

# **A Delineation Of Dreams**

**A Regency Era Novel**

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A Delineation Of Dreams  
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**LOTTERY FUNDED**

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## A DELINEATION OF DREAMS

When recently single fine art conservator Tiffany Sutton finds herself inexplicably transported back through time to 1814, it marks the beginning of a strange and dangerous adventure. All that Tiffany wants is to find a way to go home. If she can safely indulge herself in a romantic tryst or two along the way without derailing history, then so much the better. But things unmentioned by any historical account are occurring, and it soon becomes clear that Tiffany must play her part in them! Will she survive long enough to unravel the truth of her mysterious circumstances?



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## Chapter One

Twenty-two-year-old Tiffany Sutton frowned at the devastatingly handsome man in front of her. Major William Lompton was a tall, fair skinned man, with long, well-muscled legs, broad shoulders, and a flat stomach. His clothing had been neatly cut from what were obviously expensive fabrics. Not a thread was out of place. It was a British Army officer's uniform, in keeping with the man's professional role, and it fitted him perfectly. Above it, his aquiline features were topped by a head of neatly combed glossy black hair. Even his eyebrows and eyelashes looked immaculate; the eyes framed by them a pale greyish green in colour. It was the latter detail that had given Tiffany cause to frown. She sighed as she took up her brush again. "I really *don't* like the colour of your eyes, you know. Something about it just feels off to me."

The portrait that she was so diligently restoring made no reply. It was an old oil canvas painting, dating back to 1814, and it usually had a heavy gold

painted wooden picture frame around it. Right now, that frame was lying on top of Tiffany's workbench, over on the opposite side of her studio. The young conservator had spent the past week and a half sanding it down and filling in the various little nicks and scrapes that had been accrued over the years. Tomorrow, once the last of the putty had finished drying out, she would begin repainting it.

Today, however, Tiffany's focus was squarely on the canvas itself. Specifically, the eyes. As she had told the portrait numerous times now, something about the colour of the paint used didn't look quite right. She grumbled about it again as she worked. "I mean, it's just such a *watery* sort of eye colour! It doesn't fit with the rest of your face. You look as if you ought to have something a teensy bit darker. More vivid."

A slightly frail baritone voice came from behind her then. "Yes, he was a rather vivid sort of fellow all round, my ancestor. And of course, that portrait there was never actually completed."

Tiffany whirled around to face her unexpected visitor; accidentally splattering him across the face with greyish green oil paint in the process. She blushed as she realised what she had just done. "Sir Cecil! I'm so sorry about that! Um, just give me a second or two, and I'll grab a cloth."

Ninety-six-year-old Sir Cecil Montmorency Lompton chuckled and took out his handkerchief. It

was even whiter than his hair. “No need, my dear! In fact, if anything, it’s jolly nice to finally have a use for this old thing.” He dabbed at his face. “As I was saying, that portrait isn’t finished. I can’t think why the museum even wants to include it in the exhibition. Who wants to look at a painting of a man with only halfway envisioned eyes, eh?”

Tiffany set down her brush and her palette, and carefully wiped her hands clean on the cloth that she kept for that purpose. The elderly baronet was the owner of the portrait in question, and a very important patron of the British Museum. Tiffany was painfully aware that the handkerchief that he had just ruined because of her clumsiness had probably cost more than her entire outfit. She cast about her for something to say in reply. “Um, well, the rest of it is very well done!”

“I suppose so, yes.” Sir Cecil ambled closer and peered balefully at the canvas. “I think you *should* change the eye colour; you know. Perhaps to a dark brown, like mine, or else to a nice solid blue. Plenty of blue eyes in the Lompton family. It would be nice to jazz the poor fellow up a bit for his day in the sun. Spare him the indignity of having people suspect him of having been half-man and half-fish or some such.”

Tiffany smiled ruefully. “Sorry, Sir Cecil, but my boss would never approve of me making changes to such an important historical artifact.”

“Oh, pish posh, my dear girl!” The old man shook his head disparagingly. “It’s only a silly bit of canvas and paint! Very nicely arranged paint, true, but hardly the Ark of the Covenant. The original artist never even bothered signing it! And anyhow, I’m the owner. I say that it *needs* changing.” He winked at Tiffany. “If you don’t do it, then who knows who I might hire instead?”

There was no persuading Sir Cecil to change his mind, Tiffany discovered. It was all that she could do to convince him that he needed to inform the curator in charge of the gallery about his decision in writing before any alterations could be made to the portrait. Sir Cecil was openly disappointed in Tiffany’s refusal to simply crack on with repainting his distant ancestor’s eyes then and there. He acceded to her advice on the matter with very bad grace; grumbling about how young people in his day hadn’t been so terribly afraid to take risks. “Honestly, my dear girl, where’s your sense of adventure gotten to, eh? It can’t be good for one’s soul to be so very by the book at all times! You need to cast off the old shackles of societal expectation; break the rules a little on occasion!”

By now, Tiffany was rather fed up with smiling politely and nodding along with the old man’s words. She gestured politely but firmly back at the canvas. “I’m sorry, Sir Cecil, but I really do need to get back to work on this now.”

Sir Cecil ignored the hint. Instead of leaving, he ambled further into Tiffany's studio, and began examining her materials. "I have something that might be of interest to you, you know."

"Oh?" Tiffany picked up her paintbrush again and peered at the outline of Major Lompton's jaw; resigning herself to tolerating the baronet's company while she worked. Hopefully, he wouldn't distract her too much. "What's that then?"

"Just an old bauble. Been in the family almost as long as me, if you can believe that!" Sir Cecil stopped rummaging through Tiffany's brushes and dug about in his pockets as if in search of something. "It's got the most wonderfully ridiculous legend attached to it – I simply must tell it to you! You'll get a jolly good laugh out of it, I'm sure. Ah, yes, here it is!" He held up his find with a flourish and a proud grin. "The Heart of the Vixen! Horribly clunky looking old thing, isn't it?"

Tiffany stared in wonder at the pendant dangling from Sir Cecil's fingers. "Wow! Is that painite?"

"It is indeed, my dear. Here – take a closer look at it." Sir Cecil potted over to Tiffany and pressed the undoubtedly invaluable pendant into her hands despite her protests; causing her to drop her paintbrush in the process. "A fifty-carat orange-brown painite, faceted in an Old Mine Cut, and with a silver cannetille setting and matching chain! One of my distant relations sent it all the way from

somewhere or other in Burma as a gift for my first birthday. For decades afterwards, everyone presumed that it was nothing more than an unusually large bit of garnet. And then that fellow Pain made his discovery, and suddenly we had a rare thing on our hands.”

Tiffany shook her head in disbelief. “Sir Cecil, you really should keep this somewhere safe! It must be worth an absolute fortune!” She tried to hand it back to the baronet. “Please, I don’t want to risk getting paint on it. It’s beautiful.”

Sir Cecil nodded happily; ignoring Tiffany’s attempts to hand him the pendant. “Yes; we had it valued a few years ago, and they reckoned about five million all in. The metalwork adds to the value. A very early example of the style. And of course, it’s most awfully tricky to facet a painite.”

“All the more reason for you to keep it safe, Sir Cecil.” Tiffany tried yet again to return the pendant to its elderly owner. “Seriously, take it back now.”

“Try it on first, my dear.” Sir Cecil reached into another of his pockets and took out a camera. “Please indulge me. I promise you that I’m going to stash it away safely at my bank to be forgotten about soon enough, but I want to take a few photographs of it first. Can’t very well take photos of a necklace without it being worn, now, can I?”

Tiffany privately felt that one very well could take such photographs, but saying so seemed a little

meanspirited. “Okay then. As long as you’re sure that that’s what you want to do.”

“Positive, dear girl, absolutely positive!” The old man beamed sunnily and gestured for her to put the pendant on. “I’ll tell you the legend too.”

Smiling along with him, Tiffany carefully unfastened the silver chain and put on the pendant. Somehow, it felt lighter around her neck than it had in her hands. She dismissed that minor strangeness and moved over to stand in front of the window. “This should give you the best light for the photographs, Sir Cecil.”

“Thank you, Miss Sutton.” Sir Cecil raised his camera and began fiddling with the flash. “The legend goes that it’s magical. It lets the rightful wearer travel back through the mists of space and time to whenever and wherever they choose!”

Tiffany frowned slightly. “Huh. I thought the whole notion of time travel was a modern invention. When does the legend stem from, do you know?”

“Haven’t the foggiest, my dear! But Samuel Madden wrote about a time travelling angel in 1733, and that was long before the Heart of the Vixen came into my ancestor’s possession.” The elderly baronet gestured again. “Can you turn a little to your left, please? Try and make the stone catch the sunlight – yes, that’s it! Perfect!” He pressed the button to take the photograph. “And now one from straight in front, I think.”

Tiffany turned around as requested; still mulling over the pendant's supposed mystical qualities. "Too bad it's just a legend. I wish I really *could* go back in time and meet Major Lompton. At least then we'd know for sure what colour his eyes were...!"

Suddenly, the familiar confines of the young conservator's studio were gone from around her. In their place was brackish tasting water; ice cold, and right up to her chin. To Tiffany's shock, she was somehow now in the middle of a slowly flowing river surrounded by woodland. She gasped and floundered around in search of land. To her immense relief, she soon felt her toes touch what seemed to be a mixture of rock and silt. That relief vanished almost instantly, as she realised that her feet were bare, and so was the rest of her, save for the apparently genuinely magical pendant around her neck. A small shriek of anguished confusion escaped her lips. "Argh, why am I in a *river*, and where on Earth are my flipping *clothes*?"

There was no answer, aside from the uninterrupted chatter of birds in the nearby trees. Evidently, Tiffany would have to fend for herself here. Mercifully, the river's current was weak, and after a few seconds of clumsy paddling, she succeeded in safely reaching the bank and staggering clear of the water. Arranging her almost waist length, and by now dripping wet, auburn hair over her chest to cover her exposed breasts, she

stared around herself; her bright green eyes slowly widening in utter confusion. Her heart was pounding and her mind racing. Where was she, and how had she gotten here? “Seriously, where are my clothes? And where is Sir Cecil?”

The elderly baronet was nowhere to be seen. Above Tiffany’s head, the wholly unsympathetic birds continued their chorus. She cast about her for a suitably leafy branch or two to hide behind in case anyone stumbled upon her thoroughly embarrassing predicament. “I don’t want to end up arrested for public indecency, after all. Wherever here eventually turns out to be, they’re bound to have laws against people wandering about stark naked!”

A dense thicket of fragrant, dark green shrubs caught her eye. The leafy plants were almost six feet tall and four feet across. Tiffany tiptoed across to them gingerly, wincing at each sharp twig or pebble. To her mild distaste, the shrubs were sticky. Information that she had acquired years before during countless school holidays spent in France and Spain with her twin brother and their botany obsessed parents, finally made itself useful. “Gum Rock Roses! These aren’t native to England.”

Tiffany hummed thoughtfully to herself as she broke off a few springy, fan shaped branches. “Just how far away from home *am* I right now? Did the pendant really bring me here? Ugh, how would that even have worked? I mean, just calling it *magic* is a

bit vague! And yet here I am. So clearly it is. Magical. Wow. Magical time travel is real.” She paused and sniffed the air pensively as she peered at her surroundings. “Juniper, holm oak, pennyroyal, lavender, sage, rosemary, wild thyme, wormwood – hmm, yes, almost all the typical species seem to be here. I really do seem to be in France; presumably sometime in the early 1800s, if Sir Cecil’s old family legend is right, but when *exactly*, and how do I get back? Is it like in *Aladdin*? Do I need to rub the pendant or something? Click my heels together and think of home?”

Rubbing the item in question had no effect. Any heel clicking that Tiffany might have attempted was interrupted by the snapping of a twig somewhere in the trees behind her. The inadvertent time traveller whirled around, holding her freshly gathered foliage up in front of her somewhat desperately. She didn’t see anyone yet, but she could definitely hear the tramping of feet, just out of sight amid the dense vegetation. The faint murmur of male voices reached her ears. Tiffany looked down at the branches in her hands and grimaced. It was better than nothing, but whoever was approaching was still in for an eyeful! *At least it sounds as if they’re speaking English. I’d hate to have to try and negotiate for help in French; what with how much language tends to change over time! There’s no way I’d get it right!*

Deciding to risk hoping for the best, Tiffany called out to the unseen men. “Er, excuse me, please, but I need help!”

The voices she had heard ceased abruptly. For a long moment, the insistent chatter of the birds reclaimed the woods entirely. Then the footsteps resumed; swifter this time, and coming straight towards Tiffany. A line of tired looking English riflemen emerged from the trees. They were difficult to see at first. Their dark green and black uniforms seemed all but part of the vegetation that surrounded them. Tiffany glanced nervously at the heavy flintlock rifles in their hands; each one handcrafted out of walnut, iron, and brass. Pattern 1800 Infantry Rifles, her memory supplied her, the standard issue firearm for riflemen in the English army at this time. It struck her that the weapons were almost as tall as the half-starved men who carried them. Her heart broke a little at the sight. *Ugh, what was I even thinking; begging for help from them? The poor things look dead on their feet!*

The long-legged and somewhat lanky looking officer in charge of the group stepped forwards slowly, pulling off his pack and rummaging in it as he moved. He looked to Tiffany to be aged in his mid-twenties, and was of average height; fair skinned and immaculately shaven, with longish blond hair, large dark brown eyes, a wide, rather sensuous looking mouth, and high cheekbones.

There was a small dimple in the middle of his chin. He drew out a neatly folded wool blanket and proffered it to Tiffany. "Please miss, take this, before you catch your death of cold!"

Tiffany acceded readily to this suggestion; dropping the branches with considerable relief. The blanket felt coarse against her skin, but it was far better than remaining naked. She blushed as she tightened it around herself; mindful to try and speak and act as a woman from this era would have. "Thank you, sir!"

"No trouble at all, miss." He smiled kindly down at her. To his credit, and her relief, his gaze never left her face. "Forgive me please, but there is no one here who might introduce us correctly, and yet an introduction must be made. Might I therefore ask your name?"

"Tiffany." She shivered, not only from the cold, but also in unspoken pity for her rescuers. "My name is Tiffany Sutton."

"Lieutenant Evelyn Plunkett, of the 136<sup>th</sup> Foot, Fourth Battalion, Rifles." He bowed solemnly to her as he gave his name. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Sutton. A terrible pity that it should be under such unpleasant circumstances as have befallen you here. Can you tell us what happened? Who did this to you? You sound to be English, but I don't think that I recognise you from our encampment. My apologies, if I am mistaken."

What possible excuse could she offer for her situation? Obviously, claiming to be a time traveller was out! At best, poor Lieutenant Plunkett and his men wouldn't understand what she was talking about. At worst, they'd think her a liar, or insane, or perhaps even both. Since landing herself in a nineteenth century asylum was right at the top of her list of things not to do, Tiffany decided that claiming to know absolutely nothing was likely her safest option.

She answered the questions that had been put to her accordingly. "I er, I woke up and found myself in the river over there just a little while ago now. I've no idea how it happened. I don't even know where exactly here is, to be honest, or where my clothes are. I think...well, um, I think someone must have kidnapped me or something, and then thrown me into the water!"

Lieutenant Plunkett scowled darkly. "Bastard should pay for doing that, whoever it was!" He caught himself abruptly. A sudden flush of remorse tinged his face. "Ah – begging your pardon, Miss Sutton! I ought not to use such deplorable language in the presence of a lady."

"Oh, please, don't apologise; I've heard worse!" Tiffany waved off his concern, and then realised that this would likely be suspicious. She brightened as the perfect excuse occurred to her. "I...I'm a travel writer, you see! For the British Museum.

That's why I'm here. In France, I mean, as opposed to this specific bit of countryside. Yes, I was doing my work, exploring France, and um, other parts of Europe. You know; just travelling around, writing things, rubbing shoulders with all sorts of people along the way."

He looked at her in obvious surprise for a moment. "Begging your pardon, miss, but that sounds terribly dangerous! Still, it makes no difference to the conduct expected of me as an officer, and owed to you as a woman. I ought to have minded my language."

This resulted in some snickering amongst the other soldiers. Lieutenant Plunkett rounded on them irritably. "Pack it in, the lot of you! This is no laughing matter. Sergeant Marsh, see to it that there's space cleared on the mule for Miss Sutton. I'm sure that between the lot of us, we can manage carrying whatever's removed."

"Aye, sir!" Sergeant Marsh set to work at once. Tiffany guessed him to be a northerner, based on his accent. He was slightly older looking than Lieutenant Plunkett, and a fair bit taller too; with tousled looking brown hair that hung in thick curls. His face was sharp featured to the point of gauntness, likely through hunger. He had a wary look to his hazel eyes, thin lips, and a sallow complexion. It didn't look as if he'd bothered shaving today. Or yesterday either.

Lieutenant Plunkett returned his attention to Tiffany. He seemed embarrassed. “Er, if you wouldn’t mind wrapping that blanket a little more tightly, Miss Sutton? Only we shall need to help you up onto the mule’s back, and, well...you know. Decency and such.”

“Oh.” Tiffany nodded reluctantly. She adjusted the blanket as best as she could. “I haven’t ridden before. What happens if I fall off?”

Lieutenant Plunkett hastened to reassure her. “Not to worry, Miss Sutton! I’ll tell Sergeant Marsh to tie you to the saddle for safety.”

Sergeant Marsh had overheard them. He hurried over to speak with Lieutenant Plunkett; his voice low but urgent sounding. “Sir, I don’t think tying the lass in place is wise. What if she’s from money, and her father or guardian complains about it when he finds out?”

“I gave you the order, sergeant. It will fall to me to answer to him for it.” Lieutenant Plunkett pointed at Tiffany’s feet. “Anyhow, there’s no other option. She can’t *walk* back to the encampment like that! Her poor feet would be in ribbons. And none of us are carrying her; not while she’s only a blanket about her. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Aye, sir, but still.” Sergeant Marsh was clearly still worried. “Could we not just lead the mule nice and carefully like?”

“That shan’t help solve the problem, Tom!”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked exasperated. “The rope is to help keep the young lady in place, not slow the mule down!”

Tiffany eyed the pack belonging to Lieutenant Plunkett speculatively. It was on the ground nearby, and it was still open. She could see a plain linen shirt inside it. “Er, excuse me, but couldn’t I borrow some clothes from one of you instead?”

“Ah, for pity’s sake, another one? How do I keep on encountering you folk?” Sergeant Marsh sighed resignedly. “Oh, very well then! It’s your choice, Miss Sutton, but if you mean to secretly enlist with the army, then you’ll have to find a different company to join! You’ll have no ruddy hope of passing if you stay with us! The lads here have all seen...ahem...er, well, that you’re a lass! One or other of them is bound to let it slip sooner or later.”

Lieutenant Plunkett hissed at him. “Keep your voice down, can’t you?”

Sergeant Marsh looked contrite. “Sorry, sir! Still. They *have* seen well...him, is it now?”

Tiffany blinked in confusion. “Sorry, what? I um, I just thought that it would make more sense if I wore whatever was available for now. You know; instead of being, well, naked.”

By now, it was difficult to tell which of the three of them was the more embarrassed. Lieutenant Plunkett plunged valiantly back into the conversation; his face tinged almost scarlet as he

thrust his pack towards Tiffany. “Please help yourself to whichever of my things might suit your needs, Miss Sutton! Sergeant Marsh and I shall ensure your privacy whilst you dress.”

## Chapter Two

Upon reaching the encampment in the hills behind Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Lieutenant Plunkett immediately escorted Tiffany to a large white tent that he explained had been designated as the officers' mess for his regiment. Here he introduced her to another, more senior officer of the Fourth Battalion; one Captain Simon Amberley. The latter man was well over six feet tall, and leanly muscled. His craggy features were tanned from his years spent serving abroad. He had fierce grey eyes, and thick, curly black hair. Tiffany guessed him to be aged in his late thirties. He bowed politely to her, albeit not so deeply as Lieutenant Plunkett had done. "How do, Miss Sutton?"

Tiffany returned the gesture and somehow managed to string together a coherent reply, despite her near exhaustion. It struck her as she repeated her hastily crafted cover story to him that she hadn't remembered to bow back to Lieutenant Plunkett. She winced inwardly at her social gaffe. *He's been so nice to me, and all the while he probably thought*

*that I was giving him the cut on purpose! I need to find some way of making things right with him.*

Captain Amberley returned his attention to Lieutenant Plunkett; chiding him for having been so long in returning. “I sent you lot to trade with the locals and scrounge up an extra bit of food for the pot, lad! Don’t try and tell me that it took you more than half a day to do that. What else have you been at? Aside from rescuing mysterious young ladies, that is. I’m sure Miss Sutton was in no mind to delay your return.”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked embarrassed. “Sir, we ah, we got a bit turned around in the woods. Before we found Miss Sutton, sir.”

“Oh aye?” Captain Amberley raised his eyebrows and folded his arms. “A full quarter of my company, and none of you were able to read a map? What’s this army coming to? Ah, I should have sent Sergeant Moore along too, I suppose.”

Tiffany gave Lieutenant Plunkett a sympathetic grimace an instant before realising that such behaviour wasn’t seen as appropriate conduct for someone of her sex at this time. Both men stared at her aghast, momentarily united in their mutual horror. Since it was too late to undo her latest mistake, Tiffany took the opportunity to apologise for her previous rudeness. “I, um, I’m only grimacing because I’m so sorry about earlier, Lieutenant Plunkett! I forgot to bow back to you

when you introduced yourself. It wasn't deliberate. Just...just the cold. Um."

Captain Amberley sighed and gestured curtly to Lieutenant Plunkett. "Take her to the baggage train, lad. Let the women take care of her. I dare say they'll be as able for it as anyone else." He nodded to Tiffany. "I'll pass on the details of your unfortunate situation to those in charge, Miss Sutton. I expect someone will be along to speak with you about it later. In the meantime, just try and keep out of trouble, eh?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir." Tiffany gritted her teeth and nodded as demurely as she could, before letting Lieutenant Plunkett take her arm to escort her back out of the officers' mess.

She glanced up at Lieutenant Plunkett as they made their way through the rows of tents towards the baggage train. "I meant it, you know. About my having forgotten to bow."

"I hold no ill felling over it, Miss Sutton." The young officer sounded almost as tired as Tiffany as he replied. "In truth, I reckon that you acquitted yourself better than most other folk in your position might have."

Tiffany smiled ruefully. "Thanks for saying so. I needed that compliment."

Lieutenant Plunkett blanched. "Forgive me, please, Miss Sutton! I meant no impropriety by it, I assure you. It was only intended as politeness."

“That’s all I took from it!” Tiffany wondered despairingly if she would ever get the hang of talking to people from this era. “But I...well, I’ve just had such a *rotten* day! It’s nice to be told that I’m not a complete disaster.”

He frowned at her wording. “Begging your pardon, Miss Sutton, but you do speak very strangely. I’ve noticed it a few times now.”

Tiffany wracked her brain frantically for an excuse, but she couldn’t think of anything. “Um...I...you see...oh dear. I’ve buggered this up, haven’t I? Shit.”

Lieutenant Plunkett’s eyes widened in surprise at her coarse language. “Well now! I’ve certainly never heard tell of any gentlemen’s daughters talking like *that* before!”

“Ugh, of course you haven’t!” Tiffany groaned and hung her head dejectedly; too tired to keep on pretending. “I’m *so* bad at this! I might as well just give up pretending now!”

“Right, that does it!” Lieutenant Plunkett appeared to have decided on something. To Tiffany’s horror, he gripped her arm a little more tightly and turned left; dragging her along with him to a quiet spot between two of the tents. Here he stopped and turned to face her, glaring angrily. “What’s your game then, eh? If you’ve been *pretending* all this time, as you put it. Who are you really, and why did you lie?”

Tiffany squirmed; trying and failing to tug free of his hold. “You’re hurting my arm!”

Lieutenant Plunkett scoffed; clearly unmoved by her discomfort. “Then stop struggling, and tell me the truth! Are you a spy for the French? Is that it?”

“No!” Tiffany shook her head frantically. “No, I’m not any sort of a spy, I swear! I really am English, and I really do work for the British Museum. It’s just...well, it’s complicated!”

He grabbed her other arm as well, and bent both up in front of her; holding her hands level with his chest. The blanket slipped from around her shoulders and fell to the ground. “Then try to put it simply, whoever you are.”

“I gave you my real name.” Tiffany swallowed nervously. Her throat had gone dry with fear. “Look, I *want* to tell you the truth, I really do. But I’m scared that you won’t believe me. And not just that. I...well, I’m worried in case my telling you causes problems. Um, you know. For the war and such. Or in case you think I’m mad. Which would also cause problems, only just for me.”

To her relief, he loosened his grip on her arms a little. “You don’t *seem* mad. I’ll listen to your explanation. Then we’ll see. What do you mean about it causing problems?”

Tiffany took a deep breath. “Right. Okay. So, here’s the thing. Before I was in the river, I was back in London; in a gallery, in the British

Museum. And the year was 1989.”

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. “Do you mean that the last thing you remember was being in the gallery? Well, you told me that already, so I don’t see how it changes anything. And what’s this nonsense about the year?”

Tiffany sighed. “Look, just bear with me here for a little while, okay? If I were a spy, then I’d be telling you something believable, right? Something that made sense. But I’m not. I know that I’m not. I know how bizarre and insane this must sound to you. And that’s important too, actually, because if I were mad, then I wouldn’t think that what I said was at all strange, would I? So, by simple logical deduction, I am *not* a spy, and I am *not* mad. What I’m telling you is the truth. It’s...it’s just a terribly strange situation.”

By now, poor Lieutenant Plunkett looked utterly baffled. “Begging your pardon, miss, but I think you may have forgotten to tell me what it is that you’re trying to explain.”

“Oh!” Tiffany blushed. “Sorry. I suppose I got a bit caught up in trying to prove myself sane there, didn’t I? And, you know, not a spy.”

“Aye, miss, so you’ve said, and repeatedly, at that. Can you kindly tell me the rest of it now, please? Whatever that might be.”

Tiffany supposed that there was nothing else left for her to do but hope for the best. “I’m from the

year 1989. I was transported from then to now, and I don't know how to get back. I don't know when exactly this is, either. What's today's date please? I might be able to prove what I'm telling you if I know that much."

Lieutenant Plunkett shook his head. "It's Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 1814. We're in southwest France, not far from the Bidouze River. You know, the one you say you were in."

Tiffany beamed. "Ha! That's brilliant; I know what happens next!"

"Next?"

"Yes, next; you know, with the war?" Tiffany caught herself then. "And that's what I meant about causing problems. I'm from one hundred and seventy-five years into the future. I've studied history, and I've got a photographic – ugh, I mean a *perfect* memory. I know exactly what happens at each of the battles. The tactics used, who wins, who loses. That stuff."

