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EXTREME EXPECTATIONS—MISS DEARLOVE ATTEMPTS AN OPINION—
NOT AN EXPLOSION—A HOLDUP—BIXBY TO THE RESCUE—
A PROFESSIONAL DISAGREEMENT—MESS

It was the best of dress shops, it was the worst of dress shops. It sold the most beautiful garments, it sold the ugliest scraps, and Miss Primula Tewkes fell in love and despair as she walked amongst its displays. Her maid, Alice Dearlove, followed like a shadow, black-garbed and silent, arms full of hatboxes. Primula declared herself to be in Heaven, but Alice privately wished the lady would go direct the other way.

“I cannot attend Lady Hessop’s soiree in anything but the most exquisite ensemble,” Primula averred. “The most exquisite!”

“Yes miss,” Alice said.

“You wouldn’t want me to be ridiculed for wearing something outmoded, would you, Dearlove? Would you? Well?”

The lady’s eyes widened. Alice guessed from this that alarm was required at the prospect of the Honorable Miss Tewkes drinking mimosas and making nice conversation while garbed in anything less than a fashion masterpiece. Unfortunately, she felt such little alarm that she did not even blink as she looked at her mistress from behind

the load of hatboxes. Her own eyes, dark, cool, remained their normal size. Her countenance was so deadpan it ought to have been given the Last Rites.

“No miss,” she said, glancing at the glass-paneled door, which offered the only escape from the shop.

“You are tedious, Dearlove. Tedious! Surely even a lady’s maid has enough imagination to appreciate my dire circumstance?!”

Alice hesitated, unsure which of *yes miss* and *no miss* was required here. *No* would have been accurate, for although she possessed a sterling imagination for such things as secret libraries, lost libraries, and indeed any type of library possible, she could not imagine what was so dire about not being able to choose a dress.

On the other hand, *yes* was also accurate, for even Alice felt obliged to describe herself as tedious. For example, at this very moment all she wanted was to put down the hatboxes, take off her shoes, and lose herself in a really good dictionary.

“Yes miss?” she hazarded.

Primula huffed, turning to flip her hand through a rack of frothing pastel dresses. “I am wasting my time here! Wasting it! I don’t know why you even suggested this boutique. We should have gone to Harrods.”

“Yes miss,” Alice said, blowing a loose strand of fine brown hair from her face. The hatboxes swayed and she swayed with them, only just managing to keep them balanced. She glanced at a clock on the wall, then again at the door, before turning back to Primula. “Perhaps that purple lace dress would—”

A delicate chime interrupted her as someone entered the shop. Looking around at once, Alice saw only a servant, his expression bored as he held the door ajar despite carrying half a dozen bags. He appeared nondescript—brown-haired, clean-shaven, wearing spectacles and the general masculine uniform of dark suit and bowler hat. Nevertheless, Alice’s heart fluttered inexplicably. Realizing she was staring at him,

she began to turn away, but just then he glanced over and their eyes happened to meet. Alice's face remained impassive; her heart, however, went from fluttering to perfect stillness in, well, a heartbeat.

Nonsense, she thought. If her cardiac organ had stopped, she would not be standing, nor breathing (to be fair, she did not currently seem to be breathing, but that was beside the point), nor indeed blushing like a schoolgirl just because a handsome man looked in her direction. Alice felt unclear exactly how he had transformed from nondescript to handsome within the space of seconds, but no doubt an encyclopedia could explain it. She'd visit the library this evening and—

Suddenly masses of frothing pink and yellow swamped her vision. Alice blinked frantically. Either the patisserie across the street had exploded or a fashionable woman was walking in through the doorway.

"Really, Bixby? This is what you consider a suitable dress shop? We should have just gone to Harrods."

"Yes miss," the man replied without inflection.

Alice's vision recovered enough from its shock to recognize the Honorable Miss Dahlia Weekle, Primula's exact social equal and therefore most bitter rival. At that moment, a cake explosion would have been more welcome.

"You were right, miss," she murmured to Primula, nudging her eastward as Miss Weekle veered west toward a glove display. "We should indeed leave this very moment."

