckless abandon.

“Franz, are you alright?”

With reluctance, he severed his connection with the lady to turn towards the Archduchess. “I am sorry I could not hear, the music from the dance floor...” He leaned forward. “What was the question again?” The hasty excuse was met with an uneasy silence which Isabella dismissed with a wide smile.

“I wondered if you would mind coming back here next month for another ball to celebrate the Archduke’s birthday.”

“I would not miss it for the world,” He spoke loud enough hoping that the lady would overhear. His eyes sought hers but already they were focused elsewhere.

Xixanthe gasped as she followed the Archduke’s unmistakable gaze. “I cannot believe my eyes. Is Franz staring at Lady Sophie instead?”

Axyelle was surprised at the new development. “This mission only made mention that he would be meeting his fiancée tonight. I presumed that meant Maria Christina!”

“Outrageous!” Herinyes, the petite Caelumair looking after Isabella came up to the party. “Deimus! I know of your indifference, but may I remind you that we had an agreement!”

“Whatever gave you the notion that I will not honour our deal?” The Caelumair General sported a tight smile. “That is one simpleminded girl if I saw one, easy virtues for Franz to prey upon once he is betrothed to Maria Christina. There is nothing to be infuriated-”

“With your recklessness, why should I not be infuriated?” Herinyes pointed an accusing finger at Axyelle. “You should know how volatile the situation is, yet you dare to disregard orders?”

“There is no harm in their interaction,” Xixanthe reasoned. “I find it refreshing to see this unfolding.”

Deimus dismissed the tension with a drawl. “And is this not the normal order of things? A wife to satisfy the throne, and a mistress to satisfy the bed? Sensuality is every monarch’s weakness, something to our advantage,” He separated Herinyes, guiding her to a corner with a gentle grip on the elbow which tightened with every step farther from the group. “Remember your place! “I am superior in power and position, even since the Protokhronos.”

“That time is long gone, Deimus. Herinyes hissed. “Your negligence and self-indulgence will bring about the collapse of the already teetering empire.”

“It is your fault that Christina is such a bore,” Deimus scoffed. He seemed to hesitate before a brightness shone on his face. “Come now, let us not ruin the already pleasant mood.”



“Once again, Herinyes, you are quick to exaggerate anything,” General Maelyon, Isabella’s Emphyrean interrupted. “This matter is between Franz, Sophie and Maria Christina alone. Regardless of its effects, we are not to meddle in their affairs.”

““Exaggerate”? You forget that the humans we speak of is weak and that their appearances, however polished they may be, says nothing of their dignity. Your ruin and theirs have just begun.” Herinyes sneered and turned on her heel.

\*\*\*

A discreet nudge from Karl reminded Franz of his duties at an instant.

“My dear mademoiselle,” Franz extended an open palm to Maria Christina, who displayed a rehearsed demureness as she accepted. “Would you do me the honour of joining me in the quadrille? The Archduchess said you were superb at dancing and I wish to see your grace for myself,” He smiled enough to outdo even his extravagant younger brother.

As if not to be outdone, Otto surprised the group, Franz above all, when he approached the lady with the violet ribbon.

“Of course,” Isabella rushed to her side. “Your Highnesses, this is Sophie Chotek, Maria Christina’s lady-in-waiting.”

“Sophie, my lady, please give this humble gentleman the pleasure of a dance,” grinned Otto to which she responded with a modest nod.

The merry notes of the violin began to play as the ladies formed one line and the gentlemen another.

“I look forward to your Father’s birthday celebration next month,” Franz guided Maria Christina around the ballroom to lead the dance. “He looks healthy for his age. Does he like the outdoors?”

“Why yes, my lord, he is an enthusiastic huntsman,” Maria Christina grimaced. “He wanted me to have the same interests but I prefer activities indoors. I believe that a lady can only be accomplished if she has an applied knowledge of the arts and foreign languages.”

“As I am sure you do,” replied Franz, smiling. “But do you not believe that a lady should also be independent from her husband?”

“But is becoming a savant not also independence?” Maria Christina replied with prudence. “In the mind, no idea is censured by the rules of men. A lady should be self-sufficient before assuming the role of a wife to endure alongside her husband.”