"Oh." Lieutenant Plunkett nodded slowly. "Right. So, do we beat the French then?"

Tiffany demurred. "I'm not sure if I should tell you the answer to that or not."

"Why not?" He finally let go of her arms. "You speak English at least. I presume that to be a hopeful indication of our not having been conquered by the enemy."

Tiffany rubbed at her arms gingerly. "No, we

weren't conquered, and yes, we do win. But it isn't that simple. I don't want to risk telling you too much, in case it somehow ends up changing things for the worse. You know; if say, for example, something that I told you were to cause you to react differently to a situation, only for that change to result in disaster. Ripples spreading outwards; like the ones that you get when you throw a stone into a pond."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, let's say that the initial change impacted on other events, eventually resulting in something bad happening to someone important. Take Lord Wellington, for example." Tiffany bent and picked up the blanket before it could be ruined by the mud; wrapping it back around her shoulders. "He's *very* important to Britain, and not just because of the war. That's all I'm saying."

Lieutenant Plunkett scowled. "Here now, I hope you aren't accusing me of doing something traitorous!"

"What? No!" Tiffany sighed. "I only meant as a hypothetical example. You know. Imagining what the worst-case scenario might be. That sort of thing. I wanted to show you why I'm trying to be careful with what I tell people here."

That seemed to mollify him well enough. He nodded his understanding. "I suppose that makes sense, aye. Still, why should I believe this wild tale

of yours to begin with? You still haven't given me any proof, you know."

Tiffany thought hard for a moment. "Well, what about this? I can tell you exactly what our side's strategy will be during the next battle, and how well it all plays out. Then, when it happens, you'll see that I was right."

His lips twisted slightly as if he were choking back a laugh at her offer. "With respect, Miss Sutton, I'd rather know which of us exactly makes it through the deuced thing alive!"

"Ah, well, you see, the history books are a *little* bit vague on those sorts of finer details, I'm afraid." Tiffany looked down at her feet; staring at the worsted wool of her borrowed stockings. She didn't feel able to meet Lieutenant Plunkett's gaze right now. "I mean, there are still some official records, of course, but sadly a lot of them have been lost over the intervening years. So, um, I can't tell you that, sorry."

"And even if you could, you probably ought not to risk it, eh?" Lieutenant Plunkett sighed. "In case of disaster."

"Precisely that, yes." An idea struck Tiffany then. "Oh, but I *can* say for certain that our side wins the next battle. Also, the man in charge of your battalion, Major William Lompton? He's going to do something *incredibly* heroic! There was – sorry, there will be – a painting of him commissioned over

it. I know, because I've seen it as part of my job. I was tasked with restoring it, you see; touching up the paint here and there where it had faded or chipped. Repairing the frame too. That's what I really do for the museum. I'm a conservator."

"I suppose that explains the paint smudges on your fingers. And I might have known that Major Lompton would be the sort of man to go down in history." Lieutenant Plunkett sounded a little less sceptical now. "But you'll see that about him for yourself soon enough, I'm sure."

Tiffany gasped excitedly. "Do you suppose that I'll get to see him in person then?"

"Aye, probably." Lieutenant Plunkett nodded. "Captain Amberley will report your being here. Given that you claimed to be the daughter of a gentleman, it would be terribly rude for Major Lompton and the other senior officers not to meet with you at least once. But I can't say when it might be." He paused, frowning. "On which note, I'd best get you to the baggage train now. You need to try and make yourself presentable. One or other of the women might be willing to trade you some things in exchange for that pretty necklace you're wearing."

"Oh no!" Tiffany clutched the time pendant worriedly in her right hand. "No, I need to keep this. It's...ugh, well, it's what brought me back to 1814. I don't know how it works, but I'm guessing that it's my best hope for getting home again."

Lieutenant Plunkett blinked. Then he chuckled softly. "I'm sorry, Miss Sutton, but that's the limit for me on wild tales! Necklaces that can transport a person from one year to another? There must be a better explanation!"

"Yes, well, if you happen to stumble onto it, then please do tell me." Tiffany tucked the time pendant safely out of sight inside her borrowed shirt and followed Lieutenant Plunkett out from between the tents. "Because according to the legend that Sir Cecil Lompton shared with me just before I was transported here, this stupid pendant is magical. Given what's happened since, I'm inclined to believe it's true."

"Sir Cecil Lompton? Is he related to the major then?" Lieutenant Plunkett offered Tiffany his arm once more. "Mind your step, please. The ground is still treacherous after all the rain we've had."

"Thank you." Tiffany accepted the offer of assistance gratefully. "Sir Cecil would be Major Lompton's, um, well, there's about seven generations between them, so he's not an immediate descendant, by any measure. But they are related, yes. Sir Cecil is descended from Major Lompton's younger brother. He owns the painting that I mentioned. It's on loan to the museum for a year in exchange for it being restored."

"I expect that that arrangement saved the Lompton family a tidy sum, eh?" Lieutenant

Plunkett nodded towards a cluster of makeshift shelters and shabby tents. “Anyhow, we’ve reached the baggage train. I reckon it may be best if you stay with Mrs Rollant, at least to begin with. She has plenty of space in her tent since her husband died at Vittoria, and if anyone would have clothes to spare, it is her. She’s a seamstress, you see. That’s why she was permitted to stay on with the army without remarrying. I’ll introduce you to her now.”

## Chapter Three

Bristol born middle-aged seamstress turned camp follower Mrs Joanna Rollant was small, slender, and fair haired, with an artfully exposed cleavage, and a carefully powdered face. She took one look at Tiffany, and shrieked in horror. Then she put her hands on her hips and glared up at Lieutenant Plunkett. “Evelyn Plunkett, how *could* you have made this poor girl walk? Just look at the state of her – those stockings are caked in mud! You should have carried her, you silly brute! What were you thinking? Who is she, anyhow? And why is she dressed like that? Here, is that a *man’s* shirt? In place of a gown? Lord!”

Lieutenant Plunkett backed away by several steps, and raised his hands placatingly. “Steady on, Mrs Rollant! I did my best. She is Miss Tiffany Sutton. She’s er, a travel writer from London. We found her out in the forest; Sergeant Marsh and myself, and a few of the men. She hadn’t any clothes at all then. I, er, well, I lent her some of mine. And we didn’t make her walk the whole way

here. We put her up on the mule.”

Tiffany nodded hastily. “It’s true, they did! I’ve only walked from the piquet line to here. The ground’s just...very wet.”

“Humph!” Mrs Rollant tossed her hair angrily. “Damn stupid men who’d let a woman trudge through mud without shoes to protect her feet!” She whirled around again; this time to face Tiffany, and seized hold of her by her wrists. “So! Tiffany, is it? Well, just you come along with me, my girl. I’ll take *proper* care of you!”

Tiffany found herself being dragged along and into a small but neatly kept tent. In the middle of it, there was a palliasse with a bolster set at one end to mark the head of it; both items doubtless stuffed with straw, or perhaps with old hay deemed unfit for feeding. There was a small oil lamp set atop a tiny folding table at each of the two top corners. The sheets and blankets all looked to be of surprisingly fine quality. A huge, brass bound trunk sat at the foot of the palliasse.

Mrs Rollant flung open the lid of the trunk and began rifling through the contents. “I should have something that’ll fit you in here. You look to be around the same size as me; got yourself a decent bosom and all. Not like most of the young girls these days! Flat as tables, they are!” She cackled at her own ribald humour. “Sit down, do!”

Tiffany sank down gratefully onto the edge of

the palliasse and peeled off the sodden stockings. "It's good of you to help me. I appreciate it a lot."

"Oh, it's nothing, dear!" Mrs Rollant waved off her thanks. "We women must band together in our adversity! Here – these should do." She rose to her feet and pressed a large pile of garments into Tiffany's arms. "Get out of those rags and I'll help you to dress. First though, I need to fetch back some hot water to bathe your feet. And you may borrow my comb too, for your hair! Such a rare colour. How pretty it is! Wait here for me, poor love! I'll not be long, I promise you!"

Tin jug in hand, Mrs Rollant bustled off out of the tent before Tiffany could even attempt to reply. With nothing better to do while she waited, the young time traveller decided to examine her pile of borrowed clothes. At the top of it, there was a pair of navy velvet slippers, and a pair of tan kidskin gloves. Then came a plain white silk chemise, a pair of fine silk stockings, and a set of linen stays with a smooth wooden busk. Beneath those was a plain cotton petticoat. Next, there were three more petticoats; their skirts made from a great deal of lace. At the bottom of the pile, there was a dark blue velvet gown with long sleeves and a delicately embroidered bodice. Aside from the gloves and the slippers, the gown was the only garment in the entire pile that was of a colour other than plain white. Just like the bedding, the clothes were of

excellent quality. But what was even more fascinating, was Mrs Rollant's remarkable level of cleanliness. So far at least, her tent and belongings seemed to be free of the fleas and the lice which were endemic to the army and its followers at this time. Tiffany wondered how much time her hostess spent washing and airing her bedding and her clothes, and then hot ironing the seams and the folds.

Mrs Rollant flounced back in through the flap of the tent then. She beamed and thrust the jug of steaming hot water towards Tiffany. "Here, you take this, and I'll dig out the basin and the soap!"

The seamstress gently bathed Tiffany's feet with soap that smelled of lavender and rose, before rubbing them dry with a soft rag. She exclaimed in surprise over how smooth her young guest's legs were. "Why, you've got no leg hair! How peculiar! Here, did you have to shave it all off because of lice?"

"Oh, no! No, not lice!" Tiffany belatedly recalled the fact that shaving off one's body hair for appearance's sake hadn't been a thing in this era. "Um...it was just something that everyone else in my circle was doing."

"Ah, so it's some bold new fashion, eh? From London!" Mrs Rollant cackled again. "I wonder what the men must think of it!"

Tiffany, who had always hated the bother of

shaving, grimaced. Had she just inadvertently been the cause of the stupid tradition starting? “No, no, it’s not really a fashion! I just thought I’d try it, to see how it felt. Honestly, it’s a bit itchy. The hair growing back, I mean. I don’t think I’ll bother doing it again.”

Mrs Rollant nodded approvingly. “It’s good to try new things! And it hasn’t half made you look exotic. I’m sure the men will all be talking about it. What a shame that it itches when it starts to grow back! I hate to itch, or I might try it for myself otherwise.”

“Excuse me?” Tiffany spluttered in shock. “What do you mean *talking* about it?”

“Well, young Evelyn said you’d no clothes on when they found you.” Mrs Rollant shrugged. “Bosom like you have all out on display, and then those legs, why, like as not they’ll talk of nothing else for weeks! They’re *men*, you silly goose! Have you not met any others before today?”

Tiffany buried her face in her hands. She could feel her entire body blushing. “I suppose I thought it would be considered too, well, too shameful a subject for them to mention it, or something!”

Mrs Rollant patted her kindly on the knee. “It would be far worse if you were an ugly sort of creature. Then they’d be mocking what they saw, eh? Not like now. No; a buxom little beauty like you, I’d hazard that they’ll *dream* of you tonight!”

“You say that as if it’s a good thing.” Tiffany lowered her hands from her face miserably. “I don’t like the idea of there being random people fantasising about me.”

Mrs Rollant frowned at her. “But why not?”

Tiffany sighed. “It’s embarrassing! And...and it’s not the sort of first impression that I’d have chosen to make.”

“Well, at least they won’t soon forget you!” Mrs Rollant set the rag aside in the by now filthy bowl of water and picked up the clean stockings. “Let’s get you dressed, eh? Then I’ll take you out with me to find some supper. Do as I do, and you’ll eat well, my girl!”

Mrs Rollant, as Tiffany soon observed, was on first name terms with almost everyone. This unusual degree of social freedom seemed due half to her looks, and half to the sheer force of her personality. Tin cup in hand, she flitted merrily about the encampment; giggling coquettishly and batting her eyelashes as she went. Tiffany stumbled along behind her and stared at her antics in wonder. *Wow, it must be great to have that much confidence! And the other women don’t even seem to mind it. Perhaps she’s careful to steer clear of any man who’s already attached.*

By the time that the two women reached the opposite side of the encampment, the sky above them was growing dark, and Mrs Rollant had been

gifted enough scraps and morsels of assorted foodstuffs to cobble together a decent meal for herself. She made it all look painfully easy. A sliver of stale bread and a hug in return. A small hunk of cheese traded for a kiss to a whiskered cheek. Half a tin cup of rice and peas boiled down to mush and laced with vinegar, salt, and pepper swapped for two cigars; the latter fished out from the depths of Mrs Rollant's ample cleavage. A few scraps of fatty pork dropped into the cup in exchange for an equal number of minutes spent out of sight inside a tent with the two men involved in the transaction. Tiffany, having observed Mrs Rollant's process until now in horrified fascination, politely but firmly refused the invitation to join them. She hadn't the nerve or the desperation needed to join in. *I suppose that means that I'll go to sleep hungry tonight. Unless Mrs Rollant is willing to share her food as well.*

She was waiting at what she hoped to be a safe distance from the tent in question when Sergeant Marsh came into view. He recognised her instantly and hurried over, dipping at the waist in a slight bow of greeting. "How do, Miss Sutton? What are you doing wandering about the encampment by yourself?"

Tiffany bowed back to him, blushing a little at his question. "Um, I'm waiting for Mrs Rollant. She's er, well, she's in there um...bartering."

Sergeant Marsh tutted unhappily at her reply; apparently well acquainted with Mrs Rollant's way of earning her living. "Oh, no, no! That won't do at all; not for a nice lass like you! Just you come with me. I'll see to it you're fed. There'll be none of *her* methods involved, mind!"

Tiffany glanced towards the tent. There was still no sign of the little seamstress or her companions. "I do appreciate the offer, Sergeant Marsh, but what about Mrs Rollant? She'll wonder where I've gone. And she's been very generous to me. I mean, I'd still be wearing Lieutenant Plunkett's things if it wasn't for her lending me these clothes. He left me with her, you see."

"Oh, rot it all; I might have hoped he'd better sense than to do *that!*" Sergeant Marsh sighed. "Wait here, pet. I'll nip in and let Mrs Rollant know that I'm taking you to eat supper with me in the sergeants' mess. Reckon as we should go by the ruddy harpy's tent on the way there anyhow; gather up Lieutenant Plunkett's things before she sells them on for gin money!"

The sergeant stalked off. Tiffany looked down at the empty tin cup in her own hands. *I'd best make sure to leave this in Mrs Rollant's tent. I don't want her to think that I've stolen it! I expect that I'll be staying with her tonight at least.*

The walk back to Mrs Rollant's tent took a good deal less time than the journey away from it had.

Sergeant Marsh tucked his right arm around Tiffany's waist; propelling her along beside him as he strode briskly through the neat rows of white tents. He had a noticeably long stride. Tiffany found herself having to almost run to keep pace with him. She supposed that he was in a hurry to reach the mess tent. *Although I doubt if there's much food waiting for him there. At this point in history, the English army only supplied its men with two meals a day, and supper wasn't one of them. Roll on 1816 for that to change!*

The young sergeant waited outside whilst Tiffany ducked into Mrs Rollant's tent and scooped up the items that she needed to bring with her; leaving the little tin mug behind. She smiled at him as he once again tucked his arm around her. "Aren't you worried that people might, er, make assumptions about us walking together, sir?"

He shrugged. "Like as not it's better that they think you're attached to me anyway, Miss Sutton. Safer for you, if you take my meaning. It will help keep the rougher sorts from getting ideas."

Tiffany shivered at the unspoken implications of that statement. She hugged the bundle of folded clothes tight to her chest as comfort, and pressed herself a little closer to Sergeant Marsh's side as they resumed walking. "I appreciate the gesture, thank you."

"No trouble at all, pet. But don't you be

worrying, mind. I've no interest in pressing my attentions on you." He nodded up at the stars. "They're pretty, like, but they don't give us much light to see by. I'm only trying to keep you from tripping up. Well, that and I doubt if you'd keep up with me otherwise, eh? Those slippers weren't made for going anywhere quickly!"

Tiffany nodded ruefully. "I'm just glad to have anything on my feet at all! But how am I going to repay Mrs Rollant?"

"Never let her know that you even *thought* about that, Miss Sutton! Give her the chance, and she'll wring every last ounce of use out of you, that one." Sergeant Marsh's voice was grimly serious. "No – you mark my words. Make sure that Mrs Rollant knows you to be above her station in life; that you're a fine young lady, from money and such. Don't chance putting yourself in her power."

"We're sharing a tent together!" Tiffany paused then, and frowned. "At least, I *think* we are. I didn't confirm it with her either way yet. But she seemed very hospitable."

"Aye, she's right canny that way so she is." Sergeant Marsh patted her left hand with his own. "You take my advice, pet, and try and find yourself somebody else to stay with as soon as you can."

They soon reached the section of trampled grass claimed by the sergeants of the Fourth Battalion as their mess area. There were a dozen other men

present; less than a quarter of the total number of sergeants in the battalion. Sergeant Marsh led Tiffany over to where a sergeant with curly black hair and blue eyes sat by a small cooking fire, tending to a steaming kettle. He was slightly shorter than the average soldier, with a thin, wiry sort of build, and neatly trimmed sideburns.

A relieved looking Lieutenant Plunkett came dashing up to them just as Sergeant Marsh was about to begin the introductions. He spoke at once to Tiffany; dipping his head to her as he did so. "I've been scouring the encampment for you, Miss Sutton! You've been invited to dine this evening with the officers of the 136<sup>th</sup> Regiment's Fourth Battalion and their wives. I'm to escort you there at once."

Tiffany nodded and let him take her arm. Her stomach rumbled hungrily. She glanced woefully at the kettle. Whatever was in there, it really did smell delicious! Fervently hoping that her own meal would be of equal quality, she made her goodbyes. "Thank you for inviting me, Sergeant Marsh. I'm sorry to have to leave so soon!"

Sergeant Marsh bowed politely. "It was right nice seeing you again, Miss Sutton."

The still unidentified Irish sergeant clicked his tongue sharply at Lieutenant Plunkett. "Here now! Just you be sure and see to it that none of the other officers ply the young lady with too much strong

drink, sir. You know how some of them can be.”

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded so obediently in reply that Tiffany almost expected him to salute! “I do, yes, Sergeant Moore. I’ll take good care of her; I give you my word on it.”

“See that you do, sir.” Sergeant Moore rose to his feet and bowed to Tiffany. “Another time, Miss Sutton. Enjoy your evening.”

## Chapter Four

Tiffany was pleased to discover that she would be attending supper with none other than Colonel Etienne Archambeau; who was the officer in charge of the 136<sup>th</sup> Regiment. This surprised her greatly, since the exiled Comte Archambeau was historically recorded as having avoided attending such events whenever possible. A slim, golden-haired, and grey-eyed man of thirty-four, he had endured terrible suffering as a child. The French Revolution had caused the death of his father in 1790; forcing the young Comte and his mother, the comtesse douairière, to flee to England for sanctuary. However, when Tiffany mentioned her surprise, Lieutenant Plunkett explained that the supper was likely only being held at all due to the presence of a visiting English war correspondent; one Mr John Rigg, who was interviewing the officers for his newspaper. Apparently, he had originally wanted to meet with the enigmatic English general Lord Melvyn Ollerington too, but that man was much too busy.

Whatever his original hopes may have been, Mr Rigg now seemed especially interested in interrogating Major Lompton. Happily, the major courted such attentions willingly. Tiffany had been observing the two men interacting whilst everyone involved waited to be invited through to meet their host in the other half of the canvas marquee that they stood in, where the colonel's private dining area was situated. She'd also been hoping for a glimpse of Colonel Archambeau himself, but so far, she had been disappointed. *I wonder if he's really as handsome as he looks in all his portraits? Major Lompton certainly matches his; right down to that peculiar eye colouration! I still can't get over that.*

Lieutenant Plunkett was standing immediately to the right of her, as he had been ever since they arrived. Tiffany was glad of his presence. He didn't talk much, but he was proving to be rather good at scowling sternly at the other lieutenants any time that it looked as if one or other of them might approach her. Having found herself the only unmarried woman present, Tiffany couldn't help feeling a little nervous about her situation. She knew that Sergeant Moore's earlier warning wouldn't have been unfounded. *Oh well, I'm sure I'll be safe enough with Lieutenant Plunkett chaperoning me! Although, I really wouldn't mind being propositioned by Major Lompton, if I happened to catch his eye!*

Tiffany felt a small thrill of excitement go through her at that thought. Frankly, she'd happily submit to *any* sort of interest from the future baronet! Which was, she reminded herself sternly, terrible of her. She sighed quietly to herself as she thought of the risks involved. The major was an important historical figure. It would be utterly irresponsible for Tiffany to risk derailing history by sleeping with him, or with Colonel Archambeau. *I'd still do it in a heartbeat, though!*

Lieutenant Plunkett had heard her sigh. He looked down at her querulously. "Are you well, Miss Sutton? Do you need to sit down?"

Tiffany shook her head. "I'm fine, thank you. Just thinking about something."

"Was it something upsetting?" Lieutenant Plunkett glanced furtively towards the other guests. He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "Were you thinking about the er, the future, and all that? You'd at least warn me if something awful happens at this meal, I trust?"

He was proving surprisingly quick on the uptake about how time travel worked, Tiffany noted. She smiled at him; she hoped reassuringly. "I don't know anything about this evening. I was just reflecting on how exciting being here is for me; as an historian, I mean. Getting to meet people whom I've only ever read about, but who helped shape history with their actions! It's...well, it's thrilling,

you know? Like, if *you* could go back and meet, um, Oliver Cromwell, say. Imagine for a moment how you'd feel; what you might want to do, or say."

Lieutenant Plunkett scowled darkly. "I'd want to knock his teeth in, the scum!"

Tiffany nodded. "Right, so, you'd have a strong emotional response. Well, that's how it is for me too. Except that I don't hate the people involved."

"And of course, you said earlier that you want to avoid meddling." Lieutenant Plunkett shook his head as if in sympathy. "I'd meddle though, if it were me. Especially if I met *Cromwell*."

It finally dawned on Tiffany that Plunkett was a traditionally Irish surname. She winced. "I'm sorry! I didn't think. I ought to have picked someone else as an example. Hmm, let's see. What about, um, Robin Hood?"

Lieutenant Plunkett shrugged. "That depends. Is he trying to rob me?"

A tall, broad-shouldered man, with fair skin, blond hair, and cold grey eyes, dressed in the scarlet coated uniform of a captain of fusiliers, joined them without invitation; just in time to hear Lieutenant Plunkett's question. The newcomer raised an impeccably groomed eyebrow at it. "I fear that I may be interrupting some private matter! My apologies for it, but I simply must be introduced to the young lady." He bowed politely to Tiffany. "Perhaps the lieutenant will be so kind?"

“Of course, sir.” Lieutenant Plunkett answered him in clipped, flat tones. “Captain Robert Hindle, this is Miss Tiffany Sutton. She is an artist and a travel writer for the British Museum.”

Tiffany couldn't help but notice that Lieutenant Plunkett had stepped backwards abruptly by almost half a stride. In fact, he appeared to be using her as a buffer between himself and Captain Hindle. She filed the observation away for now, and focused all of her attention on the introductions; bowing and then smiling brightly up at the captain when her turn to speak arrived. “How do you do, sir?”

Captain Hindle smiled wolfishly at her, and pressed her hand just a little too firmly for comfort. “All the better for meeting you, Miss Sutton!”

The three of them made polite conversation for several minutes after that, before the entire group was finally called through to the other half of the marquee to dine. Here they were welcomed politely by Colonel Archambeau himself, whose portraits proved to be wholly accurate. Formal introductions were made for everyone, and then they were shown to their chairs. Tiffany, who was seated first due to her sex, found to her delighted surprise that she had secured the chair immediately to her host's right. *Wow! I'm the female guest of honour!*

She watched the order of seating with interest as she drew off her gloves. To her own right, was Captain Amberley, and then four of the other

captains and their respective wives. Four of the remaining five captains were seated to the colonel's left, and were also interspersed with their spouses. Directly opposite Colonel Archambeau, on the far side of the long table, sat Mr Rigg; with Major Lompton on his right. There were four fewer women present than there were men, and so Captain Hindle was on the war correspondent's immediate left, opposite Tiffany. Lieutenant Plunkett had the chair to Captain Hindle's left, directly across from Captain Amberley. The rest of the chairs on that side of the table were taken up by the other lieutenants and their wives.

It seemed as if the colonel's cook might well have taken lessons directly from Lord Wellington himself. The supper was almost painfully simple; comprising plenty of cold cooked meat, hard boiled eggs, and bread. As she ate, Tiffany thought almost wistfully of Sergeant Moore's delicious smelling kettle back in the sergeants' mess. To be fair, by now, quite literally years since her last meal, she was happy to have anything to eat at all! Still, she couldn't help but hope that she might have another opportunity to dine with the sergeants at some point. *Really, any option for acquiring food that doesn't involve prostituting myself will do!*

Beside her, Colonel Archambeau had at last noticed the paint stains on her fingers. He peered at them for a moment, and then frowned at Tiffany. "I

see that you flout the common convention, Mademoiselle Sutton.”

Tiffany blinked. He was talking to her! Her historical crush knew that she existed! Then she grimaced slightly as his meaning dawned on her. With the paint still smudged on her fingers, she should have kept the gloves *on* to dine! She thought quickly, and made her excuses. “My apologies for the state of my hands, my lord. The perils of working with oils, I’m afraid! As I currently have but one borrowed pair of gloves to wear, I thought it best to keep them in as good order as they were lent to me. I should hate to return them stained with grease or such. The paint, as you can see, is by now entirely dried, and as such it is vanishingly unlikely to rub off, or I could not have worn them at all.”

“A reasonable decision, Miss Sutton.” Major Lompton winked at her. “I myself should feel safe in lending you such items going forwards!”

Tiffany had spent far too many years sniping back at her brother’s sarcasm for her not to automatically retort now. “I appreciate that, thank you, sir, but I think your hands and mine are a bit too different in size for it to be practical.”

Luckily for her, Major Lompton seemed amused and perhaps even a little pleased by her nerve. He chuckled. “Very well said, my dear girl! Now – would you care to have some more of the baked ham? It is from a *tin can*, if you can believe that! Mr

Rigg was kind enough to bring it with him from England. Lord Ollerington will be sorry to have missed trying it!”

Mr Rigg, who was engaging Captain Hindle, immediately looked at the two of them instead. Round shouldered and rounder yet of face, the war correspondent was a jovial looking man of middle years. He had a rosy complexion and twinkling blue eyes overhung by a pair of thick brows. His neatly kept hair was dark brown; streaked through with a little grey at the temples. He beamed indulgently at Tiffany whilst the major stood up and reached across the table to place another slice of the tinned baked ham on her plate. “I expect that such modern inventions are quite the talking point in your usual social circles, hmm, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany nodded politely. “Oh yes indeed, Mr Rigg.” It was technically true. After all, both she and her flatmate *did* pride themselves on finding bargains at the local supermarket. *And we pretty much lived off baked beans and spam fritters for a while last year; after the landlord put our rent up at such short notice.*

Captain Amberley passed the bread across to Lieutenant Plunkett. “How long has it been since you were last in England yourself, Miss Sutton?”