"Steady on, Dearlove. I am not a sheep to be herded. Why the hurry?"

"Primula! Darling!"

Alice winced.

"Dahlia!" Primula's dismay was so fleeting, Alice barely saw it. "How unexpected to meet you here! So unexpected!"

The ladies gripped each others' shoulders and kissed the air, their lips making a sound like rapier tapping at the start of a duel.

“That color is *remarkable* on you, dear,” Dahlia said.

“Such a *unique* hat!” Primula countered.

The door chimed once more. Alice caught Primula’s arm, the hatboxes swaying perilously, and attempted to tug her away. But it was too late.

Two men burst into the shop, brandishing pistols. “This is a robbery!” one shouted.

Primula and Dahlia squealed. The shopkeeper squealed. Alice sighed.

“Hands in the air!”

Immediately the ladies obeyed. Alice, pleased for an excuse to set down the hatboxes, placed them on a small table then raised her own hands. Hopefully this business would be over soon and she could go home for a cup of tea and a biscuit.

“You!” The thief turned to Dahlia’s manservant. “Hands up!”

“Do as he says, Bixby!” Dahlia wailed.

Bixby carefully lowered the carry bags. But instead of raising his arms, he folded them together across his chest. “This is highly inconvenient,” he said in a reproving tone. “Miss Weekle has an appointment with her hairdresser in fifteen minutes’ time and it cannot be postponed. Kindly find another store to burgle.”

The thieves glanced at each other and laughed.

“Just shoot him, Merv,” one said. “Make sure *he* never needs no hairdresser again.”

“A hairdresser,” Bixby corrected.

Silence slammed down upon the scene, broken only by a sharp click as Merv cocked his pistol.

Alice frowned. Clearly matters were about to become even more time-consuming. “For heaven’s sake,” she began—

But it was no use. Without further discussion, Merv shot Bixby.

A loud *twang* followed, and across the shop a gilt-framed mirror

shattered under the impact of Merv's bullet. Blinking confusedly, Alice realized that Bixby had removed his bowler hat at remarkable speed and utilized it as an apparently bulletproof shield. The resultant ricochet had cast seven years' bad luck upon the shop but saved the manservant's life.

"Bloody—" was all Merv had the opportunity to say before Bixby threw the hat at him. It struck his face with more force than brushed felt regularly offered. Merv screamed, dropping his gun. From there it was a simple matter of one kick from the manservant, one punch with a black-gloved hand, two swift and efficient jabs to the throat, and the thief ended up senseless on the ground, his last word having proved prophetic as blood dripped from his nose. Bixby stepped back, calmly straightening his cuffs.

The other thief snatched wildly for Dahlia's purse. Alice pushed the young woman aside, so the thief grabbed Primula's purse instead, yanked it from her hand, and was out the door before anyone could react.

"Help!" Primula screamed. "Help!"

"Oh dear, miss," Alice said with an attempt at comfort that fell so flat a dozen steamrollers could not have crushed it more. "I'm afraid he's long gone. We should get you home." She picked up the hatboxes and was turning to the door when suddenly Bixby stepped forth, offering a crisp, shallow bow.

"Ma'am, allow me to recover your purse."

"Oh!" Primula flushed in singular delight.

"No," Alice answered, shaking her head. "We cannot ask—"

But apparently a request was not required, for Bixby immediately took off after the thief.

"How exciting!" Primula cried, flapping a hand before her face.

"Goodness me!" Dahlia added, clutching at her bosom.

"Fiddlesticks," Alice muttered under her breath. And tossing the

hatboxes aside, disregarding how they emptied across the floor, she jumped over Merv's unconscious body and followed after Bixby while Primula wailed about crumpled bonnets (crumpled!) behind her.

"Don't! Stop! Thief!" she shouted, and gave chase in a most unexpected manner indeed.

Three years Daniel Bixby had worked as a butler for the rogue pirate Rotten O'Riley. Three years flying a rickety, ensorcelled house at speeds one could only describe as improper, smuggling pennyroyal tea into Ireland, and washing O'Riley's laundry. Yet after just one week in Dahlia Weekle's service he was exhausted. Criminal life had nothing on the rigors of shopping with an aristocratic lady.