Franz smiled a pleased smile. The tempo of the music speeded up to a German waltz and Franz found himself facing a new partner.

“Mademoiselle Sophie,” he greeted with an awkward smile.

“Your Highness,” she replied.

“I apologise for my brother. You must admit that his gaudiness can be accommodating.”

“His Highness is a gentleman,” Sophie agreed, amused. “Very charming, but I believe I was not enough to keep him company. After a few turns, he exchanged looks with the lady in the pink gown,” Her eyes led his to Otto already with his new partner.

“That, I am afraid, is our Otto. Have you brothers of your own?”

“I do, he travels often. We seldom meet except during the holidays. Roaming the wide seas is something young men cannot resist, judging from the stories I heard of your travels,” Franz was flattered by her interest in his affairs.

“Well mademoiselle-”

“Please my lord, just Sophie.”

“Then please Sophie, just Franz,” He found her modest smile endearing. “Do you share your brother’s penchant for traveling?”

“It is one of my greatest passions. My family and I traversed through Europe, and if I were not duty-bound I will travel further.” She replied. “It is very liberating.”

“Do you not suppose as a wife, a lady should stay at home?” He teased.

Sophie was pensive only for a moment. “That seems to be the inevitable, as she is responsible for her family. Nevertheless I think that the only way a woman can demonstrate resilience is first to be independent from men so that in the case of her husband’s absence, she will be enough to promote her family’s best interest.”

The contrasting views piqued Franz’s curiosity and as the music began to change, he rushed back to Maria Christina who was about to dance with another gentleman.

“Excuse me sir. Might I have this dance with the lady?” Franz interceded as the partner stood back. Isabella was delighted to see this and was quick to tell her husband.

“My lord, what a pleasure to see you again so soon,” Maria Christina was taken aback at her good fortune.

“Likewise,” bowed Franz as they resumed the dance with Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto playing in the background. “Ah the Baroque Era, do you not find it glorious?”

“You enjoy Bach? I am more of a Classical enthusiast, leaning towards the works of Mozart.”

“What is your opinion of Beethoven?”

“I am not partial to it. I find his work gloomy because of their minor tonality, and they can be difficult to play,” Maria Christina noted.

“They do sound a touch solemn, I suppose that is what contributes to their mood.” The debutante remained unresolved. “What if I can convince you to enjoy Beethoven’s sonatas?”

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “Music possesses such a multifaceted beauty that almost everyone can adapt to it.”

Franz yielded her partner to another gentlemen when the orchestra began to play a slow waltz, surprising everyone with his decision to switch partners for the last dance.

“You seem to be tired,” noted Sophie with some amusement. “These dances can be quite rigorous.”

“It helps that I remain with familiar partners,” Franz smiled. “After this dance, I am heading for the refreshment table to sample the cheeses. Have you tried any?”

“Madame purchased them, so what is there to dislike?” Franz looked unsatisfied with this answer prompting more from Sophie’s candidness. “Pecorino is my personal choice, I dislike the Blue Cheese variety most of all.”

Franz raised his eyebrows, intrigued. “Why?” He almost melted when Sophie wrinkled her nose.

“It has a very pungent odour. Like Madame’s terrier after bathing.”

“The Blue Cheese happens to be my favourite you know,” he could not help but laugh when she looked embarrassed. Feeling it was safe, she giggled. “I cannot help the odour but regarding taste I will persuade you otherwise.”

“You are welcome to try. But I am known to be quite obstinate. Let that not stop you from enjoying your preferred.”

“Is it just for the sake of opposing other views?”

“I believe that women are just as entitled to their own views as men. It starts by being steadfast to one’s virtues, principles, and in this case, preferences.”

“Will you still think the same if your future husband’s perspectives are different?” Franz pressed.

“I think we will be all wiser for it. I am entitled to express myself, more so in a marriage, but who in love is rendered unyielding? Sometimes, a compromise accomplishes more than

contrariness.” Sophie reflected, “I do not wish to be the exception. I will not be silent though.”

Franz could not help but smile.

Isabella was not pleased that Franz chose to end the dance with someone else, and of all females, Sophie. She stood livid and unmoving with Herinyes muttering contempt at her ear. Just as the dance neared its close, the Archduchess dragged the poor girl aside.