It was an innocuous sounding question, but Tiffany had the creeping suspicion that Captain Amberley might just be harbouring some doubts

about her. She replied carefully. "Oh, um, well, it's been over a year now since I left, actually! It's such a shame that all of my writings and paintings have been lost to me. I have nothing left to send back to the museum. I suppose that I shall have to start over again from scratch!"

Captain Hindle exchanged serving platters with Lieutenant Plunkett; trading bread for roast beef. "There we are, Plunkett; get some meat into you! I dare say that it's what you need, eh? Miss Sutton, forgive me for my impertinence, but surely you must prefer to return home now? It would seem the most rational choice, after such a dreadful shock as you have endured."

Colonel Archambeau spoke before Tiffany could answer. He seemed intrigued, and perhaps a little concerned. "I must say I do not follow this, Captain Hindle. Mademoiselle Sutton, I had gathered that you are a travel writer and painter for the British Museum. Captain Hindle, he speaks of you enduring a dreadful shock. And of course, you yourself mentioned having borrowed some gloves. It sounds to me as if perhaps you have experienced some recent misfortune, qui?"

Tiffany blushed. "That is so, yes, my lord."

He frowned. "I should like to know the whole of the situation, if I may?"

Captain Amberley answered him before Tiffany could do so. "Lieutenant Plunkett found her in the

woods earlier today, my lord. She'd been in the river, but we don't yet know who put her there. She claimed not to remember at the time."

Colonel Archambeau was aghast. "Mon Dieu! Such an ordeal for her to have endured! Mademoiselle Sutton, have you recalled anything at all since that time? And have you been seen by a physician?"

Tiffany shook her head. "Ah, no, my lord, to both of those questions. I haven't remembered anything, but I didn't think it worth my troubling the army's surgeons. I mean, well, I shall either remember eventually, or not. There's no sense in my making a fuss and bother about it. Honestly, I'm just happy to have survived! I feared for myself until Lieutenant Plunkett arrived. He and his men were kind enough to come to my rescue and escort me back with them."

"She was most probably dosed with something by those responsible, my lord. Laudanum, or the like. I hear that it affects the memory." Captain Hindle nodded and squeezed Lieutenant Plunkett's right shoulder approvingly. "You did very well there, Plunkett! Fine fellow!"

Lieutenant Plunkett's face pinked slightly. He looked oddly uncomfortable at the praise; perhaps because of what else he now secretly knew about Tiffany. "Thank you, sir." Then, with that brief gratitude having been uttered, he returned his

attention firmly to his supper.

There was no time granted for Tiffany to wonder over the strange tension between Captain Hindle and Lieutenant Plunkett. Instead, her attention was once again claimed by Major Lompton. He questioned her closely on what sort of aid she required. At first, Tiffany was worried that Captain Amberley might attempt to pick holes in her answers. But no such interruption came. It slowly occurred to her that he had quite possibly only raised the subject of her supposed plight in order to bring it to the attention of one who was better placed to assist her. *I think I may have misjudged him a little.*

Colonel Archambeau, meanwhile, had become engaged in a lively but polite debate with Mr Rigg about the current state of the Allied army. This subject soon drew Major Lompton's ear too, and after a few minutes, he shifted his attention away from Tiffany. Across the table, Captain Hindle remained deeply engrossed in murmured discussion with the increasingly uncomfortable looking Lieutenant Plunkett. Tiffany decided to keep well out of their business, and attempted to make small talk with Captain Amberley instead. He proved to be just as taciturn as history had recorded him. In truth, Tiffany was secretly rather relieved by this. *Meeting famous historical figures is all well and good in theory, but the reality is a bit nerve*

*wracking! It's lucky that the other guests are all seated too far away from me for it to be deemed polite for us to talk to one another. I'm not sure if I could cope with the pressure of deceiving them!*

By the time that the supper concluded, Tiffany's stomach was pleasantly full, and she had enjoyed what she regarded as the optimum amount of wine. This translated as her being tipsy enough to no longer care about being stranded in 1814, whilst still retaining enough of her wits to keep her secret to herself. It had also made her a little merry. The latter rise in her demeanour went by unnoticed, since nobody else present was entirely sober either. *Hmm, the realities of life in a time before safe drinking water!*

Somehow, Tiffany ended up at the very back of the line when it was time for everyone to make their goodbyes to Colonel Archambeau. As he bowed and pressed her hand, she wondered if perhaps he had deliberately arranged things this way; the better to speak to her more privately. *Perhaps he'll ask me to remain behind with him for a romantic tryst!*

So enraptured, she smiled up at him happily. "Thank you so much for having me here this evening, my lord. I have had a delightful time."

Colonel Archambeau smiled back politely as he released her hand; dashing her hopes in the process. "The pleasure has most assuredly been mine. Bonsoir, Mademoiselle Sutton."

Major Lompton was waiting just outside the marquee when Tiffany exited. He bowed politely to her. "I must confess that I would be amenable to your visiting with me, Miss Sutton. Perhaps you might come to my tent now and take some coffee?" He raised his voice then. "Ho there, Captain Amberley, Lieutenant Plunkett – I am inviting Miss Sutton to remain with me for coffee and conversation! You two will not object to being our chaperones, eh? Why, it would give us all the opportunity to discuss Miss Sutton's circumstances! I find that I am firmly set upon providing her with what she needs."

Tiffany, whose secret crush on the major was only increasing for having met him, nodded her assent before anyone might refuse on her behalf. "I would be delighted, sir!"

Lieutenant Plunkett hurried back over to stand beside the two of them. "It will be my honour to so assist you both, sir."

Captain Amberley followed him at a more sedate pace. His expression was grim as he addressed Major Lompton. "Do you reckon my concerns regarding the other matter to have been well founded then, sir?"

Major Lompton replied calmly, and equally cryptically. "I do indeed, sir. Unfortunately, there is precious little to be done at this time. Leave the matter with me. I will deal with it in due course. For

now, we have other things to discuss.” With that, he returned his attention to the by now thoroughly baffled Tiffany. “Come, Miss Sutton! Let us withdraw to my tent for our coffee. These two fine officers will both join us.”

## Chapter Five

The four passed a pleasant hour in conversation whilst they drank their coffee. Much to Tiffany's secret relief, only half of that time was spent going over her own circumstances. The agreed upon explanation was held as having been some form of banditry, and the motivation behind it deemed as being best left unknown. True to his word, Major Lompton insisted on personally arranging for Tiffany's provision whilst she remained with the army. In exchange, she had volunteered her skills as a portrait painter; pledging to capture his likeness in oils just as soon as canvas, brush, and paint could be provided to her. From there, the conversation flowed naturally into a discussion about art. This topic sustained them nicely until their cups were emptied, and the time for parting reached.

Major Lompton rose from his chair first and bid both of his officers a warm but nonetheless firm farewell. "I shall see to it that Miss Sutton is taken care of, gentlemen. Good night to you both, and rest well. Tomorrow, we will begin our next offensive

against the French, and may God grant that we succeed in it!”

Captain Amberley was swift to exit from the tent, but Tiffany saw Lieutenant Plunkett hesitate as he neared the doorway. He aimed a worried look back in her direction. She smiled at him; the strength of the wine at dinner tripping her up. “Don’t worry! Our side *wins*, remember? It’s all right there in the history books! I told you about that earlier...oh. Ah. Oh dear.”

Lieutenant Plunkett grimaced and stared down at his boots; as if to memorise them. “You have let the cat out, Miss Sutton. I reckon that you’d best explain it all now, really.”

“I concur.” Major Lompton gestured curtly to Lieutenant Plunkett. “Get back over here, Plunkett. You obviously know something, and I will have the truth of it from both of you! Miss Sutton – what is this about history books? You spoke as if tomorrow’s effort were already won!”

Tiffany gulped. “Um, okay, so has anyone ever told you that your mind is perhaps just a little *too* sharp, major?”

He did not look amused by her answer. “There is some strangeness occurring here, Miss Sutton. Lieutenant Plunkett appears to think that you have a secret; one which I suspect him to have been keeping for you. From your outburst, I deduce that it is connected to you allegedly possessing some

impossible knowledge of future events.”

Tiffany gasped and clutched unthinkingly at the time pendant. “How did you know that?”

Major Lompton smiled drily. “I am an educated man, Miss Sutton, and it was far from a complicated series of facts to parse! Now, I wonder: is there a reason for you to suddenly clutch so tightly to that pendant? Might you have some thought on the latter, Lieutenant Plunkett?”

“She told me that it was that which transported her back to now, sir! Said that it has some sort of magic to it. And that one of your distant relations in the future was the one who gave it to her.” Lieutenant Plunkett was by now standing rigidly to attention. “Sorry to break your confidence, Miss Sutton, but you did.”

Tiffany unfolded her fingers from around the time pendant. She stared down at it for a moment; hoping that that it might finally whisk her home. When no such convenient escape occurred, she sighed and looked back up at Major Lompton’s stern countenance. “Ugh, *why* am I so bad at this? I mean, it’s not complicated! Just don’t meddle with history, and don’t tell anyone that you’re a time traveller, that’s it. Those are literally the only two rules. And I keep on breaking the second one, which by default means that I’m also breaking the first one, because telling people in 1814 about time travel existing *definitely* counts as meddling!”

“Hmm, yes, quite.” Major Lompton’s pale eyes gleamed in the lamplight. “So! Let us presume for now that I believe this wild tale of yours, Miss Sutton, and that I do not instead have you confined for your own good. You claim to be from the future! Very well. Prove yourself, *if* you can. Tell me something useful. How do we defeat Bonaparte and his armies?”

Tiffany shook her head firmly. “Absolutely not! I understand why you want to know, but I’m not risking changing things!”

“But you do not deny that we *do* indeed defeat him?” Major Lompton was undeterred by her refusal. “Expand on that victory, please.”

“Exactly what part of my not wanting to risk changing the future aren’t you getting?” Tiffany threw up her hands in exasperation. “Major, I *can*’t tell you what you want to know! It’s too dangerous. I’ve got to think of the bigger picture; of how one change now might alter the entirety of history from this point onwards. Yes, fine, our side ultimately wins the war against Bonaparte, but that’s all that I can risk admitting. Kindly stop asking me questions that I cannot safely answer!”

He raised an eyebrow at her firm refusal. “Women of the future appear to be fierce creatures indeed! I rather like it. What year do you hail from anyhow, Miss Sutton?”

“Well, I came here from 1989, but obviously I

was born before then.” Tiffany sighed. “And no, before you ask, I’m *not* going to tell you when! You don’t need to know that anyhow.”

“We shall see about that, Miss Sutton.” Major Lompton smiled at her again then. Something in his expression sent a chill down Tiffany’s spine, and lit a hungry sort of fire in various other parts of her anatomy. “Lieutenant Plunkett, you are dismissed! Tell no one else of Miss Sutton’s secret; not a word, do you hear?”

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded immediately. “Aye, sir! Er, should I escort Miss Sutton back to the baggage train now? Or I could wait outside for the two of you to finish talking. Although, and begging your pardon, that feels improper, sir.”

It finally dawned on Tiffany just why he had looked back so worriedly at her on his previous attempt to depart. She smiled at him. “Thank you for looking out for my best interests, Lieutenant Plunkett. You’re a good man. But women from my time don’t need to worry about preserving their reputations. I think I’d like to stay here a little while longer. Well, always presuming that I’m still welcome?”

Major Lompton shook his head curtly. “Perhaps some other time, my dear! Go now, lieutenant, and take the young lady with you; find her a bed for the night. Miss Sutton, I will see you again when I am next free to do so.”

Tiffany bridled at the sudden dismissal. “But...but I thought that you still wanted to question me further?”

“Alas, the hour is late, Miss Sutton.” Major Lompton gestured dismissively. “Much too late for such frivolities.”

Tiffany spluttered angrily. She set down her own glass without so much as sipping its contents. “Hey! Time travel *isn't* a frivolity! I *know* things! Important things!”

Major Lompton yawned into his hand. “You certainly claim so, yes, but as you will not share them with us, I can hardly deem them relevant enough to lose sleep over.” He shook his head firmly. “No, Miss Sutton. I cannot humour you or your imagination any further at this time.”

“I am *not* imagining being from the future!” Tiffany squared her shoulders and glared up at Major Lompton. “You need proof so badly? Fine! On Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> February 1814, Lord Wellington himself will directly command an attack against the French; driving the defenders back into the town of Saint-Palais. That victory may seem like a minor one, but it’s what enables our side to secure a crossing over the Bidouze. And *you* will personally save General Melvyn Ollerington’s life during the battle; when he’s ambushed behind our own lines by a unit of French cavalymen!”

Major Lompton smiled triumphantly at her.

“There now, Miss Sutton! Was that truly so painful a thing for you to do?”

Tiffany gasped. He had tricked her into giving him information about the future! She turned her back to him; furious at herself for having fallen for the now all too obvious bait. “You sir, are *exactly* as the history books described you to be! Enjoy your petty victory over me, and much good may it do you. Rest assured that I shan’t tell you a single thing further!”

Lieutenant Plunkett stepped forwards to offer Tiffany his handkerchief. He glowered at his commanding officer. “That was a poor trick to play on her, sir.”

Major Lompton raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Do you rebuke me for it, lieutenant?”

“Aye, sir, I bloody well do!” Lieutenant Plunkett drew his thin frame up to its full height. “Miss Sutton has warned us both repeatedly that it would not be safe for her to speak of future events. Moreover, sir, it was mean spirited of you to be so wily about the thing. I am ashamed to have witnessed it, and I...I think less of you for having done so!”

Tiffany clenched her fingers around the handkerchief. She looked anxiously from one officer to the other; hoping that things weren’t about to escalate. *What if they do?*

Thankfully, Major Lompton smiled instead. “Ah,

there it is! There is the spark of decency that is so sadly lacking in men like me! Pay close heed now, Miss Sutton! Witness how his virtue balances out my vice. I salute you for it, sir!”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked at him askance. “With respect, sir, I reckon you to be in your cups! I bid you goodnight. Miss Sutton and I will take our leave of you now.”

With that, he linked arms with Tiffany and steered her firmly out of the tent; propelling her along beside him through the almost pitch-dark encampment. The starlight cast strange shadows between the tents and supply carts. Nothing looked normal. The waterlogged ground seemed bewitched into a weird, almost luminescent grey; the rain-filled ruts and puddles transformed into bottomless dark pools. A cold breeze stirred; reminding Tiffany that it was still February. She shivered. “Um, so, does Major Lompton often behave like that?”

“I rarely have any cause to be in his society.” Lieutenant Plunkett’s answer was diplomatic. He changed the subject. “Are you staying with Mrs Rollant, or did you find somewhere else?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I’m staying with her, but Sergeant Marsh tried to warn me off from doing so. He seemed to think poorly of her behaviour.”

A tall, green uniformed figure emerged out of the darkness to their left then. It was Captain Amberley. He nodded to them. “Sergeant Marsh is no fool,

lass. Reckon as you might do worse than to heed his advice.”

Lieutenant Plunkett seemed surprised by his superior officer’s candour on the matter. “Sir, I hadn’t realised that Mrs Rollant was so poorly thought of! I’m terribly sorry, Miss Sutton. I only know her through word of mouth. I...I do my own mending, you see. But some of the other lads can’t sew, so they go to Mrs Rollant, and they seem to like her.”

Captain Amberley chuckled. “Ah, Plunkett! My poor honey! Never change, lad. Anyhow, Miss Sutton, the decision is up to you. If you must stay with Mrs Rollant, then at least know that she is her own friend and nobody else’s.”

Tiffany felt rather offended on Mrs Rollant’s behalf. She smiled politely. “I’ll keep your advice in mind, sir, thank you. Is there anyone else that you think I should be careful of?”

Captain Amberley nodded. “Aye, lass. There’s Major Lompton, for one, but I doubt as you’ll heed me about *him*. Lasses never do. Still, the worst that he’ll do is dally with you and then break your heart when he loses interest. Captain Hindle, on the other hand, is a man who you should keep wholly clear of. If you cannot avoid him entirely, then for pity’s sake don’t risk being alone with him.”

It was a far blunter warning than Tiffany had anticipated. “Sir, I must ask: if Captain Hindle is

truly as much of a brute as you imply, then how is he allowed to remain as an officer? Aren't there rules about behaviour?"

Lieutenant Plunkett scoffed bitterly. "Not for those with enough influence!

"Settle down, Plunkett." Captain Amberley patted Lieutenant Plunkett on the shoulder. "Captain Hindle's influence will only carry him so far. Keep your chin up and your head down, and just wait for him to trip himself up."

The young rifleman nodded dolefully. "And avoid letting him get me alone, sir?"

"Aye, lad." Captain Amberley patted Lieutenant Plunkett's shoulder again, and then ruffled his hair. "You do exactly that. You too, Miss Sutton. I mean it."

Tiffany nodded her understanding. "Thank you, sir. I'll be careful. Um...but just to be clear, what should Lieutenant Plunkett and I do if the major finds some way of getting one of us alone?"

The captain scowled. "Then you run for it, if you can, and scream out for help either way! And if neither one of those is an option to you, then just do whatever you must to live. Come and find me afterwards. I'll see you right."

The latter assurance was certainly nice to have, in Tiffany's opinion, but it didn't do anything for her immediate needs. Until – or rather, for all that she knew, unless – Major Lompton troubled himself

with arranging for her provision, the young time traveller was dependent upon Mrs Rollant's generosity for both shelter and sustenance. *And for all his gallant words just now, I don't see Captain Amberley offering me any alternatives! The same goes for Sergeant Marsh.*

## Chapter Six

Mrs Rollant cheerfully let Tiffany share her tent that night. However, there was a price to her hospitality. The following morning, she chivvied Tiffany out of bed at first light, and told her bluntly that, gentleman's daughter or no, someone who was truly hungry would not turn up her nose at honest work. Then she set her guest to work standing outside the tent begging for food and drink and even coin from any man who came within earshot. Not all the army had been sent to the battle, so there were still plenty of soldiers in the encampment, as well as the muleteers, and the senior officers' assorted members of staff. Tiffany found it horribly embarrassing. She was glad that all she had to do was lure the men in! Mrs Rollant saw to the rest. To judge by the sounds from within the tent, she worked hard for her living. Tiffany fervently hoped never to have to do the same. She ate her only meal of the day guiltily that evening: a thin slice of stale bread soaked down into a mushy gruel in cold tea, and a bit of fatty mutton.

Tuesday went by in much the same way. Once again, there was no breakfast or dinner to be had for Tiffany. One of the muleteers took pity on her and tossed her an apple early in the afternoon. Tiffany ate it core and all, and spat out the pips. By evening, she was almost faint with hunger. Her stomach rumbled as she paced back and forwards across the muddy grass beside the tent. She sighed miserably. *Is everyone in this era just used to starving? It certainly seems like it to me!*

“Tiffany? Where are you, my girl? Come here and let me look at you.” Mrs Rollant had emerged from the doorway of her tent. She peered at Tiffany for a moment, and then turned her around to adjust her bodice. “Suck in, suck in! And stick out your chest!” She pinched Tiffany’s cheeks. “Put a bit of colour into them for you! Now, just let me help you get the goods out on display a bit.”

Tiffany, who could now scarcely breathe, blushed as Mrs Rollant tugged her bodice down to reveal everything down to half an inch above the top of her nipples. “Um...this feels a bit...indecorous.”

Mrs Rollant scoffed. “Don’t be so coy! Now – into the tent with you! Captain Hindle is here to visit with us for the evening. He’s taken quite the liking to you!” She gripped Tiffany’s left arm firmly as she steered her into the tent. “Here she is, sir! A little shy, but very pretty, don’t you agree?”

Soft and plump where it matters!”

Tiffany yanked her arm free and stumbled backwards away from the other woman; glaring angrily. “I told you already, Mrs Rollant, I’m *not* that sort of girl!”

Captain Hindle stepped in between Tiffany and the door of the tent. He smirked nastily. “She seems rather more than a *little* shy, Mrs Rollant!”

Mrs Rollant grabbed hold of Tiffany’s wrists and pinned them behind her; twisting them sharply as she spoke. “Stand still, you beastly little...ow!”

Tiffany stamped down hard on Mrs Rollant’s other foot. This time she succeeded in making the other woman let go of her wrists. Spinning on the spot, Tiffany put her judo skills to full use, and toppled Mrs Rollant over her shoulder and onto the paillasse. “I said *no*, and I meant it!” She whirled round again, and glared at Captain Hindle. “Trouble me any further, sir, and I’ll go straight to the nearest provost!”

To her increasing horror, Captain Hindle immediately drew his pistol and pointed it squarely at her head. “The provosts shan’t listen to a whore’s word over that of an officer.”

“I’m not a whore!” Tiffany clenched her fists helplessly; afraid to raise her voice or move whilst the pistol was pointed at her. “You should know that I am under Major Lompton’s personal protection, sir. He knows my character, and he will

vouch for me!”

Captain Hindle scoffed. “How terribly unfortunate for you then that the latest report is that both he and Colonel Archambeau have been captured by the French!”

Tiffany gasped. “No! No, that can’t be true!”

“Such is the price of gallantry. But enough talk!” Captain Hindle gestured impatiently with his pistol. “I find that I require a mistress. Submit to me as such, and I will provide for you. Refuse, and I will shoot you. It is your choice to make.”

Captain Amberley’s words echoed in Tiffany’s mind. *Do whatever you must to live.* She shuddered and nodded reluctantly. “Very well, sir. I accept your offer of support.”

The scarlet coated officer smiled nastily. “Splendid! We will begin immediately. Undress her, Mrs Rollant, and then help her to bed.”

Mrs Rollant scrambled up, and hurriedly stripped Tiffany down to her chemise, before shoving her over onto her back atop the palliasse. “Lie there and let him have at you!”

Tiffany lay still as Captain Hindle straddled her. She shivered as he traced the pistol over her chest. *Just do what he wants, and stay alive.*

He nodded his approval, and finally holstered his pistol. Then he bent forwards and cupped Tiffany’s face with his hands to force her into a kiss; laughing at her when she flinched. “Come on now, my pretty

little filly – show your rider some affection, eh? And part your legs, too.”

Seizing her chance, Tiffany brought her left knee up fast and hard. Captain Hindle made a short, terribly pained sound, and collapsed on top of her, groaning and hissing curses. Tiffany clawed at his face with her fingernails, and kneed him repeatedly until he rolled off her; falling onto the floor of the tent in a deservedly agonised heap.

Mrs Rollant shrieked. “Oh, you stupid girl! You’ll pay for that! He’ll have your hide once he’s recovered!”

Tiffany scrambled off the palliasse. Fearful of what the outcome might be for her if she remained, she snatched up the nearest lamp and fled out of the tent. Stumbling through the cold, wet mud, she hurried away from the baggage train. She shuddered as she thought about what had almost been done to her, and what Captain Hindle claimed to have happened during the recent battle. *Was he telling me the truth? Have the French really captured Colonel Archambeau and Major Lompton? And if so, then what about Lord Ollerington – did Major Lompton still manage to save him from that cavalry unit?*

A tall, auburn-haired man, with a hooked nose and what looked like at least a full day’s worth of unshaven stubble on his face, wearing a dark blue cloak over the rest of his officer’s uniform, and with

a cocked hat pulled down low across his eyes, rode across in front of her then; mounted on a tall chestnut horse. Tiffany yelped as she almost collided with the animal's flank. "Oh!"

The man reined in immediately and peered down at Tiffany. He frowned as he took in her appearance. "Are you hurt?"

Tiffany gulped and shook her head. "Um...no, not really, sir."

"Hmm, good." The man unfastened his cloak and tossed it down to her. "Put that around you before you die of exposure!"

"Thank you, sir." Shivering with cold and blushing, Tiffany wrapped herself snugly in the cloak. "I'm sorry for troubling you."

"Think nothing of it. From your current state, I fear that I can guess all too well at what has happened to you. Which of the scum was it?"

"Captain Robert Hindle, sir." She ducked her head politely; too cold and afraid to bow. "He's in the 136<sup>th</sup> Foot. He threatened me with his pistol. A seamstress named Mrs Joanna Rollant helped him. She stripped me for him, and then he...well, I mean, I managed to knee him in the bollocks and get away before he could do anything, but I think he might come after me again."

His expression hardened. "Hindle and Rollant, eh? I'll look into it as soon as I can; you have my word. And you are?"

“Thank you for your help, sir.” Tiffany drew herself up; determined not to fall apart in front of this complete and utter stranger. “My name is Miss Tiffany Sutton. I am an artist and travel writer with the British Museum.”

He raised an eyebrow speculatively at her answer. “Dangerous job, that.”

She shrugged. “It can be, I suppose, at times.”

“I don’t agree with women taking such risks.” The man sighed resignedly. “And I suppose that you will want to interrogate me now on how the battle went!”

“Oh!” Tiffany blushed. “You must be with the army too, of course. How silly of me. Um, I don’t want to be a bother to you, but do you know if it’s over yet? And did we win, sir?”

Her words seemed to surprise him a little. He smiled and nodded. “Yes, and yes, to both of your questions! The day is won, and the French driven back into Saint-Palais. Have you a fellow whom you are praying for then, Miss Sutton? Some brave officer, perhaps?”

Tiffany nodded. “Major William Lompton, also of the 136<sup>th</sup>, sir, but I am told that he was captured along with Colonel Archambeau today. And Captain Simon Amberley of the 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles said that if Captain Hindle ever harmed me, then I should go to him. I have a few more friends amongst his company too.”

The man smiled again. “Well then, adventuress, take heart, for you will see them all again soon enough! The 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles did bravely today. Their captain especially must be commended; he not only saved Major Lompton and Colonel Archambeau, but also brought his whole company back safely. We could do with a good few more men of his calibre in this army!” He dug around in his pockets for a moment, and then leaned down and handed Tiffany a sovereign. “Here now – I’d best pay you off for my having ridden so carelessly. Keep things square between us, eh? Goodnight!”

With that, the man rode off again. Tiffany stared after him in bemusement. The coin felt cold against her palm. Tiffany clenched her fingers around it. *That man looked awfully familiar. He must be rich, whoever he...oh! Oh my God, that was Lord Ollerington! I didn't recognise him! And he said that the battle was over. That means that the others must be on their way back too!*

Sure enough, as Tiffany watched, she saw more figures appear in the dim moonlight: some of them mounted, but most on foot. She set down the lamp and stood there anxiously; wringing her hands as the tired, hungry men made their way back into the encampment. Finally, Sergeant Marsh appeared; mounted atop a dainty grey pony. He smiled and reined in alongside Tiffany. “How do, Miss Sutton? Have you heard yet? We won! Trounced the frogs

and sent them packing, didn't we, lads?"