This purse-snatching offered the best entertainment he'd had since his return to London (or, to be fair, second best, since nothing could surpass yesterday's discovery of a *Utopia* edition in the original Latin). Indeed, he might have stopped the hoodlum at once by using a phrase from the magical incantation that pirates employed to fly their battle-houses and witches to move small objects—O'Riley's witch wife had taught him how to bring down a man with just one enchanted word—but it was invigorating to give chase (not to mention that witchcraft was highly secret, highly illegal—and, according to pirates, highly, er, low behavior).

About three hundred feet along the street, he caught the thief. After a struggle, he twisted the man's arm behind his back, relieved him of the purse, and held it out of reach.

"Thank you," said a woman's voice behind him.

Daniel felt the purse removed efficiently from his grip. Glancing around, he was astonished to see the lady's maid. Time seemed oddly suspended as he stared, arrested by the sight of her. *You*, said something inside of him, like a memory or a dream. It had whispered to him

in the dress shop but spoke louder now, as if she'd removed a mask and he could see her more clearly. Her delicate face was framed by a coiffure so severe it made him think of backboards and plain, starched undergarments—

At which point, time dropped into the pit of his stomach with a crash that sent reverberations through his entire nervous system.

“Ma’am,” he said, taking refuge in politeness even while his nerves clamored and the thief swore and kicked in an effort to get free. “It was a pleasure to be of assistance.”

“You are too kind,” she replied, her voice civil but her expression making it clear she was speaking literally. She turned and handed the purse to the thief.

Daniel blinked, trying to comprehend the evidence before his eyes. He had not been so confused since hearing Wordsworth described as a poetic genius. And confusion was dangerous in his line of work (i.e., when he felt it, other people became endangered). He twisted the thief's arm further, causing the man to holler, and took the purse from him once more.

“I beg your pardon,” he reproved the lady's maid.

At his somber tone she cringed, her big dark eyes filling with tears, her lashes trembling. Daniel felt like an utter cad. “Please don't cry,” he said, holding out his hand in apology.

And she grabbed the purse in it, tugged hard, and jabbed the fingers of her free hand up into his armpit.

Daniel gasped at the sudden pain. His grip weakened, and the purse disappeared once more from his possession. The woman returned it to the thief, who took it with an attitude of bemused uncertainty.

“For goodness' sake,” Daniel muttered. Although years of piracy had presented little opportunity for heroics, he felt certain they did not usually involve the victim attacking her rescuer. Wrenching the thief about, he snatched the purse from him and

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The woman grasped his wrist with both hands. Daniel attempted to shake her off, and she attempted to emasculate him with an upthrust of her knee, and he saved himself (and his future children) by quickly blocking her with his own knee, leading to her stomping down on his foot, and him twisting her arm, and both of them stopping abruptly to watch the thief escape along the street.

“Is that your pearl necklace he’s carrying?” Daniel asked mildly.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Oh dear.”

She shrugged. “Hopefully he won’t bite the pearls to see if they’re real. They are in fact cyanide capsules.”

As the thief turned a corner and disappeared from the narrative, Daniel released the woman. She took a careful breath, her fingers twitching at her skirt, and he frowned with concern. “Are you hurt?”

The look she gave him was such that Daniel immediately wanted to find a chalkboard and write *I will not ask stupid questions* one hundred times upon it.

“Yes,” she said in a quiet, terrifyingly precise voice. “I have a headache, my feet ache, and it has been six hours since my last cup of tea. Six hours! And now I even sound like her. Do you realize how much work went in to shepherding that woman into position so her purse could be stolen? How many boutiques I have endured this week? Do you realize how many conversations about penny-dreadful novels I have been forced to endure?”

“I—”

“One such conversation would be too many, but there in fact have been dozens, all mixing together into a ghastly, giggling blur. And yet there goes Putrid Pete back to his gang’s headquarters *without* the tracking device in Miss Tewkes’s purse, thanks to your dratted chivalry.”