“Lazy girl. Keep to your job, and if you so much as disappoint me in the slightest, you will pay a hefty sum.” A frightened Sophie nodded her agreement.

“She is giving her far too many orders,” observed Sophie’s Emphyrean, “to keep her out of sight no doubt.”

“Franz will look for her nonetheless,” Axyelle reassured. “I am sure Herinyes and Isabella will try to change that. They make a tenacious and calculating pair.”

Franz picked up a violet ribbon off the ballroom floor. Determined to return it in person, he slipped it inside his coat pocket.

“Why worry about the girl?” Deimus muttered in his ear. “She has bright opinions now but they all turn into gossipy crones with age.”

“Your Highness!” Isabella was already by his side clasping her daughter by the arm. “You must be famished with all that dancing. Come and join us at the punch table.”

When the idea of escaping crossed Franz’s mind, Deimus continued. “This is your chance to woo Christina. Just look at those sparkling eyes, devoted only to you. Obedience triumphs over the clandestine.”

“Of course, ladies.” Franz charmed them with a smile. “I am more than happy to join you.”

A disgruntled Sophie dashed to and fro. “It is clear that I am not welcome at that ballroom.” She thought to herself as she ensured that everything was impeccable.

“I may be a subordinate to Herinyes but I will not give up without a decent fight.” Sophie’s Caelumair approached his ward, whispering in her ear. “Return to the ball. Isabella will not notice.”

“That will only make things worse for her!” muttered his Emyrean counterpart. She leaned to place a reassuring hand on Sophie’s shoulder. “That will forfeit your invitation to other events! Remain in the grand lobby where you can observe the party from behind the balustrades without drawing further attention to yourself.”

Sophie took a deep breath and walked towards the ballroom doors. She was about to open them when her hand balled into a fist. She headed for the lifts instead. Elsewhere, Franz was shuffling in his seat, resisting the urge to run off to find Sophie.

“You are not trying hard enough. One dance cannot be considered polite,” whispered Karl into his ear.

Not hearing a reply, Karl continued after picking up a blue cheese hors d’oeuvre from the table. “Good things take time, brother. She may not be good enough now, but she will mature. Here they are. Try to act interested.” Karl opened his mouth for a bite but Franz grabbed the nibble and bit into it himself.

“Just like cheese,” Franz said before he dashed off.

“Otto, I need to ask a favour,” Franz asked the brother he bumped into. “I have something to do, but I cannot do it with those two hovering about like bees.”

“You are a far cry from a flower, Franz,” Otto rolled his eyes, “but if I must, I will provide a distraction.”

“Thank you.” Franz ran off without any more explanations for the confused sibling. He filled his lungs with the breath of sweet freedom which has divorced him since he was declared heir apparent. After avoiding a hurrying waiter, he was hurled through a set of velvet curtains, into another room.

Sophie was admiring the artwork that lined the grand lobby, scenes of spring and family portraits. The serenity comforted her. She had not been there long before the sound of footsteps

resonated from the curtain partitions. She smoothed her skirt and stood upright to face the newcomer, surprised at who she saw.

“Why hello, Sophie.”

Sophie smiled at Franz’s cheerful face. “My lord,” she bowed.

“Ah, back to the formality. I thought we left all that behind at the ballroom,” Franz moved closer.

“I apologise, Franz. Please, stay.” A sudden want for conversation arose in Sophie.

Franz studied her expression before gesturing towards the sculpture of an unbridled stallion.

“I would love to have this back in Vienna. It stands proud, unrestrained, that it makes me jealous.”

Sophie stood at his side. “I have always loved horses.”

“Interesting. Do you own one?”

“Yes, but Papa never lets me ride him. He finds women who enjoy riding more than men do, the definition of unattractive.” She grinned at the memory, unaware of the intent examination Franz was making. “My mother scolded me often about men not being able to stand my behaviour. She is right, I suppose.” Franz shook his head, laughing.

“What? How can Mama be wrong?” Sophie thrust her hands on her hips. “Men tend to leave after I share that anecdote.”

“I am still here.” Franz turned to her with an indescribable glint in his eyes.

“Indeed,” Sophie tilted her head. “You are one for adventures yourself. Not at all the archetype of a prince that you appear to be.”