The other soldiers cheered raggedly in response as they trudged on by. Tiffany questioned Sergeant Marsh further. "What happened? I heard that Major Lompton and Colonel Archambeau had both been captured by the French, and then just now I was told that the Rifles saved them!"

"Aye, Miss Sutton, we did." Sergeant Marsh nodded and dismounted to rest his steed. This close, Tiffany could see that his face was spattered with dried blood. "Captain Amberley didn't take kindly to them being captured; you see. He got a bit angry like. Drew his sword and charged off on foot to rescue him all by himself! And we all followed him, of course. Bunch of mad bastards that we are!" He caught himself then, and blushed. "I got a bit carried away there, sorry, pet. But ooh, it was *glorious* what the captain did! He's still out there; him and the major both. Got Lieutenant Plunkett and half of the Rifles with them. They're seeing to it that the territory we won today is secured. Drew straws for who stayed and who came back here for the night. Got to see to packing up the tents and such too, you see. Sergeant Moore and I have charge of all that. Look – there he is now!"

Sergeant Moore bowed and greeted them both tiredly. He was on foot, and leading an equally exhausted looking dun pony. "Sergeant Marsh, Miss Sutton! How do, how do?" He glanced at Tiffany.

“Here now, have you nothing else on under that cloak, miss?”

“I was attacked, sir!” Tiffany blurted out the words. “Captain Hindle came to Mrs Rollant’s tent. I got away from him in time, but...!”

Sergeant Moore stepped forwards towards Tiffany with a softly muttered oath. “Darling girl! I’m truly sorry.”

Tiffany smiled weakly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He shook his head. “Aye, well it wasn’t yours either, Miss Sutton, and don’t you be letting anyone tell you otherwise.”

Sergeant Marsh nodded and scowled. “Was Mrs Rollant there too, miss?”

“She can tell us the details later, Tom.” Sergeant Moore handed Tiffany his handkerchief. He nodded to Sergeant Marsh. “She needs rest, and maybe a wee drop of something strong to help settle her nerves. Go you on and get her back to my tent. I’ll find her some clothes.”

Tiffany held out the sovereign. “I can pay! I met Lord Ollerington, and he gave me this as an apology for having almost ridden over me. He said that he’d look into the matter.”

“That’s right decent of him, so it is.” Sergeant Moore pocketed the coin. “Don’t you worry, miss. We’ll look after you in the meantime.”

## Chapter Seven

The two sergeants kept to their word. Unfortunately, there was a limit to how much they could do. By noon on the next day, Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> February 1814, the Allied army was on the move, and both men had no choice but to take their assigned posts in the column. Far behind them, tired and hungry, Tiffany stumbled along in the baggage train at the leftmost side of a large group of women and children. Her feet ached. The thought of how far she would have to walk today in made her grimace. So far, she was still managing to keep her skirts clear of the worst of the mud, but it was getting harder with each new step. *At least Sergeant Moore found something for me to wear!*

She shivered as she eyed the cloudy sky. There was going to be snow, she knew that from history, but not for another few days. Right now, it looked as if it might rain again. Her new gown was of soft brown wool. It was warm and practically cut, but it would offer little protection against a heavy downpour. It was just as well that she still had Lord

Ollerington's cloak. *I should probably see about returning it to him eventually though. The money left over from that sovereign he gave me will be enough for me to buy gloves and a pelisse the next time we stop near a town or village. Hopefully a hat, too. I'll need to be able to look presentable if I'm summoned for questioning about what happened.*

The latter possibility no longer terrified Tiffany. A provost had sought her out the night before at the behest of Lord Ollerington, and taken her statement. She hadn't seen Mrs Rollant since fleeing her tent, but she had spotted Captain Hindle watching her from a distance twice so far today. Thankfully, he hadn't approached her. Tiffany supposed that there were too many other people around for him to risk doing so. *That, or he's just decided to leave it to the provosts to deal with me. Although, I suspect that he might be in for a nasty surprise of his own there!*

There had still been no word of any sort sent to her from Major Lompton. Tiffany had begun to doubt his promise of assistance. Perhaps he blamed her for not having warned him that he and Colonel Archambeau would be captured by the French whilst protecting Lord Ollerington. Or perhaps he had never actually intended to make good on his word to begin with. *Well, so what? I'm managing fine without him! Sergeant Marsh promised to try and come by and check on me at some point during*

*today's journey. And Sergeant Moore said that he'd help me to secure somewhere safe to sleep. That reminds me, I wonder if they've had any chance to speak privately with Captain Amberley on my behalf yet. He did say that he'd see me right if Captain Hindle harmed me.*

Captain Amberley had advised Lieutenant Plunkett in the same way, Tiffany recalled as she trudged through yet another mucky puddle; this one ankle deep. Did that mean that Captain Hindle's taste in potential victims ran both ways? Or would he have harmed the young officer in some other way; a beating, perhaps, or an unsanctioned flogging. *I really don't feel as if the history books are clear enough on how violent and chaotic things could be during this era.*

At least she knew better now, Tiffany supposed ruefully. She grimaced as she thought back on how she had ignored both warnings that had been given to her about staying with Mrs Rollant. *Especially after Lieutenant Plunkett admitted that he didn't really know her at all himself! Ugh, I was just so sure that Captain Amberley and Sergeant Marsh were both being prejudiced towards her because of her profession! I hope Lieutenant Plunkett won't blame himself for introducing us when he finds out about what almost happened.*

A huge black horse trotted up alongside her on her left; snorting and pulling eagerly against the bit.

Tiffany flinched at how close the animal was. Turning her head to glare up at the rider, she rebuked him tiredly. “Look where you’re going on occasion, can’t you? Oh! Major Lompton. It’s...it’s nice to see you again, sir.”

He frowned down at her; reining his horse in to a slow walk as he did so. “Why the devil is it that you are *walking*, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany returned her attention to putting one foot in front of the other. “Was there some other option available to me for getting from where we were to wherever it is that we’re going? Because if so, then nobody mentioned it to *me*.”

“Evidently there has been some unfortunate failure in communication. I had thought you to be safe and snug: travelling in comfort with Mr Rigg in his carriage. No matter; I am here now!” Major Lompton clicked his tongue sharply; presumably at his horse, which immediately sidestepped even closer to Tiffany. “Up you come!” With that, he bent in his saddle and hauled Tiffany up bodily despite her startled squawk of protest; setting her angled in front of him, with his right arm wrapped firmly around her waist, and both of her legs draped over the horse’s right shoulder. “There – out of the mud at last, poor little waif!”

Tiffany could see people staring at them, and in more than a few cases, whispering to one another. She decided that she didn’t care. Her reputation was

most likely already in tatters. And right now, *anything* was better than walking! She sniffled. “Thank you. I...I’m sorry for snapping at you just now, sir. It was rude of me.”

Major Lompton chuckled. “I hazard that you believed me to have abandoned you, just as everyone else seems to have done! Why else would you not have sought me out and reminded me of my promise, hmm?”

She huddled back against him; glad of the warmth, both from his body and from the horse. “Well, you were busy to begin with; preparing for the battle. And then afterwards, I thought that you might be angry with me for not having warned you about you and Colonel Archambeau being captured. But it *wasn’t* my fault, you know. It isn’t mentioned in any of the historical records! You can’t blame me; it wouldn’t be fair.”

“Why the deuce would I blame you for such a glorious victory?” The major kissed her neck savagely; nipping her with his teeth, and urged his horse on into trot before she could reply.

Tiffany clutched nervously at his arm as they gradually overtook the slowly moving baggage train. She closed her eyes in fear. “Do we really have to go so fast? I’ve never done this before!”

Major Lompton tightened his arm around her, but did not slow the horse. “I thought that you rode one of the mules?”

“That was different! Mules are a lot shorter, and slower than this animal is. I was tied to the saddle, too; so that I couldn’t fall off.” Tiffany yelped and winced as the horse seemed to lurch beneath them. “Oh my God, did he trip?”

“No.” Major Lompton sounded a little amused. “Just a dip in the road. You are quite safe, I assure you. Come on now; get off the pommel and be comfortable. Put your arms around my neck and draw yourself back onto my lap. Yes, that’s right; now, sit just so. Good girl.”

Tiffany, now seated as told, rested her head on his left shoulder. “I’ve changed my mind, by the way. About not telling you things. I will happily write down everything that I know regarding the war in exchange for your protection.”

Major Lompton laughed at the offer. “It seems to me that you were well enough taken care of in my absence!” He ran his hand appreciatively over the gifted cloak. “I have seen this cloak before. Ought I to feel any jealousy towards your new patron? Or did you rob him? For the sake of my pride, I *do* hope that it was the latter.”

Tiffany blushed. “Of course I didn’t steal it! And you needn’t be jealous either. Lord Ollerington was just being kind to me, that’s all.”

“Well then, you must be kind to *me* now in turn and put those pretty lips to work!” Major Lompton kissed her neck again. “Your secrets may wait until

we make camp again. I promise that you will stay with me going forwards. Well, until our dear Lord Ollerington comes back and steals you away for himself, of course.”

“He’s not going to steal me away!” Tiffany jerked backwards in horror then as a louse scuttled out from underneath Major Lompton’s collar. “Ugh! You’re crawling with lice!”

Major Lompton growled and held her tight despite her panicked squirming. “No more of that, now! Unless you *want* to fall off?”

Tiffany gulped and shook her head. “Sorry. I...it just startled me a little, that’s all.”

“Ha! You will become used to such things soon enough! Now, where were we, hmm?”

Tiffany froze as the major dipped his head to claim her mouth. He kissed her savagely; plundering her mouth. Sliding his right hand up, he cupped and squeezed her left breast; rumpling the soft cloth of her bodice. The smell and taste of sour sweat and gunpowder on his skin and clothing was almost overwhelming for Tiffany. Another louse, or perhaps the same one, crawled up over her lips and onto her face. She cringed as she felt it scuttle up into her hair. The major’s grip tightened possessively on her breast as he deepened the kiss. Abandoning his reins, he moved his left hand around behind her shoulders and began unbuttoning her gown.

Captain Amberley rode up alongside them on the left then; mounted on a tall bay roan horse with a fine head. He saluted Major Lompton and nodded politely to Tiffany. “How do, sir? How do, Miss Sutton? Fine enough day we’re having.”

Major Lompton broke off from the kiss and sighed. “Go away, can’t you?”

“Aye, sir, will do!” The captain saluted again. Then he leant across to his right and hauled Tiffany out of Major Lompton’s arms and into his own. Wheeling his horse around, he urged the animal immediately into a gallop; calling out behind him as they departed. “Colonel Archambeau and Lord Ollerington are both looking to speak with you, sir! Best that you don’t keep them waiting!”

Tiffany yelped and clung on desperately to Captain Amberley as the scenery blurred past. “Can we *please* slow down?”

“Sorry, Miss Sutton.” Captain Amberley eased his horse back down to a walk. “I felt it wise to get some distance between ourselves and the major, before he made any worse a spectacle of himself or of you. He gets a bit odd sometimes; especially after a battle. Anyhow, look – here’s the rest of my company! How do, lads? Enjoying your dinner? Lord only knows that you’ve earned it. Plunkett, come here a minute.”

A collective mumble came from the resting enlisted men as they ate. The sergeants and officers

present all saluted smartly from atop their assorted steeds. Lieutenant Plunkett rode forwards on his spotted pony. He halted and stared aghast at Captain Amberley and Tiffany. “I...er...sir, Miss Sutton...sorry, sir, but *what* is going on here?” He lowered his voice. “Was she...did something else happen to her, or is it because of...well, you know; the other matter? Because I still don’t really like how it’s being...!”

“Hop down, lad. The young lady needs something of her own to ride.” Captain Amberley had already reined in. Now he dismounted; carefully helping Tiffany to the ground as he did so. “Put her up on that beast of yours. You may borrow Malice here instead. I’ll walk alongside for a bit to stretch my legs, and then I’ll see about changing horses. Sergeant Moore! Will you go and tack one of my other two up for me, please? Envy could likely use the exercise.”

“Aye, sir!” Sergeant Moore turned his stocky dun pony and rode off at a brisk trot.

Much to her embarrassment, Tiffany found that she was trembling as she straightened her gown; the buttons on the back of her bodice still at least half undone. Feeling suddenly dizzy, she leant against Captain Amberley and tried not to cry. “I’m sorry, sir. I...I’m not *usually* like this...!”

Captain Amberley kindly handed her his handkerchief as she dissolved into exhausted tears.

Removing her borrowed cloak, he turned her around gently and deftly refastened her bodice. Then he turned her back to face him, draped the cloak around her again, and pinched the louse from where it was nestled in her hairline; crushing it between his finger and thumb. "There now, lass. Be calm. You're safe now. Sergeant Moore told me what happened. The provosts are under no illusions about who was really to blame, so you've nothing to fear there. The matter will be done with soon enough. Dry your eyes now, there's a good girl."

Tiffany tried, but she was still sniffing a little when Lieutenant Plunkett helped her up onto his pony. He looked anxiously up at her, and then turned once again to Captain Amberley. "Sir, please, let me at least *try* to do something about what happened!"

The captain shook his head firmly. "Best that we leave the provosts to deal with it for now, lad. If you must be busy, then find the poor lass some bread or biscuit, if you can. Food will help settle her nerves nicely."

## Chapter Eight

Tiffany did not see or hear from Major Lompton for several days after that. She was kept busy adapting to her new routine anyhow. Captain Amberley had tasked her with cooking and sewing for the unmarried members of the Rifles. The young time traveller rode on Lieutenant Plunkett's pony since Mr Rigg's carriage proved unavailable, slept each night in a curtained off corner of Captain Amberley's own tent, and ate her meals with the sergeants of his company in their mess. Finally, on the afternoon of Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> February 1814, Major Lompton sent a young aide-de-camp to fetch Tiffany. Sergeant Moore and Sergeant Marsh both stepped in front of her and glared silently at the hapless ensign until he turned tail and fled. Tiffany tried not to laugh. Then she realised that everyone else present was already doing so, and joined in.

It was snowing that day. Perhaps the inclement weather was what had kept Major Lompton from seeking Tiffany out in person. At any rate, he caught her alone three hours later; whilst Tiffany

was making up her bedroll. She looked around when she heard the tent flap rustle, and saw Major Lompton standing over her: his grey greatcoat buttoned fully up to his chin, and his shako pulled down as snugly as possible on his head.

He glowered down at her. “Kindly explain yourself, Miss Sutton!”

Tiffany stood up hurriedly. “Major Lompton! Um, sorry for having er...well. Run off, I suppose. You scared me a little the last time that we met.”

Major Lompton snorted. “Did I? Well then, you must have my sincere apologies for it. And what, pray tell, is Captain Amberley’s excuse for *his* actions?”

Captain Amberley answered him from the doorway; having just arrived. “Oh, give over, sir! You were being wholly ungentlemanly to her, and well you know it, too! Besides which, I saw her first.” He strode across to them, and put his left arm around Tiffany’s shoulders. “We’ve made an arrangement, haven’t we, lass?”

Tiffany blushed. She nodded feebly. “Um, yes. What he said. An arrangement.”

“Ha! An *arrangement*, is it? I’d not have thought her to be at all your type, Simon!” Major Lompton smirked. “Well, far be it from me to interfere in other men’s petty romances! Nonetheless, you still promised me a painting, Miss Sutton. The materials required have been sourced, and are in my tent. I

trust that you had not forgotten about it?" He nodded to Captain Amberley. "Have her come to me later this evening so that she may make her initial sketches. Send a chaperone along with her, should you deem it to be necessary. Hell, you may come yourself, if you would prefer to!"

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the tent. Captain Amberley lifted his arm away from Tiffany's shoulders. He smiled kindly at her. "Sorry about that, lass. I only sought to rein him in a bit. Rest assured that I have no secret interest in you."

Tiffany smiled back at him. "I appreciate your candour, sir. Still with that in mind, how long should I risk keeping the major waiting?"

Captain Amberley shrugged. "Eh, ask young Plunkett when he'll be free."

And so, merely an hour later, Tiffany and Lieutenant Plunkett arrived at Major Lompton's tent. It was still early in the evening, but sunset had already been and gone. The snow remained constant. Lieutenant Plunkett's thin face was pinched with cold as well as hunger. Tiffany, wrapped up snugly in Lord Ollerington's cloak, wished that the young rifleman had let her share it with him on their walk there. *He's been so protective of me since he learned what almost happened! They all have, really.*

She let go of his arm and tugged at his sleeve just before they entered the tent. "We're sharing this

cloak on the way back later, and that's final!" Then she hurried on into the tent ahead of him before he could argue.

Lieutenant Plunkett hastened after her; stumbling to a halt and saluting their host a mere three steps into the tent. "Good evening, Major Lompton! I have escorted Miss Sutton to you as ordered, sir!"

Major Lompton nodded to them both from behind his campaign desk. He was in the middle of writing something; most probably a report. "Yes, I can see that. Do make yourselves comfortable. I will be with you presently. Miss Sutton, the trunk by the far wall contains your materials. Regrettably, there are only wood panels available as surfaces. Aside from the latter restriction, you may of course inform me if there is anything else that you require. The items will remain in my charge, the better to avoid them being damaged or misplaced."

Tiffany nodded glumly. "Yes, I suppose that does make sense, even if I would rather have free access to them! Um, thank you for acquiring them for me, sir."

The major smiled thinly. "You are most welcome, Miss Sutton. And you should know that there is nothing preventing you from making your abode here with me, should you so choose."

Lieutenant Plunkett looked distinctly uncomfortable at this blatant proposition, but he said nothing, and sat down in one of the four high

backed campaign chairs. Tiffany, firmly determined to prove herself a professional artist, gritted her teeth and smiled politely as she removed the cloak and went to fetch the materials. She suspected that rising to the major's bait would only serve to create an unpleasant scene. *If he wants to scowl and brood and be jealous, then that's his business! I have my own problems to worry about.*

Major Lompton had finished his paperwork by the time that Tiffany was ready to begin her initial sketch of him. He seated himself opposite Lieutenant Plunkett and poured them all some wine. At first, the two officers occupied themselves by playing at cards together, and making quiet conversation on how long the snow was expected to last. This soon devolved into them both pretending to slyly interrogate Tiffany on the same subject. It was clearly not intended as a serious effort. The young time traveller laughed it off, and joined in the joke; offering up a series of increasingly ludicrous predictions about the weather in a completely deadpan voice, until all three of them were overcome with laughter.

It was a nice way to spend an evening, Tiffany thought, as she ignored her still roiling stomach and accepted the major's offer of a second glass of wine. "Thank you, sir."

"A pleasure, Miss Sutton." Major Lompton readied another three glasses of wine. He handed

Tiffany her drink, and then carried the other two glasses over to where he and Lieutenant Plunkett were sitting; frowning as he retook his chair. "My dear fellow! I fear that this accursed cold has half done for you. Will you take a restorative? It will do you good, sir, and ease my heart a little on your behalf."

Lieutenant Plunkett's ears pinked at the offer. Then he nodded shyly. "Aye, sir. I confess that I would appreciate it, thank you kindly."

"Good man!" Major Lompton beamed at him, and sprang back to his feet. "I shall fetch it for you immediately! My father's own recipe, you know. The old man swears by the stuff for such circumstances. He insisted that I take a few bottles of it with me when I left on campaign, and very lucky that he did so, eh?"

"Aye, sir. Thank you, sir." Lieutenant Plunkett took the glass of cordial and drank it down swiftly as instructed; grimacing slightly at the taste. "I must say, sir, I think I *do* feel a little better!"

Major Lompton nodded sagely. "Yes, I knew you would! It truly is an excellent restorative."

They returned to their cards; this time debating on whether the major ought to bother purchasing himself another horse. He had seen one he liked the look of being offered for sale by an officer in a different regiment, and he wanted a second opinion on the animal's value. As it happened, Lieutenant

Plunkett knew of the horse in question. Yawning sleepily into his hand, he informed Major Lompton that both Captain Amberley and Sergeant Moore reckoned it to be well formed and even tempered. This assessment pleased the major, who thanked Lieutenant Plunkett profusely for having told him. After this, their conversation petered slowly out.

Tiffany stepped out from behind her easel a few minutes later to look at Major Lompton; wanting to be sure of the angle of his jaw. She paused at the sight. He was slumped back a little in his chair, sipping his wine slowly. His gaze was fixed on Lieutenant Plunkett, who had dozed off in the opposite chair with his head flung back and his hands folded atop his stomach. There was something unexpectedly tender about the major's expression; an air of exasperated fondness for the young officer emanating unspoken from every inch of him. Tiffany's eyes widened in surprise for a moment. Then she smiled and went back to her work. *Huh, I suppose it's nice to know that I'm not the only bisexual disaster around here!*

Major Lompton's voice rumbled softly. "I can see you smiling from the corner of my eye, Miss Sutton. I wonder: is it your passion for the art which makes you so merry, or the subject?"

Tiffany almost dropped the charcoal. Blushing furiously at having been caught staring, she tried to muster up an excuse. "Um, you know, just the love

of the thing, and all that! We artists *do* need to be passionate! About our um, work. And such.”

The major quirked his lips as if he were suppressing a smirk, or perhaps even a laugh. “Yes, indeed. And not merely passionate, but also observant, too; at least from what I know of it. Do you think that you are good at observing things, Miss Sutton? Are you sure to make a thorough study of them?”

“Well, as they say, the devil is in the details!” Tiffany smiled brightly at him, and then hissed at herself for the mistake. “Ugh! Just...just forget I said that last part, please! It’s an idiom from the future. It hasn’t been coined yet.”

Major Lompton turned his head to look at her. “A reference to the illuminated manuscripts?”

“Um, I suppose it could be, yes.” Tiffany frowned. “I’ll have to try and look it up when I eventually get home.”

He hummed pensively. “Have you determined how the pendant works then?”

“No, but I’m sure to figure it out sooner or later!” Tiffany set down the charcoal and traced the fingers of her left hand over the time pendant. “At least, I *hope* I will. Not that I’m not enjoying my stay here in 1814, of course, but...!”

“Enough!” Major Lompton glowered and rose abruptly to his feet; setting his glass aside. “You are thinner than you were when I first saw you. There

are shadows underneath your eyes put there by the ravages of cold and deprivation. You have changed, and are changing still; withering away like some frail, exotic blossom! I hate to witness it!” He gestured towards Lieutenant Plunkett, who was now fully asleep in his chair. “It is bad enough when such cruel alteration is wrought upon one such as *he*, poor, precious fellow, but you, my dear, you are no soldier!”

Tiffany edged back as the major strode across the tent towards her. There was a wild look in his eyes. “Sir, please! You must control yourself!”

“Must I really?” He paused just within an arm’s reach of her. Stretching out his left hand, he gently cupped her face; making a soft, soothing noise when she flinched. “Do not be afraid, my dear girl. Surely you know that I won’t hurt you?”

“Ugh!” Tiffany pushed his hand away angrily. She was in no mood to coddle his feelings. “I’m not scared of you, sir! I’m just not bloody interested in any of that right now!”

The latter utterance was louder than she had intended it to be. Lieutenant Plunkett jolted upright in the chair; fumbling for a rifle that he wasn’t carrying. “Halt! Who goes there?” Then he blinked and looked around him properly. He seemed to gather his wits. “Oh! My apologies, please; I...I fear that I must have fallen asleep. What’s happening?”

Major Lompton folded his hands neatly behind his back and turned away from Tiffany to answer the question. His voice was calm but cold. "Nothing of any importance, lieutenant! It grows late. I think it best that you escort Miss Sutton back, before the snow worsens any further. Leave the materials as they are; my aide-de-camp will see to them. Goodnight to you both."

Tiffany somehow managed to nod politely and make her own goodbyes. She wasn't sure what she was more upset with; the major's selfishness, or her own conflicting emotions. *Why can't I bring myself to tell him what happened?*

Lieutenant Plunkett held up Lord Ollerington's cloak; intending to help Tiffany into it. Major Lompton called out to them sharply. "Put that down! Use one of mine instead, and see to it that Miss Sutton is kept well covered by it. I should not like her to fall ill." He gestured curtly towards the coatrack. "Take a better coat for yourself too, sir. The one you have on is fit only for a beggar. You are an officer, and you should dress as one. I will put an order in on your behalf as a gift if you do not soon bother to arrange it! I have done so already for Miss Sutton's needs. The fellow who delivered the paints has assured me that it will be here by tomorrow. It would be little hardship to repeat the task for you, lieutenant."

Tiffany blinked in surprise, and blushed. "Thank

you, sir! You are very generous. I...I'm sorry to have been such poor company tonight."

Major Lompton's expression softened. He smiled sadly at her. "It is I who should apologise, Miss Sutton! And if you forgive me, then might I perchance beg your companionship unchaperoned tomorrow night? I am to dine with Colonel Archambeau at a formal supper to celebrate the reclaiming of his family's ancestral estate here in France. All the senior officers have been invited to attend it; even Lord Wellington! I should very much like to have you there with me."

Lieutenant Plunkett, his thin face already flushed with embarrassment over the matter of his wardrobe, now looked even more uncomfortable. "With all due respect, sir, I don't think Captain Amberley will approve of Miss Sutton accepting such an invitation. He's tasked himself with preserving her reputation."

"Your concern is noted, lieutenant." Major Lompton raised his eyebrows suggestively at Tiffany. "However, I seem to recall that women from Miss Sutton's time do not worry about such things. Is that not still the case, my dear?"

Tiffany grimaced. "It's gotten rather more complicated, sir. I'd like to go to the supper with you, and I don't mind if we're unchaperoned for it. But...well...you might want to avoid getting your hopes up too much."

“She was attacked, sir.” Lieutenant Plunkett rejoined the conversation. “One of the other officers tried to take advantage of her whilst we were fighting at Saint-Palais. That’s why Captain Amberley has taken charge of her.”

Major Lompton’s smile vanished. Striding forwards, he clasped Tiffany’s hands in his own and pressed them tenderly. “Who was it, my dear girl? Tell me, and I will avenge you!”

“Begging both of your pardons, but it might be a bit too late for that.” Lieutenant Plunkett shuffled his feet. “It was Captain Hindle, sir, and Mrs Rollant helped him. Captain Amberley was to duel with Captain Hindle over it this evening, with Sergeant Moore as his second. It’s likely all over and done with by now.” He brightened then. “Oh, but you could still see to Mrs Rollant! The captain won’t duel a woman. It isn’t right that she should get away unpunished.”

“Hey!” Tiffany interrupted him. “Nobody told *me* anything about a duel! What else haven’t I been included in?”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked abashed. “Sorry, Miss Sutton. Captain Amberley and Sergeant Moore both said not to tell you ahead of it. They didn’t want you to worry.”