“I—”

“Furthermore, what were you thinking, bringing Miss Weekle

shopping on Bond Street today? Her servants coordinate with Miss Tewkes's servants so as to ensure the ladies never meet. The last time they did, there was a fracas over a parasol, and Miss Weekle's footman ended up with his nose broken. You have disrupted everything. Therefore I say good afternoon, sir. This ends our acquaintance."

And grabbing the purse from him, she turned and marched away.

Daniel stared dazedly after her. His memory was shouting for attention . . . His body, however, drowned it out with a hot, uncomfortable throbbing. Perhaps he had strained something in his fight with the thief. He would have to consult a medical encyclopedia this evening.

The woman took an unrelenting course along the footpath, obliging more genteel ladies to leap out of her way. She moved with the dangerous grace of someone entirely aware of her surroundings and entirely unafraid. He watched her, knowing she would know that he did.

And for the first time in living memory, Daniel Bixby grinned.

"Fiddlesticks," Alice muttered, smacking the purse in a one-two beat against her thigh as she strode back toward the dress shop. Frustration and indignation dueled for possession of her mood, but annoyance already had it tied up in knots at the thought of all the undisciplined things she'd just done. Running in the street! Wrestling! Using the word "dratted" like some—some *hooligan*!

She counted her breath in, counted it out again. She imagined smacking the purse not against her thigh but in the face of the manservant. He might have been handsome and fit, with a masterful style and eyes the alluring colour of gunmetal behind those dark-rimmed spectacles, not to mention the hard—

Which is to say, he might have been somewhat good-looking, but he had ruined a careful operation and seriously disturbed her inner

tranquility. Also her outer tranquility. And several tranquil layers in between. Her hands still tingled from having touched him. Her nerves were a wreck. If she never set eyes on him again it would be too soon.

“Clacton-on-Sea,” he said.

Alice sighed. He had caught up to her, and now kept pace with ease.

“I remember where I’ve seen you before,” he said in a pleasant tone. “It was when you mugged me last year in Clacton-on-Sea. You *are* Miss Dearlove, aren’t you? Erstwhile lady’s maid to Mrs. Chuke. You stole my wallet and cufflinks.”

“Nonsense,” Alice retorted.

“I assure you, madam, my memory of events is as clear as a daguerreotype.”

“Oh, I agree it happened. But it is nonsense to say they were cufflinks. They were miniature communication devices.”

“Well, yes, such things are a necessity when one is butler to a pirate. Captain O’Riley was forever wandering away from my supervision.” His eyes seemed to lighten as he regarded her. “If you know that, then I assume you are a member of the secret service. Is that why you attacked me in Clacton?”

“I am not aware of anything about a secret service,” Alice replied promptly.

“Of course you aren’t. Neither am I. Never heard of its existence. Never drawn a paycheck from its coffers.”

Alice cast him an austere glance. “I might have guessed, considering your bulletproof hat. Very well. I was observing a clandestine ladies’ league—”

“The Wicken League of gentlewomen witches?”

“You know them?”

“A petty amount. They enjoy a generational feud with the Wisteria Society of lady pirates. Both groups possess the same magical incanta-

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tion, inherited from the adventurer Beryl Black, but they disagree on its proper use. Witches have a greater concern about being caught, since employing magic to manipulate people without their knowledge is generally considered more wicked than employing it just to fly houses—unless you are an urban planner, I suppose. But if you asked me to name any other difference between them, I could not. They are equally lawless and shameful.”

“Villainous,” Alice agreed.

“Dangerous.”

“Terrible taste in hats.”

He smiled at her fleetingly, sending a flurry of confusion through her body. Had she said something amusing? Should she smile in return? Her training had not included how to undertake polite conversation on the street with a man of brief acquaintance. Falling back on instinct, she frowned, crossing her arms tightly.

“While observing the League I was also managing the rogue pirate Lady Armitage and keeping an eye on the Wisteria Society.”

“Busy, busy.”

“One tends to be when one is the best agent of a secret government organization.”

“The best?” His eyebrows slanted eloquently.

She raised her own eyebrows in response. It was like the clash of swords, only with barely noticeable facial expressions.