“You meant to say prissy.” Sophie blushed at her own insolence. To encourage her, Franz continued. “In reality, I am the blundering imbecile in the family.” The music from the ballroom changed to a symphonic piece in honour of their Russian guest. Franz was immediately reminded of an example. “Ah, this lovely tune is one of my favourites by Tchaikovsky. While in Russia, I

attended a ball not knowing enough about their culture. When I did not dance the host seemed quite upset. They are very amiable, the Russians, but sometimes-”

“They can be very determined,” completed Sophie, nodding.

“Indeed! I was forced to join the next circle dance, which was called *Kazachok*. It was dreadful.” They doubled over with hearty chuckles. When she mentioned never seeing this dance before, Franz surprised her by standing and removing his overcoat.

“That will not do! Let me give a demonstration. If you ever venture to Russia, you shall not be embarrassed for this dance differs from our usual waltzes,” Franz squatted, folded his arms. Keeping in time with the music, he kicked each leg out in alternate strides.

“How so?” Sophie managed to say in between giggles.

“You may laugh now but I shall test how much you have learned in a moment,” Franz chuckled as he continued dancing. “I will have you know, it is customary for the women to lead the dance and the men to follow. A change in beats is signified by a clap, like this,” Franz did so just as the orchestra launched into the Andante movement of the suite.

“Bravo!” she clapped when he finished.

Franz led her to the centre of the large hall. “Now, let me see if you were paying attention.”

“N-no Franz I do not know how, and I will be awful at it!”

“As all first-timers are! So do not fret. I will help you,” Franz stood beside her and assumed the earlier position. “Just do what I do. Squat like so, fold your arms in front of you and kick in every possible direction.”

Sophie felt ridiculous but after seeing him so happy, she copied until they were in time with each other.

“This is familiar,” remarked Xixanthe. “Smacks of the Parisian Ballet’s rendition of the same dance!” She too began to move just like the couple. Axyelle laughed before joining her, hopping around after each leg kicked.



“There has to be better assignments than this.” Deiumus rolled his eyes but continued to watch nonetheless.

Sophie almost fell over despite Franz’s efforts to keep her upright. They both fell into another fit of laughter.

They did not notice the flushed face of Otto appearing at the partitions, interrupting the hilarity. “Franz! What... Oh Sophie, hello.” He waved before resuming his urgent tone. “I cannot hold off the bees any longer! Get back in there before they organise a search party.”

“Right behind you, Otto. Thank you,” nodded Franz replacing his coat.

“Bees?” Sophie asked as Otto left.

“Madame Isabella and Christina have been buzzing around me all evening,” sighed Franz. “I appreciate all their labours, but it can be stifling.”

She nodded in understanding. “It can be tiring when people wanted your persona not your personality.”

“My sentiments in a nutshell.” He took her ungloved hand in his as he spoke. “Bees are fascinating and unique creatures. The best honey-makers choose the most fragrant flower, irrespective of appearance. It is a blessing indeed to find beauty and fragrance in one blossom.”

Sophie blushed at the sudden contact. Some part of her embraced it, thinking about the perfect moment that her hand encased was in his.

“With much reluctance, I must away. The best moments I spent tonight were with you. For that, you have my sincerest gratitude.” Bowing like a true gentleman, he planted a tender kiss upon her hand. “I look forward to the time our paths would cross again.”

“Mondieu,” muttered Deiumus as he followed his ward. Summoning his assistant, he hissed, “Find out everything about Sophie. Every blemish she has is a wart to Franz.”

Sophie’s Empyrean smiled. “She was always overlooked. It is about time she gets some recognition.”

Axyelle turned to Xixanthe. “We have much to report to Lady Seibhlin and Arqris.” The last to leave, she gave Sophie a final glance, she who was the unwitting focus of their evening.

Sophie remained in the same position long after the Archduke bade farewell. With light caresses on the spot which his lips met her hand, she convincing herself that it was not a dream. She shook her head attempting to dismiss the emotions swelling within her which until now laid dormant. Sophie was about to leave when something caught her eye, a bright red rose, lying on the marble platform of the horse sculpture, with her ribbon tied in a bow around its stem. Breathing in its scent, she smiled.

Bees are fascinating and unique creatures.