Major Lompton nodded his agreement. “They were quite right to preserve you from knowing of it, my dear. Please, put it from your mind now.”

“I will *not* put it from my mind!” Tiffany tugged her hands free anxiously. “Captain Amberley and Sergeant Moore agreed to fight in a literal *duel* for me! For all that we know, they could be hurt, or...or dead! We need to go and check on them right now!”

## Chapter Nine

They crossed the encampment together in search of Captain Amberley and Sergeant Moore. They found the two men in question sitting together in Captain Amberley's tent, where they were drinking tea and playing cards with Sergeant Marsh. All three men rose to their feet in greeting. To Tiffany's immense relief, there was no sign of any injuries. She ran forwards, and flung her arms around the surprised captain's neck. "Oh, thank goodness! You're alive, sir! And sergeant, you too!"

Sergeant Moore patted her gently on the back as she pulled him into the hug too. "There now, miss. Don't worry your poor heart. Nobody's hurt."

Captain Amberley sighed and unhooked Tiffany's arm from around him. "Plunkett, did you tell her about that ruddy duel?"

"Yes, sir!" Lieutenant Plunkett blushed and stood rigidly to attention. "Sorry, sir!"

Major Lompton cut in impatiently. "Never mind that now! Miss Sutton has been worried. Tell us what happened in your duel with Hindle."

“Nothing to tell, sir. There was no duel. The coward ran to Colonel Archambeau instead, and begged him to intercede.” Captain Amberley shook his head and smiled as he explained further. “Pity for him that the duel was Lord Ollerington’s idea! He’d been looking into the matter after having met Miss Sutton himself. He told me before he departed for Saint-Jean-de-Luz with the field marshal that I was to issue the challenge; reckoned it would flush Hindle out. When it did, Colonel Archambeau gave him a choice. He could deny any wrongdoing and duel me for his honour, or resign his commission and return to England in disgrace. Hindle chose the latter. Packed up his things and left within the hour. Took Mrs Rollant too; on the colonel’s orders. Good bloody riddance, if you ask me.”

Sergeant Moore nodded. “Amen to that, sir!”

“He had to forfeit what would have been his wages for this month too!” Sergeant Marsh winked as he handed Tiffany a small burlap sack. The contents clinked. “A gift for you, Miss Sutton, by the order of Lord Ollerington!”

“Another gift, eh?” Major Lompton folded his arms across his chest, and feigned a scowl; the approval in his eyes belying the expression. “It is as I feared, Miss Sutton: he means to steal your affections! I will have to outdo his efforts.”

Tiffany set down the sack, embarrassed, but also deeply touched at the gesture. “I’ll write to him

formally, and to Colonel Archambeau too, and thank them both. But really, I can't keep all of this!"

Captain Amberley shrugged. "Divvy it up however you see fit, lass. There's plenty of folk who will thank you for a bit of charity." He nodded to Major Lompton. "A pity that we were unable to act on our mutual concerns regarding Hindle's proclivities any sooner, sir. It should never have gone as far as it did."

"Indeed, sir. It is a sorrow that we must both live with. Thank God that it went no further!" Major Lompton clasped hold of Captain Amberley's right shoulder. "You have done a fine thing tonight, Simon! Come – walk with me a time, and let us commiserate over the whole horrid matter."

There was silence for a moment as the two officers left the tent together. Then Sergeant Moore nodded to Sergeant Marsh. "Right then! Well, we'd best be off ourselves. Goodnight, Miss Sutton, and you too, sir."

Sergeant Marsh grinned knowingly and nudged Lieutenant Plunkett gently with his elbow as he walked past him. "Goodnight, sir! Goodnight, Miss Sutton!"

Tiffany looked around at the abandoned cards still scattered on the table, and the unfinished cups of tea. She sighed. "I suppose that I'd better tidy this up!"

"I'll help, miss!" Lieutenant Plunkett began

clearing away the tea things. "I like the sketch you made of the major. You're very talented."

"Thank you." Tiffany pulled back the curtain dividing the tent and placed the sack of money on the floor beside her bedroll. Then she set to work gathering up the cards. "To be fair, I've had quite a bit of practise. You know; restoring that other painting of him. I could probably draw him in my sleep by this point!"

"A delineation of dreams." Lieutenant Plunkett blushed then. "Sorry, Miss Sutton! Don't mind my nonsense."

Tiffany smiled at him. "Actually, I thought it was quite poetic of you! And accurate, too."

"Thank you, miss." The young officer closed the wicker basket that housed Captain Amberley's assorted drinking vessels. "So, who paints his portrait originally, anyhow, if it's safe for you to say? Is it someone famous? I expect that the major would only ever hire the best."

"That's the funny thing about it." Tiffany frowned as she recalled the painting in question. "Nobody knew *who* the artist was. The painting isn't signed, you see. And there's no written record of who made it, or even when. It's a mystery in historical circles."

Lieutenant Plunkett looked pensive. "What if it's you who paints it, Miss Sutton? While you're here, I mean; in this time. What if...what if you were

always fated to come here?”

“Oh! You mean a fixed time loop; like the one that they had in *Terminator!*” Tiffany caught herself then. “Ugh! Forget about the example I just used, please. It’s...you know. Future stuff.”

Lieutenant Plunkett chuckled. “I’m growing accustomed to you telling me to do that, miss! Consider it forgotten. Whatever it was.”

“Thank you. But you might be right about the artist. I’ll keep it in mind.” Tiffany hesitated for a moment, before deciding to plunge right in and meddle. “Um, so have you ever noticed how Major Lompton looks at you when he thinks that nobody else can see him?”

To her surprise, Lieutenant Plunkett simply shrugged. “Oh, he looks that way at a lot of people, miss! It’s just how he is.” He paused then, and looked worried. “I don’t mean to imply that he doesn’t have a genuine interest in *you*, Miss Sutton! But well, you’re *special*. You’re from the future. Me, I’m just another one of his passing fancies. He often dallies with his officers, you see. And with ladies, too, of course. Not that it’s safe to speak of such things openly, mind! The major could be imprisoned for it, regardless of his station in life, if ever the wrong people were to find out. He might even end up hanged. I know *I* would, if they caught on to me.”

“We call that being bisexual in 1989.” Tiffany

felt confident that Lieutenant Plunkett could be trusted not to throw the latter term around. “Liking both men and women in that sort of way, I mean. And don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.” She paused again; gathering her courage a little. “Er...so, is it my imagination, or did the sergeants leave us alone together on purpose?”

The young officer blushed. He smiled shyly at Tiffany. “Might be that they did, miss. If that’s what you’d like, I mean. I’d certainly never presume.”

Tiffany smiled back at him. “I appreciate that, thank you. And, um, I think I might like to be alone with you on purpose, yes.”

“Right then.” Lieutenant Plunkett tugged nervously at the collar of his uniform. “I...er...would it be agreeable to you if I were to hold your hand, Miss Sutton?”

Nodding her assent, Tiffany extended her right hand, and gazed up at him pleadingly. “Please, call me Tiffany! I miss hearing people say my name.”

“Very well, then – Tiffany.” Lieutenant Plunkett smiled down at her bashfully as he took her hand. “Do...do you want to call me Evelyn?”

Tiffany smiled back at him. “Yes, I’d like that, thank you – Evelyn.”

He traced his gloved thumb gently over her knuckles. “You know now that I like both, Tiffany. But...but there’s another secret that you must know about me. I cannot woo you further unless I tell it to

you. It would be unconscionable!”

Tiffany frowned. “What sort of secret?”

Lieutenant Plunkett drew in a slow, deep breath, and pressed Tiffany’s hand to his chest. “Feel carefully. You will know. Please don’t hate me for it. We cannot choose how we are born. But I chose how I would live. Despite my form, I am a man.”

“Oh!” Tiffany wondered how the young officer had managed to craft such a near-perfect disguise. “This explains what Sergeant Marsh said in the woods! I take it that he knows too then?”

“Aye, he does.” Lieutenant Plunkett nodded. “He and Sergeant Moore found out quite by accident, and they have helped me ever since. I reckon it’s because they know what it’s like to be seen as unnatural, if you take my meaning.”

Tiffany blinked as she parsed what he meant by the latter insinuation. “So, are they also like you, or is it more like Major Lompton’s situation?”

He blushed. “Nobody could question either of *them* being men! But...well, they never dally with anyone. They’re content together, you might say. Again, it’s not something that can be spoken of.”

“I hate that I understand what that means.” Tiffany smiled sadly. “I mean, I’m glad that they have one another, but the way that they have to pretend is awful. Love shouldn’t have to hide. Sadly, it’s not entirely safe to be open about it in 1989 either. They don’t *hang* us, but...well.”

“Are you an unnatural too then?” Lieutenant Plunkett leaned into Tiffany’s touch, and gently stroked her face. “According to society, I mean?”

“I’m bisexual, yes.” Tiffany edged closer to the young officer. “Um, I think this is the point when you kiss me, by the way.”

Lieutenant Plunkett blushed and looked askance. “I...er...I’ve not kissed anyone before.”

“Oh?” Tiffany felt her heart melt a little. She moved her hand up to his face and gently cupped his cheek. “Well, to start with, you do it like this.”

The two of them were still kissing and fondling one another when Captain Amberley walked back into the tent. He stopped and stared at them both as they sprang apart; his expression unreadable. Then he sighed resignedly. “Just see to it that you treat each other right. Beyond that. It’s none of my blessed business. Now – it’s late, and I’m bloody tired. Either make your goodbyes for the night, or slip off to bed together; be that here, or in young Plunkett’s tent! I’m going to sleep either way. Thank you both kindly for having tidied up.” He turned towards his palliase. “Goodnight!”

“Goodnight, sir!” Tiffany smiled. Tugging Lieutenant Plunkett over to her bedroll, she closed the curtain behind them, and whispered. “Please stay with me, Evelyn! You could catch cold if you leave. We don’t have to *do* anything if you don’t want to. We can just sleep together for the night.”

Lieutenant Plunkett wrapped his arms around Tiffany and kissed her again. “That might be for the best, aye. It *is* dreadfully cold out there, but I don’t want to disturb the captain.”

There was a mildly amused grunt from the other part of the tent. “Then shut up and go to sleep, lad! The wall between us is peculiarly thin, you know.”

Tiffany giggled. “Sorry, Captain Amberley! We’ll be quiet now!”

## Chapter Ten

Several dozen large parcels wrapped in crisp brown paper arrived for Tiffany early the next day; not long after Lieutenant Plunkett had departed. They were delivered in a handcart by the same ensign who had sought her out on Major Lompton's behalf the day before. The young man looked terribly nervous as he explained his business. He tugged his forelock politely and dashed away again before any sergeants could appear to challenge him. Tiffany winced at the sight. *Oh dear! He must hate Major Lompton for sending him to find me again!*

She took the parcels into Captain Amberley's tent a few at a time, and then sat down on her bedroll to open them. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Major Lompton has sent the makings of me an entire wardrobe! What the...how...where did he even get these from?"

Captain Amberley was sitting reading at his campaign desk. He chuckled as he overheard Tiffany's exclamation. "Best not to wonder at it, Miss Sutton! Men of his station in life want for very

little, even during war.”

“That seems to be putting it mildly, sir!” Tiffany thought of the artist’s materials that the major had also somehow produced for her. “Where am I going to put all of this?”

“You need to buy yourself some luggage, lass.” Captain Amberley was clearly much too absorbed in his book to pay attention to just how many parcels had arrived. “Ask one or other of the sutlers. They’ll have something.”

Shaking her head in wonder, Tiffany began cataloguing everything else that had been sent. Twelve delicate white silk chemises. Two dozen pairs of silk stockings, along with an assortment of ribbons to fasten them with. Two sets of stiff white cotton stays, each with a wooden busk. Six plain white lace petticoats, and another dozen such garments in a broad variety of colours and fabrics. Two nightgowns. One back bustle pad. Four simple caps, for wearing indoors, or whilst sleeping. Two chemisettes; one plain, one with a ruffled collar. Six pairs of gloves in both silk and wool; half of them long, and the rest short. A finely woven cashmere shawl patterned in deep green and scarlet. Two far more delicate gauze shawls patterned in gold and silver. Four high-cut, long-sleeved sprigged muslin morning gowns in white and soft, pastel colours, and four others made from brightly dyed wool for colder days. Eight differently styled and coloured

walking gowns, each one paired with a bonnet and a coordinating pelisse or spencer. A promenade gown cut from fine sky-blue satin, with matching embroidered silk slippers and a lace trimmed bonnet. An elegant redingote of fine blue wool. A dainty blue and white parasol with a bamboo frame. A sensibly cut worsted wool riding habit, with a jaunty little hat and veil, all in crimson. A sumptuously warm looking dark blue velvet cloak with a deep hood. Two pairs of wooden pattens. A pair of brown kidskin half-boots. Four pairs of velvet slippers in various colours, and four more such pairs made from silk. Six handkerchiefs. Three plain reticules for everyday use. An ornate silver chatelaine. A silver hairbrush and comb, along with a matching mirror.

In the final parcel, there was an extensively trimmed layered white satin and lace evening gown, with a low-cut bodice, and short, puffy sleeves. It was paired with a narrow-brimmed satin toque in the same colour, trimmed with a band of lace. A trio of pure white egret feathers were tucked into the band. For modesty's sake, a triangular shaped fichu cut from sheer white muslin completed the ensemble. Then there was a pair of soft white velvet slippers, and a white velvet pelisse with a high, embroidered collar. A white satin reticule decorated with pearls and tiny silver beads, and with two neatly folded lace handkerchiefs and a tiny sewing

kit tucked inside it. A hand-painted silk folding fan with polished wooden sticks. The pattern on it depicted a white fox in full flight from a pack of hounds and their human masters; the latter figures mounted on horseback. There was also a mantle; made from the pelts of what looked like several dozen pure white foxes. Tiffany cringed at the sight of their poor little paws, and at the now forever sealed lids of their dead eyes. She set it firmly aside; determined never to wear it unless there was no other option. *I already feel bad enough about the kidskin! And really, did he have to pair them with that horrible fan? Ugh, at least I can paint over it!*

Nestled amid all these fancier items, was a polished wooden box, with a brass latch and hinges. The Lompton family coat of arms was carved into the centre of the lid. Tiffany opened it with some measure of trepidation. She shrieked when she saw the contents. “Oh my God!”

Captain Amberley finally looked up from his book. “What’s the matter, lass? Did he send you something inappropriate?”

“Parure!” Tiffany’s hands trembled as she held out the box for him to see for himself. The lid had fallen shut. “Look, please!”

Noting the panicked expression on her face, Captain Amberley set down his book and rose to his feet. He padded over and opened the box. “Ah, I see. Family jewellery, eh? Looks expensive too!”

Tiffany pressed the box into his hands. "I *can't* accept these from him, sir!"

"No, indeed not. Some might argue that you ought not to go to supper with him tonight either." Captain Amberley peered at the glittering contents of the parure for another few seconds. Then he shut the box and set it aside. "Do you want me to go and speak with the major on your behalf? I can tell him that you've come to an arrangement with Lieutenant Plunkett, and changed your mind about attending."

Tiffany hid her face in her hands. "But won't he be offended, sir? I don't want to hurt him."

"Reckon as he'll get over it soon enough." Captain Amberley nodded towards the rest of the parcels. "You should return those too, or else pay him for them. It's not right to do otherwise. Not if you don't want him to hold any claim over you going forwards. And you can't have both of them, Miss Sutton. You need to choose which man you want." He patted her gently on the shoulder. "If you ask me, you're better off with Plunkett anyhow. He might be poor, aye, but he's young, and he doesn't have it in him to be cruel. Take what you will from that."

"Are you sure that Colonel Archambeau won't think that I'm snubbing him if I don't attend the supper, sir?" Tiffany wrung her hands anxiously. "He's done a lot for me. Then again, I don't even know if he knows that I've been invited! Would

Major Lompton have told him to expect me?"

"I suppose he may have done, aye." Captain Amberley sighed. "You do well to consider it, Miss Sutton. I've no patience for such things myself. That's why I'll like as not remain at the rank of captain! Major Lompton though, he could go far in life. He is to be a baronet one day. It would be a pity for him to lose standing. Especially after the lads and I went to so much effort saving him from the ruddy frogs."

Tiffany smiled at the captain's dry humour. "I will go to supper with him tonight as a friend then, sir. I like to think that he will still think of me as such going forwards anyhow."

"He is enough of a man to do so." Captain Amberley took out his pocket watch and checked the time. "Now, I have duties to be about, and so do you! I'll speak with the major and explain things to him. Reckon I'd best talk to young Plunkett too. See you at dinner, lass."

He took the parure with him. Tiffany breathed a little easier in its absence. There had been both gold and silver items in the box; the latter paired with what had looked like white diamonds, and the former with various coloured stones. She shuddered to think how valuable the jewellery was. Had those been *real* gemstones? Not that it mattered much. *Even if they're paste, the metalwork alone is still be worth a small fortune!*

Her relief was to be short-lived. Major Lompton strode into the tent an hour later; while Tiffany was busy with her sewing. He set the parure down on the table beside her. "You will wear the diamonds tonight, Miss Sutton. They are for evenings. The others are for use during the day."

Tiffany set her sewing aside and stood up. "I know the current etiquette for different types of jewellery, sir, thanks all the same."

Major Lompton raised an eyebrow querulously. "Oh? I had wondered if perhaps there was a custom in 1989 precluding the wearing of such items unless to travel through time. Why else would you have refused to accept them? They will pair well enough with the time pendant, and I assure you that they aren't in any way magical, if *that* is your concern."

"Stop being snide!" Tiffany glared at him. "I take it that Captain Amberley told you then?"

"My officers report to me about many things, Miss Sutton. You will have to be less vague." The major seemed amused. "And really, my dear girl, *snide*? Is that how you speak to your benefactor?"

"It is when he's being a prat on purpose!" Tiffany folded her arms crossly. "Did Captain Amberley tell you or not?"

"Did he tell me?" Major Lompton sat down on the nearest chair. He stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles; gazing at Tiffany all the while "Tell me what?" His smile was strangely

catlike; amused, predatory, and calculating, all at once. "Do you refer to your recent tryst with Lieutenant Plunkett?"

"Yes!" Tiffany all but hissed the word. "Yes, sir, that is exactly what I'm referring to!"

"Hmm." The major nodded. He was still smiling. "Very good! Finally, we are both clear as to the subject of our discussion. And yes, of course Captain Amberley told me about it. How else was he to explain his gallant attempt at discouraging my interest in you?"

Tiffany sighed in frustration. "I sense that he was not wholly successful then, sir."

"Not even in the slightest, my dear girl." With that, Major Lompton reached out with his left arm and hooked it around Tiffany's hips. Ignoring her squawk of protest, he pulled her onto his lap and held her firmly in place. "Now, listen here! I am very happy that you and the young lieutenant are in love. By happy coincidence, I am *also* perfectly willing to pursue both of you at once." He paused and kissed her cheek as if to prove his words. "I think that I might even like dear Plunkett a little more. Of the two of you, he has the kinder nature. Alas! I cannot take him along as my companion for tonight's supper. You will have to suffice."

Tiffany stared at him for a long moment. She nodded slowly. "I like your solution, sir. But I'll only agree to it if Evelyn does too! You must ask

*him* first. I promise that I'll still go with you to the supper at Château d'Archambeaux tonight either way. Anything further...well."

"All else depends upon dear Evelyn, eh?" Major Lompton all but purred. "I look forward to convincing him of my worthiness!"

Tiffany smiled. "You should know that he's already noticed how you look at him, sir. I asked him last night. Sadly, he thinks himself only a passing fancy to you."

"Oh, does he now?" Major Lompton set her back on her feet and stood up immediately. "I will be sure to correct *that* misconception for him! Now – I must go, my dear one. There is much to be done before I will see you next. Be ready for me to collect you from here at seven o'clock this evening. We are to go by carriage to the supper, along with Mr Rigg and his companion for the evening." He bowed deeply to Tiffany. "Again, I give you my solemn oath that none of the items in that parure are known by me to be magical in any way. Wear the deuced diamonds! The fox fur mantle too; it shall be cold in the carriage."

With that, he was gone; striding purposefully out of the tent with his head high. Tiffany picked up her sewing and sat down again. *I just hope he doesn't upset Evelyn!*

A somewhat bemused looking Lieutenant Plunkett came and found Tiffany in the sergeants'

mess during dinner. He bowed to her and sat down on the chair opposite to her with his allotted ration of boiled beef and rice. "Major Lompton came and spoke with me privately this morning, Tiffany. About what he discussed with you earlier. He um...he asked for my agreement. I gave it."

Tiffany smiled at him. "Thank you for confirming it with me, Evelyn."

"Here now!" Sergeant Moore had overheard him. "And what, pray tell me, is this then? First name terms! So, when is it?" He beamed at them as he sat down, and clapped Lieutenant Plunkett on the back. "When is the happy day to occur?"

Sergeant Marsh hurried over to join them. "What happy day? Who's getting wed?"

Tiffany gestured frantically for the two sergeants to be quiet. "Don't shout so!" She glanced around worriedly, but no one else seemed to have overheard them. "We aren't getting married!"

"Well, we might do, someday. I hope." Lieutenant Plunkett blushed and edged his chair a little closer to Tiffany's. "But not yet."

Sergeant Marsh crowed with delight; evidently not even remotely envious. "Ah, sir! Can Sergeant Moore and I come to the wedding breakfast? Oh – can we help with the arch too?"

"Aye, sir!" Sergeant Moore nodded happily. "A fine officer such as yourself *has* to have a sabre arch as part of his wedding ceremony!"

“Whenever it might happen, sir.” Sergeant Marsh sat down; grinning happily. “Are you going to wait until the war is over, so that you can take Miss Sutton home to England first?”

Tiffany had the sudden, deep suspicion, that there was going to be a wedding. Possibly, if indeed not probably, *very* soon. She just wasn’t altogether sure if either of the two sergeants cared *whose* wedding it would be. Amused but also somewhat peeved, she shook her head. “We’ve only just begun courting!”

Sergeant Moore patted her hand. “Aye, you’ve the right of it there, Miss Sutton! Can’t rush these sorts of things. There’s the banns needing to be read, for one.”

“Aye, that, and you’ll need a gown, too, pet!” Sergeant Marsh nudged Lieutenant Plunkett in the ribs with his elbow. “Make sure that she gets a right good one, eh, sir? She deserves it! And you should have a nice new coat for the day and all!”

The lieutenant sighed resignedly. “Why is everyone in this encampment so terribly set on my having a new coat?”

“Just after the middle of March, I’d think.” Sergeant Moore busied himself slicing up his beef. “For the banns to be done. Maybe the weather will have picked up by then too.”

Lieutenant Plunkett smiled contritely to Tiffany. “I hope you enjoy the supper at Colonel

Archambeau's estate this evening."

"I hope so too." Tiffany resisted the urge to try and stroke her foot along his lower leg. "Um, so will I see you tomorrow morning, or...?"

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded at once. "Oh, yes, absolutely! We can breakfast together, and you can tell me all about the supper. And I'll be sure to see you safely aboard Mr Rigg's carriage this evening too, I promise."

## Chapter Eleven

The supper took place in Colonel Archambeau's newly reclaimed ancestral home: the Château d'Archambeaux, close to the outskirts of Garris. It was a large house, with a somewhat plain exterior compared to most others of its type, and steeply pitched rooflines. Tiffany counted four floors above ground level, and she knew that there were likely basements and cellars too. According to Major Lompton, the snow-covered grounds surrounding it were vast, and had been immaculately kept even after the surviving family members fled in 1789. Unfortunately, it was almost eight o'clock as the carriage arrived, and little could be seen of them in the dark. Tiffany hoped that she might manage to return for another visit during daylight hours. *It would be nice to do some sightseeing!*

For now, however, she was just glad to exit the carriage. The previously jovial Mr Rigg had been surprisingly poor company on the journey there. He had barely spoken to anyone in the carriage. When he had, it was in little more than stuttered

monosyllables. Apparently, he was a nervous traveller. Tiffany privately thought that this must make his job as a war correspondent rather tricky, but she didn't say so. It would have been too unkind. Major Lompton had been less understanding. He had not openly chided Mr Rigg for his behaviour, but he had given the poor man some very cold looks. Tiffany, who had not been especially comfortable herself with rattling along at high speed along the pitch dark, snowy road, thought rather less of him for it. *It's not Mr Rigg's fault that he's scared. I suppose this is why he kept on making excuses not to have me travel in his carriage. He was probably too embarrassed. Which is silly, really, because frankly carriage rides are bloody terrifying!*

Mr Rigg's companion, a stunningly attractive young French woman with black hair and blue eyes named Mademoiselle Babette Dupont, had been wholly at ease with travelling in the carriage. She didn't seem all that keen on the gentleman accompanying her though. This was unfortunate for him, but perfectly understandable. The eldest granddaughter of the couple who were housing Mr Rigg, she was eighteen years old and only recently out. Tiffany felt quite sorry for her. *Poor thing! I bet she only agreed to come with him because of how few options she has. All the young French men have been conscripted.*

It was to be a formal meal, with a full twelve courses to the menu. Tiffany doubted if any of them would be from a tin this time. The young time traveller kept that thought to herself as Major Lompton escorted her into the château, where their host was already mingling with his other guests. She soon spotted Lord Ollerington amongst them. The general was only just returned from visiting Saint-Jean-de-Luz with Lord Wellington. Although finely dressed and cleanly shaven, he looked tired, and more than a little frustrated. Tiffany sighed. *It's such a pity that I can't tell him how the weather will change for the better soon!*

Major Lompton helped Tiffany out of her deep blue velvet cloak, and handed it to a servant. His demeanour shifted abruptly. To Tiffany's surprise, he glared at her. "Where is the fox fur mantle that I gave to you? I told you to wear it this evening!"

Tiffany shook her head. "I don't like wearing fur, sir; especially not from animals who are only killed for that purpose or for sport. It's cruel. And besides, between the cloak and this pelisse, I was warm enough without it."

There was a sudden cold draft. The candles flickered as Major Lompton replied. "Damn it all, Miss Sutton! You are not as clever as you think!"

Lord Ollerington stepped in then. He stared coldly at Major Lompton. "A gentleman does not speak so to a lady, sir!"

The sternly issued rebuke snapped Major Lompton back to his senses. He bowed deeply to Tiffany. "My apologies, Miss Sutton. I simply cannot bear to see you risk your health so! Lord Ollerington, on that subject, I returned the cloak that you so kindly loaned to my companion here during her time of need. I had one of my aide-de-camps deliver it earlier today."

Tiffany bit back a grimace at the mention of the horrible night in question. She smiled shyly at the general when he looked at her. "Er, it's nice to see you again, my lord. Thank you very much for helping me."