“I am stating mere fact, sir. While there exist several committees and squads dedicated to fighting the pirate scourge—or at least sitting back and complaining about the pirate scourge, since there’s not much that can be done against people who fly weaponized houses—not many have been able to infiltrate the Wicken League of witches. Those who have tend to meet a dreadful end, choking on tea cakes or tripping and hitting their head on the ceiling. It is fair to say I may have

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overreacted toward you in Clacton-on-Sea, but I was in a tight spot. And I was disinclined to trust the butler of a pirate whom even the Wisteria Society considers a loose cannon.”

“Excuse me, but Captain O’Riley’s cannon is bolted in securely. I supervised the work myself.”

“Is that meant to be a joke?”

“Good God, no. One does not joke on a public street.”

She nodded in reluctant approval. “That day I had planned to question you about O’Riley’s intentions. But . . .” When the moment had come to ask if he’d like to join her for an ice cream and stroll along the beach so they could discuss matters, she’d taken one look at his handsome face and calm eyes and decided bashing him on the head was the less stressful option.

“But?” he prompted.

“Oh look, we are back at the shop.” She hurried forward the several dozen steps necessary to make that statement true. Taking a deep breath, she settled her countenance into the quiet docility of a lady’s maid. Bixby, reflected in the door’s glass panels, straightened his tie. Their eyes met briefly via that reflection; something dark and intense flashed between them. Then Alice opened the door.

—and people of good sense don’t wear so much pink!”

Crash!

Alice stared into the shop. Its owner knelt weeping over a tangled heap of dresses and broken racks. The thief Merv moaned, half-hidden beneath a pile of hatboxes. A mannequin lay broken across the counter, a coat hanger impaled in its back; another protruded headfirst from a wall. In the center of this, Primula and Dahlia wrangled over a ballgown. It seemed the ladies’ tête-à-tête had escalated into a full-blown tit-for-tat.

“I had it first!” Dahlia shouted.

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"I was just robbed, therefore I deserve it more!" Primula countered. "More!"

"Ahem."

As Alice cleared her throat, both women turned to stare at her. Not one speck of reproach showed upon her countenance, yet they blanched guiltily. Primula dropped the dress and smoothed her disheveled hair.

"You may have the rag," she said haughtily to Dahlia. And clambering over the mess, she moved to the door, where she snatched her purse from Alice's hand. "Come along, Dearlove. We are going to Harrods."

"Yes miss." Alice turned to follow her. "Good afternoon," she murmured to Bixby.

"Good afternoon," he replied, bowing.

And she walked away, no doubt never to see him again.

❖ 2 ❖

ALICE VISITS HER AUNT—TEA AND APOLOGIES—
AN ALPHABETIC SURPRISE—THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS—
ALICE IS NOT WHO SHE SEEMS—AN ENGAGEMENT

Alice walked in beauty like the afternoon of cloudy climes over Westminster, where all that was the best of dark and bright met in a sky about to rain. She entered a rather dingy building whose bronze doorplate advised that the tenants were Bover & Sons, Brush-makers, est. 1785. Within could be found a small manufactory of brooms, dusters, and specialist brushes, which oddly enough had not been applied to the cluttered and dusty premises. An old man whittling a broomstick looked up and nodded as Alice entered.

A lady like her, dressed in a smart, dark blue walking suit with the merest hint of a bustle, and bearing a hat so discreet it could have been safely employed as an ambassador to France, did not usually patronize such an establishment. But this was no real manufactory. And Alice was not in fact a lady like her. She nodded to the old man, then strode across the room, her bootheels tapping smartly against its wooden floorboards.

Alice loved that sound. It made her feel like a capable woman. An

intelligent woman. A woman who had this morning made an omelet without it turning into scrambled eggs!

Certainly not a woman who had tossed and turned all night, trying to ignore visions of a bespectacled butler straightening his cuffs after having bashed a man senseless.

She paused, looking around the manufactory. "You need a fan in here," she informed the old man. "The air is decidedly hot."

He nodded, since he was deaf and would have nodded even if she'd told him the place was burning down. Continuing on, Alice wondered what brand of starch Mr. Bixby used to get his cuffs looking so precise. The slide of crisp linen against his skin must be soothing indeed—although oddly enough her own clothes felt suddenly scratchy and constrictive. She would have to reconsider the ingredients of her laundry soap.

Arriving at a closet, she slipped inside, angling herself amongst its collection of mops. Shifting one to reveal a faded calendar picture of a woman in a bathing costume leaning against a horse-drawn carriage, she pushed against it. A panel swung aside to reveal another closet, this one empty. Entering, Alice closed the door and tugged on a clothes hanger suspended from the ceiling. The closet began to descend. Instantly bored, Alice took a small dictionary from her dress pocket to read.

Sensual . . . sensualism . . . sensualist . . . sensuality . . .

Well, that did not provide as helpful a distraction from thoughts of Mr. Bixby as she had hoped. Snapping the book shut, she returned it to her pocket just as the ground reacquainted itself with the spirit of its name. Before her stood another door. An abacus was set into its center panel, and Alice adjusted the beads along their horizontal tracks until the door clicked and swung open.

She stepped through to the headquarters of the Agency of Undercover Note Takers. **Copyrighted Material**



A.U.N.T. was England's most secret intelligence agency, fortunately better at espionage than at naming itself. It had been established in the reign of Henry VIII, when his queens' troubles led household servants to realize the tremendous power of gossip. Since then, the covert web of chambermaids and butlers, housekeepers and footmen, grooms and sweeps, had grown so extensive it had become in effect a downstairs government. With an information-rich net of service providers spread across the realm, A.U.N.T. ensured, amongst other things, that every scheme of the Wicken League was known, that pirates did not make too much trouble, and that spoiled rich girls were kept from killing one another on shopping sprees.

"It's like one big family," the man who recruited Alice had explained when he'd removed her from the orphanage where she'd lived for the first six years of her life. He'd given her lollies and set her inside a carriage with blacked-out windows, and Alice had thought she was going to meet her hitherto unknown aunty. She'd asked nothing, since she barely spoke in those days; she'd just hugged her battered volume of *Alphabets and Pictures for Children* (and hidden the lollies beneath the carriage seat cushion, since they were bad for one's teeth). Only after arriving at the Academy of Household Management and being assigned her first broom had she finally realized the truth.

Mind you, considering her sole understanding of "family" up until then had come from fairy tales, she was just grateful the teachers and other students did not throw her down a well or cut off her head. Ten years of service training passed before she even met Chief Servant Mrs. Kew, and another two before she graduated as a lady's maid and spy.

Now her friends (which is to say, people to whom she said a polite hello when passing, and watched laughing together at the agency

Christmas party) knew her as A—ranked first, equal with the mysterious B, whose identity was kept secret even from her. Sometimes she almost forgot her Christian name, so seldom did she hear it. But that did not matter. Only service mattered. Well, that and returning library books before they accrued a late fee, of course.

“Don’t you ever wish for real friends?” Hazel Coombly had asked her once, soft-voiced and gentle-eyed, as they sat drinking tea.

“No,” Alice had responded. And she would have given the same response even if Hazel hadn’t been the agency clinician undertaking a psychological evaluation of her.

The only person in whom Alice felt any genuine interest was B, whose reputation had developed over the years into something close to mythology. For example, it was said B had saved Princess Louise from assassination, thanks to being in bed with her at the time. From this, Alice, an exceptional intelligence officer, deduced that B must be a woman. After all, who else would have a pajama party with the princess?

She herself rather wished to attend such a party with B. Whispering together under blankets, sharing intimate secrets . . . she imagined this would be entertaining indeed. In a way, she felt closer to B than to anyone else in the world, for surely no other could understand better what it was like to be essentially unknown.

That thought veered close to an emotion, and Alice stopped, half-way across the A.U.N.T. lobby, beneath the rose painted on its ceiling and just past the statue of Queen Victoria’s butler. The threat of melancholia rattled around inside her, disrupting her tranquility and sending her pulse into free fall. Suddenly the whole world felt like it might break apart. Fiddlesticks!