Lord Ollerington bowed politely. "Not at all, Miss Sutton. I am informed that the matter is now fully resolved. I trust that the outcome is to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, my lord, it is. Thank you." Tiffany thought gratefully of the money she had been compensated with. "I am well set now. And Captain Amberley has kindly established himself as my guardian."

"Very good." Lord Ollerington nodded to her. Then he returned his attention to Major Lompton. "I do not know if you expected it, but your parents are also attending this evening's supper, sir. Lord Wellington and I spoke with them a little while ago. It seems that they are keen to meet with you."

Major Lompton sighed. "That is in part my own doing, my lord! I wrote to them when I first

encountered Miss Sutton; informing them that I intended to take her under my protection.”

Tiffany gasped. “What? But why, sir?”

The major smiled. “Given the expenditure involved, it seemed only right to explain the situation to them as swiftly as possible. Better that, than to leave them to make the discovery via poorly informed rumours and other such gossip.”

Tiffany blushed and shook her head. “I really would prefer to pay you back, you know, sir! I don’t like to be a burden.”

Lord Ollerington looked approving at that, but he said nothing. Major Lompton simply waved off the offer. “You are no burden to me, Miss Sutton. On the contrary: I find you to be pleasing company.”

The general cleared his throat politely. “Excuse me please; I am required elsewhere.”

Tiffany couldn’t help but gaze after him as he walked away to speak with someone else. She sighed. “Sometimes major, I still can’t quite believe that I’m really here! Anyhow, how did your parents manage to get from England to here so quickly? For that matter, how had your letter even reached them yet? We’re in the south of France! That must be a week’s travel, at least!”

Major Lompton chuckled. “My dear Miss Sutton, whatever makes you think that my parents were in England to begin with? War or no war, they like to travel. They keep a second home in this part

of France, not to mention a third one in Spain, and a fourth in Italy! I gather that they intend to acquire a fifth in Germany too. They were here some weeks before you ever arrived. My mother even helped with choosing your wardrobe. Come – give the deuced servant your pelisse too, and let us go and meet with them now. And with Archambeau too, if we can but find him in this crowd!”

Tiffany removed her pelisse unaided and handed it to the servant; thanking the man politely for his assistance. Then she took Major Lompton’s arm and let him guide her across the room. “So, um, was it your mother’s idea to send the parure? Because I’m still a bit freaked out about that, to be honest.”

He settled his right hand over her own; pinning it firmly against his left forearm. “Then I must be sure not to let you bolt, my dear girl! Although why you are so flustered by a few mere baubles is quite beyond me. There are a million more of them still undug and unpolished, I am sure, but only ever the one of *you*.”

There was no sign of their host, but Sir James and Lady Lompton were seated on a small settee in front of one of the tall windows. They were still an elegant couple, but they could not be called young; she was just entering her sixties, and he was a full ten years older again. Like their son, they were both aquiline featured, and fair of complexion, but only Sir James shared his strange, pale eye colour.

Although fashionably cut, the now elderly baronet's once glossy black hair was as silver as his brows. His wife's eyes were blue. Her brows had been neatly painted with kohl, and her tresses were too well hidden beneath her ornate satin turban for anyone to know their colour. She might easily have passed as being a good two decades younger.

Major Lompton introduced Tiffany to them almost casually. "Mother, Father! How do you both? It has been a long time indeed. Here is the young woman I wrote to you about – Miss Tiffany Sutton, of London. Miss Sutton, these are my parents – Sir James and Lady Lompton."

Tiffany felt distinctly unworthy. She curtsied to them as politely as she could. "How do, Sir James? How do, my lady?"

Sir James greeted her warmly; rising to bow to her, and then pressing her hand. "My dear Miss Sutton, it is indeed a pleasure!"

Lady Lompton patted the seat beside her and smiled at Tiffany. "Come, Miss Sutton! Sit here and talk with me. Sir James has some dull business to discuss with our dear William. Since it shall be very boring, I should like it if they part from us now. Go away, my dear ones. Miss Sutton and I will enjoy an apéritif or two together and see you again at the table when the supper begins."

To Tiffany's relief, she found it easy to talk to Lady Lompton. Indeed, the older woman could

scarcely have been any more gracious to her. By the time that the hors d'oeuvres were finished, the young time traveller had begun to think of Lady Lompton as a close confidante. She was pleased to find herself seated opposite her when the guests were summoned upstairs to the table, and happier yet to have Major Lompton immediately to her right, with Mademoiselle Dupont just beyond him, and Sir James opposite her. Mr Rigg had been seated to his young companion's right, where he was attempting to impress her with his regained conversational skills. But most exciting of all, as far as Tiffany felt, was the fact that she once again had Colonel Archambeau immediately to her left; the arrangement ranking her as the female guest of honour. Lord Wellington had, of course, been seated to the colonel's left; as befitted his status. Lord Ollerington was seated directly opposite the field marshal. He looked a little less uncomfortable than he had downstairs.

Tiffany beamed happily as the amuse-bouche was served. *Okay, it's official – tonight is my new favourite social event ever!*

Sadly, trouble arrived with the cheese course. Tiffany was enjoying sampling a sweet, nutty piece of Gruyère when it began. She had placed the cheese atop a thick chunk of bread, and daubed a little chutney that Colonel Archambeau had quietly recommended to her onto it for added flavour. As

such, her mouth was full, and so she was unable to refute Sir James' sudden declaration of approval for his eldest son's recent taste in romantic partners. She felt her face warm with horrified shame. *Ugh! Perhaps now would be a good time for me to employ that hideous fan!*

Instead, still chewing, by now somewhat desperately, Tiffany glanced up at Major Lompton's face in search of his support. He caught her eye, and sighed resignedly. "Hardly an appropriate topic for polite conversation, sir! Why, you have made our dear Miss Sutton blush!"

Tiffany didn't feel at all helped by the latter observation. If anything, it seemed that even more attention had been drawn to her discomfiture! She kicked irritably at Major Lompton's shins; knowing that her slipper clad feet could do his leather booted legs no injury. The food in her mouth suddenly seemed thick and sour. *He's barely even spoken to me since we sat down to eat, and now this?*

Beside her, Colonel Archangeau had begun to emanate an air of silent irritation. He set down his wine glass just a little too calmly. "Perhaps a change of subject now, qui?"

Lord Wellington agreed curtly. "Quite!"

Lady Lompton smiled graciously across the table at Tiffany. "Do not worry, Miss Sutton! Our eldest son has a curious aversion to matrimony, but you have my blessing to ensnare him, and that of his

father too. Isn't that right, Sir James?"

Sir James nodded eagerly. "Absolutely so, my dear! Please do marry the poor fool, Miss Sutton. He is far too old not to have a wife! Especially given his noble but dangerous career. Why, at this rate, the baronetcy will one day fall to his brother's son instead of his own."

Major Lompton grimaced. "I will remind you both that Edward is but two and twenty years himself, and intrigued *only* by his academic studies. He has likely not yet so much as traded tender glances with a girl!"

His mother gave him an arch look. "Precisely! It ought not to be his responsibility to bear. But with the way that you go on, my dear William, you will be dead in battle before you even *think* of finding a wife! And likely poor Miss Sutton too, if you must drag her about France with you, instead of seeing her safely installed somewhere or other."

"Hmm. You make a fair point there, I concede. War is indeed unsafe. And I suppose that I should hate to fail in my familial duties. Very well! I will propose to my chosen lady at once!" Major Lompton slammed down his cutlery and rose abruptly to his feet. "Mademoiselle Dupont – will you marry me?"

## Chapter Twelve

The resultant chaos allowed Tiffany to slip quietly out of the *salle haute* and back downstairs. Not wanting to be seen by anyone until she could collect herself, the young time traveller retreated to the nearest room with an open set of doors. This turned out to be a conservatory; with its high ceiling and three of its walls constructed out of wrought iron and glass. The final wall was by default the plain grey stone of the *château's* exterior. The doors were of heavy dark oak, with brass fittings. Their panels were intricately carved with an elaborate pattern of coiling vines and fantastical blooms. A neatly spaced line of matching oil lamps burned in sconces along the wall at either side of the doorway. The light from them illuminated the first two dozen or so feet of the conservatory; revealing a red tiled floor and neat red brick framed seed beds filled with moist, rich soil that was dotted with small green shoots. Beyond the back edges of the seed beds, everything was rendered into pooling shadow and vague greyness in the moonlight.

Closing the doors behind her for privacy, Tiffany sank down onto a nearby bench and covered her face with her hands to cry. She realised dully that she had no handkerchief; her reticule was still underneath her chair at the supper table. *So much for Major Lompton's supposedly passionate interest in me and Evelyn! Ugh, I've been so stupid! I can't believe I fell for his lies!*

A sudden soft rustling of foliage came from somewhere out of view. Tiffany startled slightly, and then dismissed it. *Probably just a prayer plant folding up its leaves for the night or something like that. Or there might be birds in here, I suppose. Or else a cat, or something.*

The sound came again; a little closer this time. Still sniffing but intrigued nonetheless by the mysterious rustling, Tiffany rose to her feet and walked to the edge of the lamplight. Straining her eyes, she peered into the darkness. A sweet, slightly spicy fragrance ghosted through her nostrils. It was unlike anything that she had ever smelled before. Inhaling deeply, the young time traveller savoured the intoxicating aroma. *Okay, seriously - what in the world is growing in this greenhouse, and how do I get perfume made from it?*

There was a polite cough from behind her. Turning, Tiffany saw Colonel Archambeau standing next to the bench. He bowed to her in greeting, and then stepped closer and passed her his handkerchief.

“It was the most awkward situation at the table, Mademoiselle Sutton.”

Tiffany wiped her face free of tears and handed the colonel back his by now thoroughly dampened handkerchief. All that she could smell now was his cologne. “Thank you, Monsieur le Comte. I apologise wholeheartedly for my role in the matter, but Major Lompton and his parents may answer for themselves. I had no idea of what would happen this evening.” She paused and then tugged off the diamond bracelets; setting them carefully on the bench. “These belong to his family. I never should have agreed to wear them.”

Colonel Archambeau watched as Tiffany removed the elegant riviere necklace, and the delicate earrings; leaving herself adorned only with the time pendant. “I think that he will regret his choice a good deal more than you will. A pity for Mademoiselle Dupont and her family.” He nodded to the still open wall panel in the grey stone that he had entered by. “I was born in this house, you know. My late mother fled to England with me during the revolution, of course, but that was later. My early years, they were spent here. I know all of Château d’Archambeaux’s secrets. There are hidden passages on every floor. That one leads not only back up to the salle haute, but downwards too; past the kitchens and on into the wine cellar. It was intended for the servants, you see. However, one

*could* also leave the house by it. Not through this area, of course, for there is no opening in the glass, but rather through the kitchens.”

Tiffany imagined for a moment how that might go. She pictured slipping quietly back outside via the kitchens; perhaps even sending someone from there to fetch her pelisse and her cloak, before climbing into a carriage and instructing the driver to whisk her safely back to the encampment. “No one else at the table has even noticed that I left yet, have they, my lord?”

“Not that I observed.” Colonel Archambeau looked solemn now, and somewhat uncomfortable. “Major Lompton is said to be an excellent soldier. That is a fact. Another fact is that he and his family are all quite mad. By now, I think, you have realised all of this for yourself.”

Tiffany nodded her agreement. “Are you telling me to run away, my lord?”

He gazed down into her eyes for a long moment. His own expression seemed chiefly one of sympathy, and resignation. However, a slight hint of willingness played at the corners of his eyes. “Mademoiselle Sutton, should you require it, I will place you in my own carriage, and provide an escort for your journey. Either way, I must return to the table, and make some effort at restoring peace there. I would far rather be in my bed.”

“So would I, my lord.” The words were out

before Tiffany could think better of them. She blushed. Then she carried on. "Sorry, that was dreadfully forward of me! But it's still true. About your bed, and my being in it. With you."

The colonel blinked at her wordlessly for a moment. Then he retrieved the candle that he had used to light his way through the passage down from the *salle haute*. He bowed and held out his hand to her. "As it happens, there is another branch to the passage that connects it to the master bedchamber on the third floor of the south tower. We must be careful, however. There are stairs involved, and they are very narrow. I should not wish for you to turn an ankle, mademoiselle."

Tiffany followed him willingly into the hidden passage. Certain basic practicalities occurred to her all the same. "Um, I trust that you have a preventative in mind regarding that particular concern, my lord?"

He chuckled as he closed the wall panel behind them. "I had not intended the metaphor, but it *is* an apt one! Especially given the circumstances. Qui; such a thing can certainly be found. But please, do mind your step now as we ascend."

The stairs really were quite dangerous, especially when one was tackling them in a full-length evening gown. Tiffany breathed a sigh of relief as Colonel Archambeau opened another hidden panel; this one, as he had said, leading into an ornately furnished

bedchamber. The servants had readied it well ahead of Colonel Archambeau retiring to bed. There was a fire crackling in the grate, and candles burning in all the sconces. She gazed around her appreciatively. “Oh! What a beautiful room! It looks like Ange-Jacques Gabriel’s style.”

“You are correct, Mademoiselle Sutton; although this house was not one of his better-known works. It was commissioned and constructed some eighty years ago now, by an ancestor of my late father.” Colonel Archambeau bowed once again. “Wait here for me. I must attend to my other guests, and make an excuse for your departure. I will tell Major Lompton that I offered you the means to depart ahead of him. That will likely break up the gathering entirely, and so much the better for us if it does! Please – do feel welcome to make yourself comfortable until I return to you.”

He vanished back into the passageway, and closed it behind him. Tiffany strained her ears to try and hear his footsteps, but the walls were too thick. Impressed, and a little unnerved by how well hidden the secret routes through the château were, she wandered around the room and examined its contents. *Eighty years old – ha! Very Hill House, that. Oh well, at least there’s no sign of any ghostly goings on so far! I just hope the wrong people don’t find out that there are hidden passages leading from outside the house to here. That could give the*

*enemy the means to strike at Colonel Archambeau!*

She laughed at herself a little then; feeling foolish for worrying about something that she already knew had never happened. The colonel was perfectly safe! He would live on for decades yet. Well, unless Tiffany herself was to randomly do something to change that fact. After all, she was the only rogue element present in all of this. *But I'd never do anything to derail history, so there's nothing to worry about. Although, there's still that odd matter of he and Major Lompton having been captured by the French. I really should try to get to the bottom of that.*

The major proposing to Mademoiselle Dupont had been another unexpected twist to things. Tiffany could admit that her feelings were deeply hurt by his actions tonight, but she was also worried for less personal reasons. According to Sir Cecil, Major Lompton had originally never married. As Lady Lompton had prophesied, he had been too caught up in his career with the army. Either Tiffany's presence had somehow altered things without her realising it, or the engagement would never actually come to pass. The latter possibility roused a poisonous little thrill of hope deep in Tiffany's heart. She shook her head; not liking to even entertain becoming that person. *I don't own him. Okay, so yes, it...it hurts that he dropped me so horribly publicly, but maybe it's for the best*

*anyhow. I do want to go home, after all. I can't stay here in the past with him. Or with Evelyn either, for that matter.*

She bit back a snuffle. There was no point in crying over it. It was just one of those unpleasant facts of life. Parents inevitably grew old and died. Friends sometimes grew apart, and so did family. Lovers dumped you right before Valentines' Day without any warning. Strangers might decide to hurt you, just because they could. People you fancied proposed to other people instead. And time travel...well. That could never result in a happy ever after for anyone involved. Not without derailing history, anyhow. *And I won't do that.*

Tiffany sighed and traced her fingers along the back of a sumptuously embroidered chair near the fireplace. The near silence in the room was starting to get to her a little. This was the first time that she'd been alone since meeting Lieutenant Plunkett and his men in the woods. *Well, except for just after I escaped from Mrs Rollant and Captain Hindle, that is. But I was too busy running then to notice.*

The familiar blocky shape of a virginal caught her eye then. Smiling in delight, Tiffany sat down in front of the instrument. It was unusual to find such a thing in a bedchamber, but she certainly wasn't complaining! *I love these things! Great Aunt Milicent taught Robin and me how to play one when we were teenagers. Now – how does the start*

*of Ride Across the River go again?*

She was six songs in and wholly engrossed in playing by the time that Colonel Archambeau returned to the room by its proper door. He stood there unnoticed by her for a moment; too intrigued by the unfamiliar tune to interrupt. Finally, he spoke. "What music is that, Mademoiselle Sutton?"

Tiffany stopped playing at once. She blushed as she answered him; inwardly cursing her own stupidity. "Oh, um, it's nothing really, my lord! Just a song I heard back in London."

"Hmm. I don't recognise it. Still, it *has* been quite some time since I was last there!" The colonel paused and hummed the few bars that he had overheard. "Ah, bien, I rather like that! How does the rest of it go? Can you let me hear it? Play it for me now, please."

It would be terribly rude of her to refuse, Tiffany supposed. Hoping desperately that just one little song from the future wouldn't be enough to unravel the entirety of history as she knew it, she set about playing *Brothers in Arms* over again. *At least I wasn't singing along when he arrived!*

Colonel Archambeau stepped in close behind Tiffany as she finished playing. His leather gloved hands settled firmly around her waist. "That was truly beautiful, Mademoiselle Sutton. Do you paint as wonderfully as you play?"

Tiffany tilted her head back and smiled up at

him. "I'd say I'm even a little better, my lord."

The colonel pulled her to her feet and spun her around to face him. He kissed her tenderly as his hands roved over her body; unfastening the bodice of her gown and tugging it down to her waist so that it trapped her arms snugly against her sides. Finally parting lips with her, he murmured softly. "Lompton is a fool to cast you aside for that coarse peasant girl! Rest assured, ma chérie, that I will not make the same mistake."

With that, he tore the beautiful white evening gown in half down through the back of its skirts, and let it drop to the floor. The satin toque was tossed aside with no care for where it might land. The elegant gloves and the velvet slippers were removed one at a time; reverential kisses pressed to each elbow, wrist, and ankle in the process. The dainty fichu drifted down to join the remains of the gown. Then he set to work on the fine lace petticoats, and then the stays; removing them item by item, until at last Tiffany stood before him in only her silk chemise and stockings. "I will keep you forever, ma petite renarde innocente!"

Tiffany blushed wordlessly. *Wow! Shame about the dress, but it's not as if I can return it anyhow.*

Colonel Archambeau took her in his arms again and kissed her; slow and deep. Kneeling before her, he carefully untied the ribbons on her stockings. He peeled them off one at a time; kissing his way down

each of Tiffany's calves from knee to ankle as he did so. Rising gracefully to his feet, he drew her chemise slowly up over her head, and dropped it onto the floor. "Come – let me take you to my bed. I will make all the bad memories go away for you."

Afterwards, wholly satisfied, Tiffany lay sprawled on her back underneath the blankets, and reflected on the outcome of her most recent life choices. On her left, the already sleeping Colonel Archambeau twitched and mumbled. He had undressed, and was lying on his right side, with his back to the left edge of the bed and his left arm stretched across Tiffany's lap; the palm of his hand cupping her right hip possessively. She sighed contentedly into the dark. *I think we both needed that release!*

A faint click alerted her then. Turning her head to the right to look towards the sound without sitting up, Tiffany saw a man slip all but silently out from inside the hanging cupboard on the right-hand side of the satinwood armoire. He was dressed in dark clothing, with a broad brimmed hat pulled down low across his face. Both of his leather gloved hands were full. A small tin-plated bullseye lantern hung from his left; its shutter opened just enough to permit a thin sliver of light out. Far more worrying was the vicious looking knife that he grasped tightly in his right as he crept towards the bed.

Spying it, Tiffany lurched up into a sitting

position and scrambled out of bed; snatching the heavy goose feather filled bolster out from underneath her lover's head as she went. Gaining her feet, the young time traveller swung her improvised weapon as hard as she could at the would-be murderer's face, shrieking out a warning as she did so. "Wake up, my lord! There's a man with a knife in here!"

Behind her, Tiffany heard Colonel Archambeau utter an oath. The assassin stumbled backwards with a startled grunt. He kept his hold on the knife, but he dropped the lantern. The shutter snapped shut; plunging the room back into full darkness. Tiffany swung the bolster again towards where she guessed him to be. She felt a satisfying thud as it connected. Then she winced as a crashing, splintering sound suggested that her opponent had tripped and landed on top of something fragile. *Oh dear! I hope whatever that was wasn't irreplaceable!*

The assassin snarled angrily in French. "Au diable votre ingénence! L'Ordre de l'Inconnu apportera la mort aux Tueurs de Renards!"

There was the scratch and snap of a flint on steel, the huff of breath over tinder, and then, several agonising seconds later, the candles in the sconce on the wall by the left of the bed fluttered back into life. Their soft light illuminated half of the room. The assassin, his hat lost in the scuffle, looked past Tiffany at the by now fully awake and furious

colonel, and blanched. Scrambling up from amid the wreckage of a small table, he fled for his life; bolting out into the hallway with his knife still in hand. If he knew of the secret passage at all, he wasn't using it.

Tiffany, the adrenaline finally leaving her, dropped the bolster and shivered. "I...he...that man was hiding in the armoire! I think he was here to kill you, my lord!"

"Qui, and had I been alone tonight, then he might have succeeded in doing so! Now, I want you to wait here until I return, ma chérie. Light a few more of the candles for your comfort." The colonel finished tugging his breeches on and shoved his feet into his boots. Not bothering to dress himself any further, he snatched up his sword, seized the abandoned lantern to see by, and stalked out onto the landing; shouting orders as he went. "To me, men, at once, and bring light, all of you! There is an assassin in the house!"

Tiffany closed the door behind him. Her mind was reeling. The assassin was an impossibility! There was no recorded instance of such an attempt on Colonel Archambeau's life. Yet it had happened; she was witness to it. *And if I hadn't been here? What then? Would someone else have intervened instead?*

There were voices outside the château now. It sounded as if Colonel Archambeau had sent some

men to search the grounds. Presumably that meant that the assassin was no longer thought to be inside the main building. Hoping that this was correct, and that the man in question would soon be caught, Tiffany set to work relighting the rest of the candles. Some of them were easier than others. The wall sconces proved to be just out of her reach. Admitting defeat, Tiffany blew out the taper that she was holding and set it down on the marble fireplace. *I don't want to set the room on fire!*

The raw, deep cries of hounds began down in the snowy grounds. A sudden terror seized Tiffany then, as she listened to the baying. She found herself unable to keep from trembling at the sound of the dogs outside. Visions of frothing jaws filled with razor sharp white teeth skittered across her mind's eye. Finally, unable to contain her fear, the young time traveller screamed, and then swooned. The echo of her own high, wordless cry rang in her ears as she passed out. *What's happening to me?*

## Chapter Thirteen

Yawning a little into her hand, Tiffany set down her now empty cup, and rose to her feet. Leaving the table, she wandered over to one of the tall windows in the ground floor room where she had just finished eating breakfast. It was a small, brightly painted room, with a fireplace at one end of it, and a door leading out into the vestibule at the other. One side boasted a series of elegant fitted cabinets, whose dark oak panels were carved to match the doors of the conservatory. The other was mostly floor to ceiling windows; looking out over the south side of the grounds. The view of the gardens was probably breathtakingly beautiful in any other season. Now however, everything was covered in more than a foot of snow. Tiffany shivered in sympathy as she watched a pair of doves take flight from the cold ground. *Poor things! At least they have their dovecote to shelter in.*

In the end, Château d'Archangeaux's resident pack of Braque Auvergne hounds had found and cornered the fleeing intruder. Tiffany shuddered a

little as she recalled their excited barking and howling. Something about the noise had unnerved her. She didn't know why. The dogs hadn't harmed the assassin; merely sniffed him out where he was hiding in one of the château's outbuildings. If anything, the animals had probably thought the whole thing to be a wonderful game between them and the humans involved. Tiffany knew that she ought to have been amused and relieved at how well Colonel Archambeau's impromptu solution had worked. *Since when am I scared of dogs, anyhow?*

It was easy to try and chastise herself for her fears now that morning had come, but Tiffany still remembered how she had felt last night. Her eidetic memory made her incapable of forgetting, no matter how much she might want to. Instead, she could only attempt to rationalise the experience. *Could it have been due to the wine at supper?*

Incredibly, nobody had heard her scream; which was another testament to the thickness of the château's walls. When Colonel Archambeau had at last returned to the bedchamber to announce the assassin's capture, he had found Tiffany still collapsed. He had lifted her bodily and carried her to his personal physician. The latter man had examined the young time traveller thoroughly, before declaring that he could find nothing physically wrong with her. A diagnosis of fainting due to extreme stress had duly been recorded, and

treatment in the form of plenty of rest and quiet advised for the next few days.

To her chagrin, Tiffany remembered nothing of this. She had woken up today in bed in an unfamiliar room, with an old French woman sitting vigil. By then, it had been approaching nine o'clock. Apparently, Tiffany had tossed and turned in her sleep for hours; whimpering in what had sounded like terror. The impromptu nurse, who was one of the château's many servants, had told Tiffany in broken English whilst she helped her to dress that it had been pitiable to witness. As such, Tiffany was determined to try and prove herself less fragile today. *I hate having embarrassed myself in front of Colonel Archambeau and his staff like that! At least everyone is being nice about it.*

Now Colonel Archambeau was closeted away elsewhere in the château. He was overseeing the interrogation of the man who had tried to murder him in his sleep. There had been no question about Tiffany being allowed anywhere near that doubtlessly unpleasant situation. In truth, she hadn't wanted to be. *I can cope with it being necessary, but I don't want any part in it.*

Tiffany was wearing a different gown to the one that she had attended last night's supper in. Whilst she was sleeping, Colonel Archambeau had sent an aide-de-camp back to the field army's main encampment on her behalf; with a letter of

explanation for Captain Amberley, and a pair of pack mules to transport her things. The young officer in question had returned promptly, bringing with him all of Tiffany's belongings. He had also returned the Lompton family diamonds to Major Lompton, along with the rest of the parure. Tiffany felt heartily glad to be rid of the jewellery. She was still reeling emotionally from Major Lompton's sudden proposal of marriage to Mademoiselle Dupont. *I can't get over him humiliating me like that! Her too, really. The poor girl is only just out!*

Hoofbeats thudding along the packed snow covering the driveway of the château interrupted her reverie. As she watched, four familiar figures rode into view outside. First came Lieutenant Plunkett mounted on Malice. He was leaning forwards in the saddle; urging the elegant bay roan horse to gallop on as fast as was possible. Coming up rapidly on his left side was Captain Amberley, who was mounted on another of his horses; the sweet-tempered dapple grey that he ironically called Spite. A good few horse lengths behind were Sergeant Moore and Sergeant Marsh atop their respective ponies; the two much smaller mounts galloping neck and neck. Suddenly, Captain Amberley launched himself out of his saddle, and dove at Lieutenant Plunkett. Tiffany gasped as they toppled to the snowy ground together; landing heavily. "Oh my God!"