Slipping one hand into a skirt pocket, she tapped her fingers against her thigh with a steady one-two beat. This calmed her, and she was soon able to continue on. In an office at the far side of the lobby, she found Mrs. Kew awaiting her.

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“Come in,” the woman called as Alice knocked on the door. “You’re right on time.”

Alice entered the office and felt her calm instantly turn to the same color as Mrs. Kew’s walls—i.e., custard. Everywhere was white lace, cream lace, frothing pink lace, as if a maniacal bride had run amok with decorator tools. It framed the map of England on one wall. It wrapped around flower bouquets set on lace-clothed shelves. Even Mrs. Kew’s fluffy white cat wore a lace bow. Alice suspected one more delicate, finely spun ribbon set anywhere in the room would cause the whole place to collapse in a suffocating heap.

Tap tap went her fingers in her pocket.

“Sit down, dear, have some tea,” Mrs. Kew urged from a plump lace-trimmed armchair at one end of the room. Alice turned to offer the Chief Servant a curtsy—

And froze.

Mr. Bixby sat on a sofa opposite Mrs. Kew, holding a teacup.

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

He looked back at her with a stare so void of emotion, Alice struggled not to dreamily sigh. A woman could never drown in eyes like that! She could stand on safely dry ground while other women flailed about in swooning, adoring gazes. His posture within his dark suit and black overcoat was rigid. He wore no hat, and Alice observed that, although his hair was cut to regulation in a short, precise style, near the back of his neck a tattoo could be seen rising an inch above his collar, suggesting some uncouth mystery seared into the naked skin below . . .

Goodness, but the air in this room was even hotter than that in the broom factory.

Belatedly performing the curtsy, Alice crossed the room, her bootheels smacking hard against the floor. As she sat beside Bixby on

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the plump, embroidered sofa, he blinked, and her heart blinked in response. *Guard your tranquil layers*, she chided herself.

“Remind me, dear,” Mrs. Kew said, leaning forward over an array of tea things, cakes, and roses on the low table before her. “Do you take sugar?”

Alice smiled politely at the Chief Servant—although not quite looking at her from sheer self-defense. Mrs. Kew was as decorative as her office, with lace and jewelry set upon every available surface of her soft, middle-aged person. But Alice had watched this same woman kill a man at ten paces with a Royal Jubilee commemoration plate and was not fooled.

“No, thank you, ma’am. Just milk. And please allow me to apologize for the disturbance on Bond Street yesterday—”

“I have already apologized for it,” Mr. Bixby interjected coolly. “It was entirely my fault.”

Alice bristled. “I beg your pardon, sir, but it was my fault. And furthermore—”

“Now, now,” Mrs. Kew said soothingly. “I’m sure everyone was to blame. I heard all about it from Lady Hassan’s butler. A fight in the street! Histrionic aristocrats! And a missed appointment with London’s most exclusive hairdresser! It sounds very dramatic. Really no sugar, dear?”

“None, thank you. I must insist on apologizing.”

“Oh good. After all, sugar makes one’s teeth sparkle.”

“I meant I am sorry about the Bond Street debacle.”

“Never mind, I was going to take you off that case anyway. Something more important has come up that requires your special skills.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it’s— *Goodness me, what is that?!*”

Mrs. Kew gasped, staring wide-eyed over Alice’s shoulder. Alice

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turned, reaching instinctively for the petite gun in her waistband, but saw nothing untoward. (Well, a statuette of Queen Victoria swathed in golden lace, but nothing else untoward.) As she turned back, she noticed a tiny, fleeting smile on Mr. Bixby's mouth.

"Must have been just a shadow," Mrs. Kew said, and handed Alice a delicate pink teacup.

"Thank you." Alice took the cup and, lifting it from its saucer, sipped discreetly. Only years of training prevented her from spitting out the liquid.

"I went ahead and put just a speck of sugar in," Mrs. Kew confessed. "For the sake of your health."

"I see." Clearly, her notion of a speck and Mrs. Kew's diverged by several teaspoons' worth.

"Now, regarding your new assignment," Mrs. Kew said, easing back in her chair and smiling merrily at the agents. "A, I need you to—"

"Excuse me." Mr. Bixby's teacup went down in its saucer with a disapproving *clank*. "Did you just address Miss Dearlove as A?"

Mrs. Kew's smile widened. "Of course I did. A for Alice, since our dear Mr. Digglesby-God-rest-his-soul will forever be Agent D. I thought that you knew this, B. When you—"

"Excuse me." Alice tapped a fingernail against her teacup with an unhappy *clink-clink*. "Did you call Mr. Bixby by the name B? Mr. Bixby?"

"Yes, dear. Daniel Bixby, who has just come out of deep undercover as butler to the pirate Alexander O'Riley. He is our most reliable investigator. Daniel old chap, allow me to properly introduce Miss Alice Dearlove, our best fixer."

Alice and Daniel glanced sidelong at each other, eyes not quite meeting, and gave a brisk nod.

"Don't be shy," Mrs. Kew urged. "Shake hands!"

Alice extended her hand reluctantly. Daniel hesitated the merest

moment before taking it in his own with a firm grip. Just then an earthquake occurred in Whitehall, located directly beneath the sofa in Mrs. Kew's office, and both snatched their hands back. Daniel drank tea; Alice rubbed at a crease in the lace cushion beside her.

"I'm glad to see you getting along so wonderfully," Mrs. Kew said, showing a level of astuteness at odds with her position as chief of an intelligence agency. "This bodes well for your assignment together."

Teacups rattled.

"I work alone," Alice said.

"I work alone," Daniel said at the same time.

Mrs. Kew smiled. "Of course. I appreciate how you feel, and it's entirely fair. Just now I'd like to try unhooking you from that custom, and although you're *absolutely* my star agents, nevertheless lifting you even higher, to a new level of professional—"

She stopped, her smile becoming stiff, as she registered their frowns. "Let me rephrase that. I need you to do as you're told. We received warning this week that someone is planning to assassinate Queen Victoria."

"Again?" Daniel said.

"I'm afraid so. Fifteen warnings, to be precise, but the one which concerns us most involves the pirate Frederick Bassingthwaite."

Daniel stirred his tea in a manner that suggested he was laughing behind his inscrutable countenance. "I would not worry. Frederick Bassingthwaite is even greater a moron than Mr. Collins."

"Who?" Mrs. Kew inquired.

"From *Pride and Prejudice*," Alice and Daniel replied in unison. They very carefully did not glance at each other.

Mrs. Kew's gentle confusion failed to lift. "Is that a crime-fighting duo?"

"No, ma'am," Daniel told her. "It is a book."

"I see. Well, where were we? Ah yes, murdering the Queen. Perhaps

it is better to say that the danger is from Frederick's wife, Jane Fairweather, a dastardly creature if ever there was one. Our intelligence network reports that she has come into possession of a new kind of weapon, which she plans to use on Her Majesty. Jane's motive is, and I quote, 'to prove once and for all she is as much a scoundrel as that revolting Cecilia Bassingthwaite.' What this weapon is, we do not know. Where Jane obtained it, we do not know. Where she is keeping it—"

"Let me guess," Daniel said. "We do not know."

"Actually, this one we do. Inside Starkthorn Castle, ancestral battlehouse of the Bassingthwaites."

"Where inside Starkthorn Castle?" Alice asked. "It is an immense building."

"Ah. Well. That, we do not know. Frederick is holding a house party this coming week, and several Wisteria Society members will be attending. We do not know—but we strongly suspect!—that they too have learned of this weapon and intend to steal it. Your mission is to steal it first."

"Why would Frederick and Jane risk inviting the Wisteria Society to their house when they are keeping a secret weapon there?" Alice asked.

Mrs. Kew winced slightly. "I am going to say again that we do not know, but you cannot blame me this time. No one understands why pirates do anything." Leaning forward, she took up a porcelain sugar canister and lifted its lid to her ear before speaking into the bowl. "You can come in now."

Four clerks carrying large, gilt-framed paintings entered the room, lining up against a wall. Mrs. Kew waved a finger, and one of the men closed the gas tap for the overhead light. As darkness filled the room, Mrs. Kew angled a lamp on the tea table so its light shone directly at the paintings.

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