The two now loose horses galloped on; bucking

excitedly, and still pursued by the sergeants on their ponies. Worried in case either of the men who were now on the ground had been injured in the fall, Tiffany opened the window, and hurried out through it to intervene. She called out to them as she stumbled and slipped her way across the wintry courtyard. "Are you alright? Um...I mean, unhurt?"

By the time that Tiffany reached them, Captain Amberley was back on his feet and attempting to wrestle Lieutenant Plunkett into submission. He dragged the younger officer up out of the snow and held him tight. "That's enough, lieutenant! Control yourself, lad, before you end up dead!"

Lieutenant Plunkett gasped with relief as he spotted Tiffany. "Oh, thank God! Tiffany, you're alive! Sir, let me go! I must help her!"

Captain Amberley growled irritably. "Not until you promise me that you're done with trying to run off and fight the ruddy colonel!"

Tiffany frowned at both officers. "Er, seriously, gentlemen, what's going on here?"

"Nothing for you to be concerned with, lass." Captain Amberley tightened his hold on Lieutenant Plunkett. Then a look of confusion crossed his face, followed by embarrassment. He adjusted his grip carefully so that his hands were no longer touching any part of Lieutenant Plunkett's chest. "Ah, Plunkett, is there by any chance something that you might have neglected to tell me about yourself?"

Lieutenant Plunkett tried to reply, but at first only managed a small, broken sound. All the fight had gone out of him. He slumped forwards onto the snow as Captain Amberley released him; his elbows resting on his knees and his face buried in his hands. “Oh, God, why did this have to happen? Everything is ruined!”

Tiffany knelt in front of him. “Hey, don’t talk like that, Evelyn! Nothing’s ruined!”

“But it is!” Lieutenant Plunkett’s voice shook. “The captain *knows*, Tiffany. He’s obliged to report it. They’ll take back my commission now that the truth is out. I’ll be hanged, or sent back to England in disgrace over it! I...I might even be committed to an asylum for having dared to reject my born sex and live as a man!”

Captain Amberley sighed. “Oh, for pity’s sake, lad, come here!” He hauled Lieutenant Plunkett back onto his feet and dusted off the worst of the snow from his uniform. Then he clasped him firmly by his shoulders and stared him squarely in the eye. “You’re one of my lads. Nobody is going to do *any* of those things to you; or at least not while I’m around to have any say about it! Well, unless you keep on with that daft plan of yours about fighting Colonel Archambeau for Miss Sutton’s honour.”

“Argh!” Tiffany flung up her hands in despair. “Someone *really* needs to explain to me what that last part is all about, you know!”

“I reckon I’ll let him try first, lass.” Captain Amberley turned Lieutenant Plunkett around to face Tiffany. “Go on then, lad. Explain to the nice young lady why it was that you decided to go off and try to get yourself killed instead of bloody well listening to your superior officer!”

Lieutenant Plunkett gulped. “Sorry, sir!”

“Oh, you *will* be sorry, lad!” Captain Amberley glowered at the younger rifleman for a moment longer. Then he sighed again and shook his head resignedly. “Blasted idiot! You’re lucky that you’re too good of a shot to waste. Elsewise, I’d likely have more than half a mind to assign you to digging latrines by hand for the entire rest of the war!” He gathered himself again, and turned his attention to Tiffany. “Begging your pardon for my language just now, Miss Sutton. I find that I get terribly upset whenever one of those in my command needlessly endangers himself.”

The two sergeants rejoined the group then; leading the officers’ horses behind them. They saluted smartly as they reined in their ponies. Sergeant Marsh was pale and scared looking. Sergeant Moore didn’t look any happier. It was him who spoke. “Has the lieutenant calmed down enough to listen to reason yet, sir?”

Captain Amberley scoffed. “Seeing Miss Sutton alive and apparently well has helped him a fair bit there, aye, Oscar! Be sure to remind me about the

army's rules on striking a superior officer the next time we see Major Lompton."

Sergeant Moore nodded briskly. "Depend upon it, sir! Reminded you shall be! Absolutely no attempts at drowning majors in shallow puddles of water allowed for you, sir!"

Tiffany folded her arms crossly. "What did he do *this* time? Honestly, wasn't publicly proposing marriage to Mademoiselle Dupont only hours after meeting her disgraceful enough for him?"

To her surprise, all four men stared at her in open confusion. For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Lieutenant Plunkett gave an angry sounding cry and made to climb back aboard Malice. Captain Amberley silently yanked him back down again and held onto him onehanded by the scruff of his neck to keep him there. The two sergeants started scowling and muttering to themselves.

Tiffany squirmed uncomfortably. "Um, sorry! I thought that Colonel Archambeau would have informed you already, Captain Amberley. It was what made me decide to leave the supper early."

Captain Amberley shook his head. "His letter only said that you'd had a nasty shock, and been prescribed rest. He didn't go into any details. That's why this one here was so quick to believe the major when he...well. Never mind that part now. You're clearly *not* dead, or maimed, and you don't look to me as if you're being held here against your will."

Now it was Tiffany's turn to stare aghast. She unfolded her arms and put her hands on her hips. "Oh no, I think that I very much *will* mind the part that you aren't telling me about, sir! What exactly did Major Lompton do to make Evelyn come storming off to here in such a fluster?"

The two sergeants began snickering quietly, and Lieutenant Plunkett blushed at Tiffany's choice of words. He grimaced at her. "Tiffany! Please don't call it *that*, it sounds ridiculous! Besides, I was just...well...I mean, I thought that I was being heroic. Riding to your rescue and such."

Captain Amberley chuckled along with the sergeants then, but he kept a firm hold on the younger officer's neck. "To answer your question, Miss Sutton, Major Lompton took it upon himself to tell Lieutenant Plunkett this morning that Colonel Archambeau had spirited you away during supper, and then refused to let you leave."

Tiffany scowled. There was no doubt in her mind that Major Lompton had been acting out of malice! She turned angrily on her heel. "I'm going to go and have some more hot chocolate now. Would any of you like to join me? I fear that I may end up screaming if I have no one around me to witness it and object."

## Chapter Fourteen

The riflemen handed their animals over to some of the staff from the château's stables, and followed Tiffany in through the window. Colonel Archambeau entered the breakfast room soon after they had all sat down with their hot chocolate. He nodded a greeting. "Good morning, Mademoiselle Sutton. Good morning, gentlemen. It is well that you have come to visit, for there are serious matters afoot, and I will likely have need of you to assist in dealing with them! On which note: Mademoiselle Sutton, tell me, please – have you ever heard of a group calling themselves Les Tueurs de Renards?"

"Er, no, my lord, I haven't." Tiffany shook her head; confused. "Well, except when the assassin in the armoire was shouting last night."

"He is why I speak to you of them now." Colonel Archambeau began to pace to and fro across the breadth of the room. "He claims that there is an ancient and secret murder cult by that name. It translates as the Killers of Foxes. Apparently, they have committed many terrible acts. He also claims

that he is *not* an assassin, but rather a warrior monk belonging to a rival cult. L'Ordre de l'Inconnu, or in English, the Order of the Unknown."

Captain Amberley frowned. "He sounds thoroughly crazed, my lord! And what was that about an armoire?"

"It stands in the bedchamber where Mademoiselle Sutton spent the night, monsieur." Colonel Archambeau glanced again at Tiffany as he replied. "The man involved was hiding inside it. He climbed out when he believed that everyone was asleep. Fortunately, Mademoiselle Sutton was still awake. She repelled him, and promptly raised the alarm. I went to her aid. The intruder fled, but my dogs were able to catch his scent. Once he was secured, I went to check on Mademoiselle Sutton, and found her collapsed. I took her to my physician. The rest you know."

Tiffany was impressed at how neatly the colonel had avoided mentioning the more torrid aspects of the night before. The guilt over having cheated on Lieutenant Plunkett was gnawing at her. *Thank goodness he didn't just come straight out and admit it! I don't want Evelyn to find out like that. I won't lie to him, but I want to break it to him gently, and apologise for not asking him in advance if he'd be okay with me sleeping with Colonel Archambeau instead of with Major Lompton.*

Lieutenant Plunkett voiced a question then;

drawing Tiffany's attention back to the matter at hand. "Then, this intruder; the man who attacked Tiffany – when is he to be held accountable for it, my lord? Is there to be a trial?"

Incredibly, Colonel Archambeau shook his head. "Non to both of those questions, monsieur. Those serious matters which I mentioned must take precedence for all our sakes. The monk has an integral role to play in resolving things."

Captain Amberley rose to his feet abruptly. "Colonel Archambeau, forgive me for speaking so plainly, my lord, but I feel that there is some strangeness occurring here! You speak to us of this man having attacked Miss Sutton, and now you say that he is to be spared from justice over it. Why, my lord? What intelligence has he supplied that was so valuable you would pardon him? Also, I am unnaturally calm about this entire situation, and it troubles me. Have we all somehow been exposed to opiates since our arrival here?"

"Fear not in that regard, monsieur. No opiates are involved, I assure you. And I too would be concerned; did I not already know the reason for our collective peace!" Colonel Archambeau sighed. "What I tell you next will undoubtedly be difficult to believe. It is not rational. I must insist that you take me at my word over it nonetheless. Here, then, is the unlikely meat of the thing! This château is currently under the influence of une amulette de

sanctuaire; an apotropaic charm worn by the monk on a chain around his neck. He activated it a little while ago. It compels all of those within its sphere to behave peacefully and wholly openly with one another. No deliberate act of physical violence is possible between us. Moreover, it drives us to speak only the truth as we believe or know it to be. According to the monk, the effects of the charm will remain in place for some hours yet. Until then, we may only escape them by leaving the grounds entirely.”

“How thoroughly horrible an object it sounds, my lord.” Captain Amberley shook his head as if trying to clear it. “Presuming that I believe a word of this bizarre tale, then is there some means to stop the ruddy thing? I don’t like to be stripped of my will, and seeing others subjected to the same violation vexes me still further.”

Colonel Archambeau gestured towards one of the cabinets. “For now, monsieur, all that I can offer you is a drink. Heaven itself knows that I need one! Especially with all that I have recently been told.”

Tiffany blinked. “Um, sorry, but are you really saying that there’s *another* magical necklace in the mix now, my lord?” She pulled the pendant that had begun her adventure out from underneath the bodice of her gown. “On top of this one?”

Lieutenant Plunkett gasped. “Tiffany! You said that you needed to keep that a secret!”

Everyone else was of course even more interested now. Even Captain Amberley looked mildly intrigued. Colonel Archambeau peered carefully at the time pendant, and then looked sternly at Tiffany. “This pendant bears the sigil of Les Tueurs de Renards! The monk has an illustration of the mark in a book that he carries; I have seen it myself. Mademoiselle Sutton – where did you acquire this pendant, and how?”

Tiffany grimaced. “Ah, that’s a bit complicated, my lord. Um...you see, I’m not...ugh, this is so weird! I really can’t help but to be honest about it; even though I’m afraid that doing so might derail history!” She clapped her hands over her mouth for a moment. “Argh! I don’t like this either!”

Colonel Archambeau’s expression became even more severe at her delay. “Mademoiselle Sutton! I need you to answer my questions!”

Tiffany shivered nervously, and then nodded. “I...it was given to me unexpectedly back in London as a gift, my lord. By a man distantly related to Major Lompton. I met him whilst I was working on restoring a collection of paintings which belonged to the Lompton family estate.” She swallowed. “It was Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February 1989. The pendant...it’s magical, or something! It transported me back through time to now. Well, I mean, to Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 1814. That was the day that I arrived.”

To her surprise, Colonel Archambeau looked more relieved than startled by this revelation. "Dieu merci! You are *not* one of them then! I will inform Frère Babineaux accordingly."

Captain Amberley and the two sergeants were apparently too stunned by Tiffany's explanation to speak. Lieutenant Plunkett, having known of the secret for some time now, had only to gather his nerve enough to make his subsequent enquiry. "Is that the name of the, er, warrior monk you mentioned to us earlier, my lord?"

"Qui, monsieur." Colonel Archambeau set about pouring wine for all of those present in the breakfast room. "L'Ordre de l'Inconnu, they are the sworn nemesis of Les Tueurs de Renards."

Tiffany realised what was being implied. "Then he was there to kill *me*, and not you, my lord?"

Her statement, and the nod from Colonel Archambeau that followed, were met with an immediate four-way outpouring of furious indignation on the part of the riflemen. Tiffany suspected that Frère Babineaux had best make sure to keep well clear of her friends from the 136<sup>th</sup> for at least the foreseeable future! *Ugh! Serves him right, too, if you ask me! The creep!*

Sergeant Moore rose to his feet and began assisting the colonel by handing everyone their wine. His kindly face was pale with anger. "And what in the name of God does he think gives him

the right to sneak in here and try to murder poor Miss Sutton?"

"Aye, my lord, and how did he manage it to begin with?" Sergeant Marsh sounded baffled. "I mean, how could he have known where she'd be in order to hide in the right blooming armoire?"

Colonel Archambeau smiled wryly at the latter question. "At least there is a somewhat amusing answer to *that*, monsieur! Picture, if you will, the scene. Mademoiselle Sutton had understandably withdrawn to the library due to Major Lompton's disgraceful behaviour. I followed her to determine whether I might be of some assistance. We spoke for a few minutes, and then, wanting to preserve Mademoiselle Sutton's privacy, I escorted her upstairs via one of the château's hidden passages. Meanwhile, however, unbeknownst to either of us, Frère Babineaux, had tracked Mademoiselle Sutton to the library, only to discover that she was not alone. He had therefore hidden himself just outside in the hallway, where he had been listening in on our conversation. Determined to complete his mission, he proceeded to race upstairs by way of the main staircase. Having successfully reached the intended bedchamber ahead of our arrival there, he fixed on the idea of hiding in the armoire until an opportunity might be presented for him to...well."

Captain Amberley growled. "An opportunity for him to try and murder the poor lass whilst she slept,

my lord! That dastardly coward!”

“Ugh!” Tiffany felt more angry than afraid. “That...that brute! I should have hit him harder with the bolster!”

Colonel Archambeau smiled as he took a sip of his wine. “As it is, you broke his nose, mademoiselle, and I suspect that his pride is even more injured.” He chuckled. “He is still reeling from the shock of having been bested by an unarmed woman.”

“Pity for him, my lord.” Captain Amberley smirked. “Would it help if he was to be done over next by a few strapping lads instead?”

Sergeant Moore nodded keenly. “Just you give us the order, and Sergeant Marsh and myself can have the whole of the Light Company here with us by noon, so we can, my lord!”

Lieutenant Plunkett scowled. “If I see him before you get back, they’ll have little left to do!”

“Oh, we’d find something, sir!” Sergeant Marsh smiled grimly. “We could bury him for you, at least.”

Colonel Archambeau shook his head firmly. “Enough, gentlemen, enough! There will no murder here. The amulet prevents it. And on a broader note, we, and Frère Babineaux are on the same side of things. We share a common enemy. It could never be otherwise; given all that Les Tueurs de Renards have done so far.”

“But why was *I* even suspected of anything to begin with, my lord?” Tiffany frowned as she voiced her query. “And what does the time pendant have to do with...oh! Of course – the time pendant! It was gifted to me by one of the Lompton family! And Major Lompton had seemed to have formed an attachment to me, too. He was very public about it. That’s why, isn’t it, my lord? Frère Babineaux...he must have thought that I was a part of the murder cult because of my connection to the Lomptons!”

Captain Amberley set down his by now empty wine glass and rose to his feet. “Do you mean to tell us that Major Lompton might be personally involved with these scoundrels, my lord?” He sighed resignedly as Colonel Archambeau nodded in assent. “Oh, blast it all! And after we went to all that bother saving him! I’d have just rescued you and the horses if I’d known that!”

Tiffany thought back to her conversation in 1989 with old Sir Cecil. “Wait! The man who gave me this pendant – Sir Cecil Lompton – he told me that Major Lompton saved Lord Ollerington from the French cavalry at Saint-Palais. He didn’t mention *anything* about Major Lompton and Colonel Archambeau being captured, or about how the Rifles then came to their rescue. And...and he also said that Major Lompton never married, so where does that leave Mademoiselle Dupont?”

“In grave danger, mademoiselle!” A soft, heavily

French accented male voice came from the door of the breakfast room. Frère Babineaux bowed stiffly as those assembled turned to look at him. He had a florid complexion, neatly combed fair hair, and dark grey eyes with hooded lids. His nose was indeed horribly bruised and swollen. “She has been chosen in your stead, and I pray for her sake that it is merely as a blood sacrifice, and *not* as a true bride to that monster! That would be an even worse fate, for it would surely mean the permanent damnation of her immortal soul as opposed to its entrapment!”

Tiffany sank back against the cushioned frame of the settee. “Wow. It got worse. I honestly didn’t think it could, because, hey, there’s a murder cult, but yeah. Here we are. So – what do you mean by damnation or entrapment of her soul, please? I’m sure I’m going to hate the answer, but it feels as if it’s probably something that I’ll need to know.”

Frère Babineaux nodded grimly. “Alas, mademoiselle, you are correct! I overheard your conversation with Monsieur le Comte. I know now that you were, as they say, duped, by Les Tueurs de Renards, and not truly one of them. But they will not let you escape from them so easily!” He padded over to Tiffany and pointed to her hair. “They have already marked you as their prey – see there, please, all of you; the single white lock of hair behind her left ear. Not grey with age, but snow white, from terror! With time, it will spread, until only white

remains. And then they will begin the hunt in earnest. Tell me please, mademoiselle. Have the dreams begun yet? The visions of being torn apart by a pack of vicious, snarling hounds?"

Colonel Archambeau spun and stared at Tiffany in horror. "Mademoiselle Sutton! Is *that* the nightmare which gripped you when I found you?"

Tiffany couldn't answer him. Instead, she put up her left hand and tugged frantically at her neatly braided hair; loosening it so that she could check the colour for herself. She whimpered softly as she saw the white strands. "No! It was just a nightmare; because of the stress I'd been under!"

Frère Babineaux folded his hands piously before him as if in prayer. "There is more power in dreams than you may suppose, mademoiselle!"

"That's enough from you, sir!" Captain Amberley surged to his feet and seized Frère Babineaux by the collar of his shirt; dragging the startled looking monk away from Tiffany. "I've had my fill of this nonsense, and I reckon as the lass has too! Colonel Archambeau – this man invaded your home and attacked Miss Sutton with the intention of killing her. Now he's openly trying to terrorise her further! He should be treated accordingly. If you'll excuse me, I'll go and find somewhere to put him until he deigns to apologise and behave as a gentleman. Lieutenant Plunkett, you stay here and act as chaperone. With me, sergeants!"

Frère Babineaux yelped and struggled. “But how is this possible? The amulet of sanctuary...!”

“May go and ruddy rust for all that I care. And anyhow, if you deem my treatment of you now as *violent*, sir, then you have led a sheltered life!” With that, Captain Amberley stalked out of the breakfast room; hauling Frère Babineaux along with him. The two sergeants hurried after them. Sergeant Marsh closed the door behind him as he exited, and then all was quiet again.

## Chapter Fifteen

Colonel Archambeau and Lieutenant Plunkett stood by the settee and inspected the mysterious lock of white hair carefully for Tiffany. Both were equally concerned by it. For her part, Tiffany just wanted it gone. She recalled the little sewing kit in the reticule that she had brought with her to the supper. There had been a tiny pair of scissors in it. Would cutting off the affected hair solve the problem of the alleged mark? *It can't hurt to at least try doing that!*

She rose abruptly to her feet, and made to walk away from the settee. "Excuse me, please, both of you. I need to go back upstairs to the *salle haute* and find my reticule. I left it underneath my chair at the supper, along with a fan given to me by Major Lompton. On reflection, the fan might interest Frère Babineaux. It has foxes on it."

Colonel Archambeau blocked her route and shook his head. "Any items left on the floor will have been cleared away by the servants. I will tell someone to fetch them for you. And I should like

you to be seen by the physician again; to have his professional diagnosis of this strangeness about your hair. He can come to us here whilst we wait for Captain Amberley and the others to rejoin us.”

The colonel went over to the door of the breakfast room and opened it; calling out politely to a servant who was in the hallway. Whilst this was going on, Lieutenant Plunkett clasped hold of Tiffany’s hands. He gazed into her eyes worriedly. “How are you feeling now, Tiffany?”

Tiffany blushed. “I’m fine.” She glanced over at Colonel Archambeau, who was still talking to the servant, and lowered her voice a little. “Um...so, you should know that I did something a bit...well, unforgivable, last night. I...I spent the night with Colonel Archambeau, Evelyn. In his bedchamber. Since...well, you know. That whole hideous thing at supper with Major Lompton and his unexpected proposal to Mademoiselle Dupont. I mean *obviously* it’s not an excuse! But it’s still sort of part of why I did it.”

Lieutenant Plunkett blushed. “Oh! I see. Well, it doesn’t bother me if you have needs or desires that I cannot physically meet for you. I certainly won’t start any trouble over it; at least, not as long as it was wholly of your own choosing. I...er...Major Lompton suggested otherwise, you see. Hence my coming here.”

Tiffany still couldn’t look at him; despite his

generous acceptance of her behaviour. "I'm so sorry, Evelyn. I should have just come back to the encampment instead. I wasn't thinking rationally." She grimaced. "I guess I was too busy feeling sorry for myself and wanting to prove that I didn't care about Major Lompton! I let myself forget that my choices could affect you too."

Neither of them had noticed that Colonel Archambeau was now close enough to overhear them talking. They both startled as he cleared his throat politely from only a few steps away. "Am I to understand then that the two of you are ah, as they say, intimately attached to one another? But somehow also, I think, to Major Lompton, qui?"

Lieutenant Plunkett snapped immediately to attention. "Monsieur le Comte! I...er, well...it's complicated, sir. Ah, I mean, my lord."

Colonel Archambeau smiled knowingly. "Is it?" He moved forwards as he spoke; his left hand settling gently on Tiffany's right shoulder, and his right cupping Lieutenant Plunkett's upper left arm. "I am not so sure, mes jolies columbes."

The door of the breakfast room burst open then, and Captain Amberley sprinted in, followed by both sergeants. All three levelled their rifles at Colonel Archambeau. And right there with them, impossibly, was Lieutenant Plunkett; his rifle trained on the same target, and his thin face etched with fury and relief as he saw Tiffany. He called out

to her as she turned to look at the empty space next to her where he had been standing only an instant earlier. “Tiffany, we’re here! You’re safe now.”

Captain Amberley jerked his head slightly. “Come over here and stand by us, lass. Mind out that you don’t block our line of sight as you go. Our Monsieur le Compte here has some ruddy explaining to do!”

Tiffany blinked in utter confusion. She stayed standing where she was. “I...he...what?”

Captain Amberley sighed. “Go and fetch the poor lass out of the way, Plunkett.”

“Aye, sir!” Lieutenant Plunkett shouldered his rifle and hurried over to Tiffany. He grasped her gently but firmly by the arm. “Come with me, Tiffany. That’s right. Come on; it’s over now.”

Tiffany let him lead her over to the other three riflemen. Then she dug in her heels. “Wait – please, I want to know what’s going on!”

Major Lompton strode in from the vestibule then, and swept Tiffany up into his arms; cradling her as a man might his new bride. “Thank God, you have found her! I have a carriage waiting outside. I’ll take her to it now.”

Tiffany made to scream, and then froze instead, as she felt something sharp press against her side; hidden by the folds of Major Lompton’s cloak. She shuddered as he carried her out of the breakfast room. “You won’t get away with this!”

Major Lompton sighed and shook his head as he crossed the vestibule. "My poor, dear Miss Sutton! What have those dastardly fiends done to you? I blame myself for taking Colonel Archambeau at his word when he told me that you had left the supper early to return to the encampment!" He nodded politely to another of the Rifles, who opened the front door of the château for him. "Don't mind her wild ramblings, corporal! The poor girl is overwrought with fear after her ordeal at the hands of our regiment's former colonel! A few days rest should cure her well enough."

No one watching so much as turned a hair as Major Lompton climbed up into the back of the carriage with Tiffany. She could still feel the pricking of the blade against her ribs. Although, seated squarely on his lap as she was, there was another, much more organic, point of pressure now worrying her as well. She flinched as the door slammed shut and the carriage set off. "Where are you taking me?"

Major Lompton hummed. "That depends on what exactly it is that you know, Miss Sutton. Tell me – how much did Frère Babineaux reveal?"

Tiffany yelped as the knife came into view; her captor tracing it almost idly across the tops of her breasts. "I don't know anymore! Everything has changed somehow. And nobody else but me seems to have noticed."

“A common enough problem with time magic, I am afraid!” Major Lompton laughed coldly. “You are immune to such changes, of course. The pendant around your neck protects you from them; just as mine does me.” He hooked the blade underneath the chain of the time pendant and lifted it up a little. “I will have to deal with that!”

With that, he wrapped his left arm more tightly around Tiffany’s waist, and plunged his knife deep into her chest. Tossing the blade aside, he clenched his right hand around the time pendant, and began to murmur in Latin.

Tiffany swooned back against him. An eerie cacophony of despairing screams rose in her ears: terrified, and wholly inhuman sounding in their shrill...beeping? *But...but screams don't beep...!*

With that thought, the young conservator woke up gasping; one hand swatting clumsily at the digital alarm clock on her bedside table. Finally, her finger hit the correct button to silence it. Her heart was racing, and her skin was drenched with sweat. She sat up slowly and looked around her. The familiar chaos of her bedroom felt strangely out of place. Glancing back at the screen of the clock, she read the date: 13:02:89. Sighing with relief, Tiffany flopped back against her pillows. “It was a dream!”

Something solid brushed against the skin of her chest. Looking down, she saw an impossibly familiar sight: the time pendant. A few rays of weak

sunlight filtered through the slats on the venetian blind and glinted against it. Tiffany stared for a few seconds longer. Then she fainted.

At once, a strange pale glow began to shimmer outwards from the pendant. The strange light enveloped Tiffany's unconscious body. When it faded, a small but complex pattern of foxes and clockwork gears adorned the centre of her chest; just where the pendant rested. If anyone were to look closely enough, they would also see several curious sigils; just as were wrought into the metalwork of the time pendant itself.

Tiffany regained consciousness a few moments after the pattern materialised on her skin. She yelped when she spotted it. Scrambling to her feet, she hurried into the bathroom of her shared flat, and frantically tried to wash off the artwork in the sink; tugging desperately at the pendant when she found that she couldn't unfasten it. To her horror, the seemingly fragile chain refused to break. Nor could it be lifted over her head. "Seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

Tiffany's panicking hadn't gone unheard. Her flatmate, twenty-two-year-old Martina Wilton, who worked odd hours in her job as a taxi driver, soon wandered sleepily into the bathroom. She stared at Tiffany for a few seconds before speaking. "Uh, are you doing okay there, Tiffany? Only you look a bit frazzled."

“The pendant won’t come off, Martina!” Tiffany sat down on the closed toilet lid and stared at her dripping wet hands. “I can’t get it off, and now there’s a tattoo as well!”

“Okay, calm down! It’s just a bit of jewellery.” Martina handed Tiffany a towel from the rail on the wall. “As for the tattoo, I don’t know why you went and got one on your chest, but it’s done now. There’s no point panicking about it. Although, you *might* want to think about avoiding wearing any low-cut tops for work, yeah? Don’t think the museum is that sort of place.”

Tiffany shook her head firmly as she dried herself with trembling hands. “Oh no! I’m *never* going back to the museum, Martina! I want to live!”

Martina eyed her worriedly. “Seriously, Tiffany, what the fuck are you on about? You’re acting like you’ve gone insane or something! Here – did you and Lucinda take something last night?”

The mention of her ex-girlfriend caught Tiffany’s attention. She crumpled the towel miserably. “No. I didn’t even see her yesterday.”

Her flatmate frowned. “But I thought you said that you were planning to go out for a big romantic dinner together?”

“She rang me to cancel just after you left for your shift.” Tiffany sniffled. “She um...she said she was too tired. Of course, she’d technically already dumped me via a letter, but it only arrived this

morning. I mean, it's going to arrive. In about ten minutes time. Anyhow, Lucinda's probably halfway to Buenos Aires by now. That's where her new job is, apparently."

Martina blinked. "What?"

"It'll all be explained in the letter." Tiffany stood up and tossed the towel into the laundry hamper. "You're welcome to read it if you want to. I'm not even going to bother opening it this time."

"Right." Martina nodded slowly and backed out of the bathroom. "Drugs then."

"Ugh, no, I'm not on drugs!" Tiffany scowled and stomped back into her bedroom; stripping off her pyjamas as she went. She tossed them onto the bed. "But you'll never believe the truth, so why even bother trying to explain it to you?"

Martina had followed her. She looked worried. "Tiffany, I'm just worried about you, that's all! You aren't yourself this morning. Are you *sure* you haven't taken anything weird? I mean, did you go out by yourself last night, maybe? Somebody could have spiked your drink."

"Nope. I stayed in. Got a Chinese delivered. The boxes are in the kitchen bin." Tiffany pulled on a high-necked sweater to hide both the pendant and the tattoo. "Feel free to chuck Lucinda's stupid bloody letter in there too when it arrives." She wriggled into her jeans from the day before, and grabbed a clean pair of socks from her drawer.

“Like I said, I’m not going to read it again.”

“Well, what *are* you going to do?” Martina watched as Tiffany finished dressing and began cramming some clothes into the tatty old suitcase that she used for holidays. “Don’t you have work today? I thought you had that big Regency Era exhibition to look after.”

Tiffany shuddered as she thought of Sir Cecil. How could she explain that she hadn’t stolen the pendant around her neck? “Something...something bad happened to me while I was working there, Martina. I don’t want to talk about it. I’m going to go and stay with my Great Aunt Milicent for a while. She lives just outside Dorking. I need to get out of London; clear my head, rest up a bit.”

Martina sighed. “Okay, fine, but I’m driving you there myself! I’m worried about you, Tiffany. All this whatever it is? It’s not like you.” She patted Tiffany’s shoulder. “Promise me that you’ll go and see your GP about it once you get back, yeah? I think you might need help.”

Tiffany smiled sadly at her flatmate; secretly envying the other young woman’s undisturbed sense of normality. “Honestly, I’ll be fine. I just need to find a new job, that’s all. But yeah, sure, I’ll ring my GP too.”

## Chapter Sixteen

They were less than two miles away from Great Aunt Milicent's village when things went awry with the plan. Martina glanced at Tiffany, who was sitting in the front passenger seat of the car. The young taxi driver shrieked and immediately pulled over by the side of the road. "Tiffany!"

Tiffany flinched back in her seat. "What?"

Martina pointed at her neck. "You've got another tattoo! It *literally* just appeared there! What the *fuck*, Tiffany? What's going on with you?"

"It's complicated!" Tiffany flipped the passenger side sunshield down and peered worriedly at her reflection. The fox on her neck stretched and yawned, before ducking back out of sight beneath the collar of her top. "Ugh – it isn't *another* tattoo! It's a part of the one that was on my chest. The artwork *moves*! Martina, did you see that?"

Her flatmate nodded. She looked increasingly uncomfortable. "Has this got anything to do with why you're quitting your job at the museum?"

"Um, sort of, yes." Tiffany watched as one or

other of the foxes wriggled into view from inside her right sleeve. The animal curled up just above her knuckles and seemed to go to sleep. “One of our patrons turned out to be connected to an evil cult and he sent me back in time to 1814. I still don’t know why he did that. It’s got to do with this pendant, you see. It’s magical. That’s what transported me to the past; the patron, Sir Cecil Lompton, gave it to me as a gift, and when I put it on, poof! Time travel. Anyhow, long story short, one of his ancestors kidnapped me after I found out about the cult thing. We were in a carriage together, and he stabbed me and did some sort of weird chant, in Latin while...um...well, while I died. The next thing that I knew, I was alive again, and back in my bedroom.”

“And now the pendant won’t come off, and you’ve got a weird tattoo that moves.” Martina shook her head unhappily. “Tiffany, seriously, let’s just go find a church, and beg the old priest or the young priest or the flipping minister in there to ask the baby Jesus to uncurse you or whatever!”

“I don’t think it works that way.” Tiffany shivered as she thought back to her experiences in 1814. “Although, there was that other cult too, I suppose. The one that was enemies with the people who murdered me. The Order of the Unknown. Maybe they could help; if they even still exist nowadays.”

“Okay then! Brilliant!” Martina pointed to a nearby public phone box. “Let’s go check the Yellow Pages and see if we can find them!”

Tiffany suspected that secret esoteric cults didn’t tend to list themselves in telephone directories. She nodded anyway, and followed her flatmate over to the phone box. “Thanks for helping me with this, Martina. I don’t know what I’d have done if I’d been travelling by bus or something when the tattoo started moving!”

Martina snorted. “Yeah, I can already imagine the headlines! Mass hallucinations wreak havoc on public transport! PM blames the youth, etc.”

Tiffany giggled at the thought. “You always manage to see the funny side of things!”

“It’s my special talent.” Martina pulled open the door of the phone box as she deadpanned. “That and wrangling tourists. And improv too, of course. Love a bit of improv, me. Probably should have gone to bloody RADA.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me! I’m *rubbish* at improvising. I kept making all sorts of stupid mistakes while talking to people in 1814. It was so embarrassing!” Tiffany sighed as she picked up the tattered Yellow Pages. “Although, there were good bits too, of course. I made friends back there. I wish I could introduce you to them.”

There was a sudden strangeness to the air around them. For an instant, everything seemed to swirl and

ripple. Then the phone box and its contents were gone. Tiffany and Martina found themselves standing neck deep in cold water. Shrieking in mutual horror, they floundered across to the nearest bank and staggered clear of the river. Birdsong echoed from above them. Tiffany gasped as she recognised the scene. “Oh my God! It happened again – we...we’re in 1814!”

Martina stared at her. “Did...did you just bring us both back in time? What the *fuck*, Tiffany? Why would you do that to me? I thought we were friends!”

Tiffany held up her hands. “Hey! I didn’t do it on purpose! I don’t even know *how* I did it!”

“Yeah, well, if I end up being enslaved or dying of cholera, then I’m holding you responsible for it. Not joking.” Martina folded her arms and shivered. “So, what happens now? You’ve done this once already. Is there somewhere near here that we can get clothes from, or what?”

“Ah. That bit again.” Tiffany grimaced. “Um, so last time around, I was sort of rescued by some soldiers, and they gave me things to wear.”

“Right, great. I’m all for that.” Martina looked about her hopefully. “Where are they then?”

“Um, I’m not sure.” Tiffany turned and stared at the nearby trees; straining her ears for any sounds of life other than the birds. “Over that way, I think. At least, that’s where they appeared from the last time.

We'll be able to hear them before we can see them. Oh, and we need to pretend that we're from now. Nobody will believe us about being time travellers, you see. We don't want to end up in an asylum!"

Martina nodded grimly. "Yeah, I'd guessed that much already. Let's tell them that we were robbed or something. You know; the typical rich noblewoman with no common sense who ran off to meet some bloke her family disapproved of, and the long-suffering companion who got dragged along with her."

"Last time I just said that I woke up in the river and didn't remember how I got there." Tiffany set to work gathering up some branches for them both to use as cover. "I pretended to be a travel writer. Everyone sort of filled in the blanks for themselves and assumed that I'd been kidnapped. They were very sympathetic."

"I suppose that works too." Martina joined her in gathering branches. "Yuck! Why are these so sticky?"

"It's resin. Gum Rock Roses." Tiffany smiled ruefully. "It's all over the ground here too, I'm afraid. At least it smells nice!"

"Agree to disagree there, I think!" Martina looked supremely unimpressed with the foliage. "Still, it's better than nothing. Should I pretend to be a travel writer too, then? Or would people not believe that there would be two of those here? Do

they even work in pairs?”

“It should be fine.” Tiffany paled then as she realised that her newly acquired tattoo might throw a spanner into things. “Ugh! I just thought of a problem! The images on my skin will cause all sorts of awkward questions when they’re seen. Nobody’s going to believe that I’m a respectable young woman this time around!”

“I hadn’t thought of that!” Martina frowned for a moment. “Maybe we could say that whoever kidnapped you did it to uh, despoil your appearance? Tell people that he was some sort of crazed lunatic. You know; your father pissed him off years ago, and now he’s back for revenge? Hook for a hand, big cloak, all that sort of thing.”

Tiffany nodded. “That might work. Wait – you speak multiple languages fluently, don’t you? And you can read and write in all of them too?”

“Uh, yeah? French, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek. Comes in handy for driving tourists around. I was thinking about learning Mandarin next, or maybe Japanese.” Martina looked at her quizzically. “Why are you asking?”

“Because having additional languages means that pretty much nobody will question you being from the upper classes. Education was expensive in this era. We can say that *you’re* the one who was kidnapped for revenge on your father. I’m better off pretending to be a circus performer with these

things on me.” Tiffany winced as she saw one of the foxes currently on her left arm sit up and scratch its ears. “Although I don’t know how we’ll explain them *moving!*”

Martina scoffed. “Hey, what’s to explain? Like I said, you didn’t put them there! Anyone asks, it’s all that vile Baron von Blugmere’s fault. Him and his evil circus owning ways! Kidnapped you and tried to force you to become a tattooed lady. And as for them *moving*, well, you and I have never seen that happen, have we? Because only crazy people would think that a tattoo could do that. And we aren’t crazy. We’re perfectly sane and well to do travel writers.”

Tiffany giggled despite herself. “So, basically just deny everything, and hope that nobody else wants to risk seeming insane by pointing out when the foxes move?”

“Exactly!” Her flatmate paused then, and glanced over towards the treeline. “Hey, do you hear footsteps?”

Tiffany nodded. “It’s the soldiers. We need to call out to them now so they know that we’re here.”

That done, the two inadvertent time travellers covered themselves with the branches and waited. A few moments later, the small group of riflemen emerged from the trees. For Tiffany, it was a painful echo to witness. She couldn’t help sniffing. *Darling Evelyn! And dear Sergeant Marsh too! I*

*didn't just dream them up; they're real!*

Just as before, it was Lieutenant Plunkett who approached first. He drew out the same neatly folded wool blanket as he had on the previous cycle, and proffered it to Tiffany and Martina. "Please, ladies, take this, before you catch your deaths of cold! Sergeant Marsh, bring another blanket here, quickly. To judge by their wet hair, I fear that they have both been in the river!"

"Aye, sir!" Sergeant Marsh hurried over with a blanket from his own pack. He ducked his head politely. "How do, ladies?"

Martina beamed. "Thank you kindly! I'm Martina Wilton, and this is Tiffany Sutton. We're travel writers from London. A crazed lunatic with a big cloak and a hook for a hand kidnapped us both as revenge on our respective fathers. He called himself Baron von Blugmere, but we think he probably made that part up, don't we, Tiffany?"

"Um, yes." Tiffany nodded her agreement; impressed by her flatmate's improvisation skills. "On account of him being insane, you see."

"He forcibly tattooed her, as you can see." Martina, who was a keen member of an amateur dramatics group back in 1989, managed to make her voice wobble a little as she pointed to the foxes on Tiffany's left arm. "Said that he'd use us to start a travelling circus and make his fortune from it. Poor thing has weird pictures all over her now! I'd have

been next, but we escaped. Please don't ask us how, by the way. It's much too shocking to discuss."

"Gracious, how dreadful!" Lieutenant Plunkett bowed solemnly as he gave his name, and the details of which battalion he belonged to. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Wilton, and you too, Miss Sutton. Sergeant Marsh, see to it that there's space cleared on the mule for the two young ladies. I'm sure that between the lot of us, we can manage carrying whatever's removed."

"Aye, sir!" Sergeant Marsh set to work. "Pack saddle will take both of them no trouble at all!"

Lieutenant Plunkett had returned his attention to Tiffany. He seemed embarrassed. "Er, if you wouldn't mind wrapping that blanket a little more tightly, Miss Sutton? Only we shall need to help you up onto the mule's back, and, well...you know. Decency and such."

"Oh." Tiffany decided to try and stick close to what she had said last time. "Um, so I haven't ridden before. What happens if I fall off?"

Lieutenant Plunkett hastened to reassure her. "Not to worry, Miss Sutton! I'll tell Sergeant Marsh to tie you to the saddle for safety."

Sergeant Marsh had overheard them. He hurried over to speak with Lieutenant Plunkett; his voice low but urgent sounding. "Sir, I don't think tying the lass in place is wise. What if her father complains about it when he finds out?"

“I gave you the order, sergeant. It will fall to me to answer to him for it.” Lieutenant Plunkett pointed at Tiffany’s feet. “Anyhow, there’s no other option. She can’t *walk* back to the encampment like that! Her poor feet would be in ribbons. And none of us are carrying her; not while she’s only a blanket about her. It wouldn’t be right; not even with Miss Wilton as chaperone.”

“Aye, sir, but still.” Sergeant Marsh was clearly still worried. “Could we not just lead the mule nice and carefully like? And perhaps Miss Wilton could help her to balance somehow.”

Martina nodded cheerfully. “I love riding! Don’t worry, Tiffany. You can sit behind me and hang on around my waist!”

“Thanks very much.” Tiffany gestured at Lieutenant Plunkett’s pack. “Um, do you suppose that Miss Wilton and I might also borrow some clothes from one of you instead of just wrapping ourselves up in these blankets?”

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded and handed her his pack. “Yes, of course, Miss Sutton. Please help yourselves to whichever of my things might suit your needs. Sergeant Marsh and I shall ensure your privacy whilst you dress. Sergeant, tell the men to turn their backs to the young ladies.”

## Chapter Seventeen

The journey back to the encampment in the hills behind Saint-Jean-de-Luz went smoothly. Once there, Lieutenant Plunkett immediately escorted Tiffany and Martina to the officers' mess, where he introduced them both to Captain Amberley. The latter man bowed politely in greeting. "How do, Miss Wilton, Miss Sutton?"

Tiffany returned the gesture; wincing inwardly as she realised that she hadn't remembered to bow back to Lieutenant Plunkett this time either. Or to Sergeant Marsh, either, for that matter. *Argh! Why am I still so rubbish at this?*

Just as before, Captain Amberley began chiding Lieutenant Plunkett for having been so long in returning. There was almost no change to his words. "I sent you lot to trade with the locals and scrounge up an extra bit of food for the pot, lad! Don't try and tell me that it took you more than half a day to do that. What else have you been at? Aside from rescuing mysterious young ladies, that is. I'm sure neither of them was in any mind to delay your

return.”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked as embarrassed as he originally had. “Sir, we ah, we got a bit turned around in the woods. Before we found Miss Wilton and Miss Sutton, sir.”

“Oh aye?” Captain Amberley raised his eyebrows and folded his arms. “A full quarter of my company, and none of you were able to read a map? What’s this army coming to? Ah, I should have sent Sergeant Moore along, I suppose.”

Tiffany reminded herself not to grimace in sympathy this time. She still attempted to apologise for her previous rudeness. “I, um, I’m sorry about earlier, Lieutenant Plunkett. Miss Wilton and I both forgot to bow back to you and Sergeant Marsh when you introduced yourselves. It wasn’t a deliberate snub! Just...just the cold. Right, Miss Wilton?”

“Absolutely that, yeah.” Martina nodded. “And the fact that we were both naked, of course. Hard to drop a curtsy with no clothes on!”

Captain Amberley sighed and gestured curtly to Lieutenant Plunkett. “Take them to the baggage train, lad. Let the women take care of them. I dare say they’ll be as able for it as anyone else.” He nodded to Tiffany and Martina. “I’ll pass on the details of your unfortunate situation to those in charge, ladies. I expect someone will be along to speak with the pair of you about it later. In the

meantime, just try and keep yourselves out of trouble, eh?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir." Tiffany gritted her teeth and nodded as demurely as she could, before once again letting Lieutenant Plunkett take her arm to escort her back out of the officers' mess; this time with Martina walking on his other side.

The three made their way through the rows of tents towards the baggage train. Tiffany made sure to apologise to Lieutenant Plunkett again; mostly just as an excuse to talk to him. "I meant it, you know. About our having forgotten to bow. We weren't snubbing either of you."

"Don't worry on it, Miss Sutton." The young officer sounded almost as tired as Tiffany as he replied. "I reckon that you acquitted yourselves better than most in your position might have."

Martina laughed bleakly. "Oh, you have no idea how right you are about that, mate!"

Lieutenant Plunkett frowned. "Begging your pardon, Miss Wilton, but I've never heard any gentlemen's daughters talking like *that* before!"

The similarities were too much. Tiffany took a deep breath and turned left abruptly; dragging her companions along with her to a familiar quiet spot between two of the tents. "There's something that we need to tell you, sir."

Lieutenant Plunkett frowned; clearly baffled by the situation. "What is it, Miss Sutton?"

Tiffany swallowed nervously. “Um, okay, so, here’s the thing. Right before Miss Wilton and I were in the river, we were in England. And the year was 1989.”

He stared at her uncomprehendingly. “Do you mean that the last thing you remember was being in England? Well, that’s certainly very peculiar, and I’m sure you must be troubled by it, but I don’t see how it could be considered as being any if my business. I’m no physician! And what’s this nonsense about the year?”

Tiffany groaned. “Look, just bear with me here for a little while, okay? Believe me, I know how bizarre and insane this must sound to you. And keep in mind that if I were mad, then I wouldn’t think that what I said was at all strange, would I? So, by simple logical deduction, I am *not* mad. What I’m telling you is the truth. It’s...it’s just a very strange situation.”

Lieutenant Plunkett looked anxiously at Martina. “Begging your pardon, Miss Wilton, but I fear that Miss Sutton may be a tad unwell.”

Martina shook her head. “Nah, mate. She’s telling you the truth. We’re time travellers. In fact, this is like the second go that Tiffany’s had at doing it so far. Last time around, she got murdered by an evil cultist. I’m sort of hoping we can avoid meeting him.”

Tiffany shivered. “Yeah, me too.” Releasing

Lieutenant Plunkett's elbow, she rolled up the sleeves of her borrowed shirt and stretched out her arms. "Please – just look at the images on my skin. They'll prove to you that mysterious forces are at work here! They're magical; just like the time pendant that I'm wearing is!"

Lieutenant Plunkett's expression had changed from one of concern to one of resigned pity. "I er, I think perhaps we'd all best go back to Captain Amberley now, ladies. He'll know how to help you with...sweet God in Heaven! They move!" He stumbled backwards; narrowly avoiding tripping over the edge of one of the tents. "Your tattoos move! What trickery is this?"

"It's not a trick!" Tiffany bit back a sob. "We've met before, Evelyn – you, me, Sergeant Marsh, Sergeant Moore, Captain Amberley, and Colonel Archambeau. But none of the rest of you remember it now. I wish you did."

The air around them seemed to snap in on itself, and then furl outwards again just as suddenly. Lieutenant Plunkett staggered and shook his head. He looked dazed. Then he blinked. "Tiffany...? What's going on? Why are we back in the old encampment? Did Major Lompton bring you here in the carriage? He must have done, but then how did *I* get here? And...wait. No. That's not right. Didn't Frère Babineaux tell us that the Lomptons were murder cultists?"

Martina gasped. “Oh my God, Tiffany, what did you *do*? Did...did you just rewrite his memory?”

“I don’t know!” Tiffany shook her head and flung her arms around Lieutenant Plunkett. “I don’t know what I did, and I don’t care! I’m just happy to have him back!”

It took several minutes for Lieutenant Plunkett to compose himself after the shock of having his memories of the previous timeline restored. He swiftly confessed that he was more perturbed by his conflicting memories of the events at Château d’Archangeaux than he was with finding himself back at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. “I even remember not remembering how things had originally played out that morning, Tiffany. It truly is a dreadfully strange feeling. I don’t care for it one bit!”

Tiffany stroked his back and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Evelyn. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. Things just keep on getting weirder around me!”

“She’s not joking about that.” Martina shook her head. “So, uh, Tiffany, will anyone else start remembering things now do you suppose?”

“Um, I don’t know the answer to that either.” Tiffany frowned as she thought about it. “I mean, admittedly, I don’t actually know how it happened with Evelyn, but I still can’t think of any reason for other people to be affected too.”

Her flatmate looked relieved. “I thought maybe it

was going to happen to everybody you named when you were talking to him.”

Lieutenant Plunkett jolted backwards away from Tiffany. His face was pale with worry. “Miss Wilton could be right, Tiffany! I think we should go and check on the others.”

The three hurried back out from between the tents. Before they could decide who to check on first, there was a sudden shout of alarm, and then the sound of a pistol firing somewhere off to their left. It was followed by multiple voices shouting angrily, and even by a few frightened shrieks and screams. Then a second shot rang out. Exchanging worried glances, Tiffany and the others ran towards the sounds of chaos. They had to push their way through a veritable mob of enlisted men and camp followers to find out what had happened. Thanks to the average such person’s reaction to spotting his rank, Lieutenant Plunkett accidentally surged on ahead of his two companions. Left behind, Tiffany grabbed hold of Martina’s arm so as not to lose her too in the crowd. Everyone around them seemed shocked and confused. Some of the women were openly weeping. Murmurings about treason and murder filled the air. It rapidly became clear that someone had been killed, but no names were uttered.

Finally, Tiffany and Martina made it through to the front of the mob. They stopped in their tracks

and clung to one another; staring down at the crumpled form on the muddy ground. A man, dressed in a scarlet officer's coatee, with gold epaulettes. He was sprawled face down, and clearly very dead indeed. The ruin that had until recently been the back of his skull indicated that much. It was obviously an exit wound, Tiffany noted clinically; even whilst clenching her fingers in Martina's sleeve, and trying not to retch at the sight. *The force of the impact from the shot must have spun him around as he died.*

Martina shuddered. "Who was he?"

A nearby fusilier answered. "He was that colonel as oversaw the 136<sup>th</sup> – Archambeau, his name was. Heard tell he was the son of a count here in France, or something or other like that."

"No!" Tiffany stumbled forwards and knelt beside Colonel Archambeau's corpse. "No, he *can't* be dead!"

Behind her, Martina gasped. "Oh fuck! Tiffany, that Evelyn bloke we were with is in some sort of trouble too! Over there by that big tent; quick, look! I...I think he's been arrested or something!"

Tiffany looked. Sure enough, Lieutenant Plunkett was being dragged along between two provosts. He looked dazed; there was blood trickling down his face from a gash on his forehead. His wrists were chained in front of him, and the provosts had hold of him by his elbows. Another

officer held open the flap of Colonel Archambeau's marquee. Tiffany gasped as she recognised him. *Major Lompton – he must be involved with whatever is going on here!*

The soldier who had spoken previously piped up again. "He went for Major Lompton, so he did! Must have got things mixed up, I reckon."

Martina nodded encouragingly to him. "Mixed up how? What's going on here?"

The soldier puffed out his chest a little; clearly enjoying the attention. "Colonel Archambeau went insane is what! I saw it happen. One minute, they're all just walking there and talking amongst themselves like gentlemen, and the next the colonel gets this strange look about him. He staggered a bit. Thought he was going to faint at first, so I did. But instead, he whipped out his pistol and started yelling in French. Don't know what he was saying, mind. Anyhow, he shot Captain Hindle at point blank range. Blasted his ruddy – ah, I mean, he got him right in the unmentionables, so to speak."

Another soldier chimed in then. "Doubt as there's many as would object to him having done it, mind! Not given Hindle's reputation."

The first soldier agreed. "Aye, but the colonel didn't stop there, did he? Nah. Drew his sword next, so he did, and ran at Major Lompton!"

Tiffany gulped. "Who...who killed Colonel Archambeau? Was it Major Lompton?"

The second soldier shook his head. “Nah, miss. He was too busy grappling with him; trying to get him to drop his sword and surrender, or so it looked like to me. It was Wellington what done it. One shot, straight through the head.”

His companion scoffed. “Miracle he never hit the major and all!”

Tiffany rose to her feet. “What happened to Captain Hindle? Where’s his body?”

Both soldiers shrugged. The one who had first spoken pointed off to one side. “Wasn’t dead. A few of the other lads carted him off on a blanket just before Lieutenant Plunkett arrived. They’ll have got him to the surgeon by now.”

“He might have died on the way there.” The second soldier sounded optimistic. “There was a lot of blood, like.”

The provosts had reappeared, and were trying to disperse the crowd. Tiffany clenched her fists. “Martina, I need you to go back and tell Captain Amberley and Sergeant Marsh everything that’s happened since we last saw them, please. Tell them that you need to find Sergeant Moore too.”

Her flatmate eyed her warily as they hurried away from the scene of the killing together. “Um, okay, but what are *you* going to do?”

“I’m going to find out what they’re doing with Evelyn.” Tiffany nodded back towards the marquee. “He’s in there with Major Lompton. That’s the man

who killed me the last time that I was here. And Captain Hindle...he...let's just say that he harmed me too. I don't want to talk about it. I think Colonel Archambeau must have remembered what happened somehow, just like Evelyn did, and attacked them in revenge."

Martina sighed. "Just promise me that you'll be careful, alright?"

Tiffany thought back on her recent experience of being murdered. She shuddered. "I'll try."

"Yeah, that doesn't exactly fill me with confidence!" Martina hugged Tiffany fiercely. "So, do you think your friends here have all got their memories back?"

Tiffany nodded grimly. "We mustn't risk the others making the same sort of mistakes. You go warn them. Tell them what's happened, and that you left me keeping watch at the marquee where the supper was originally held for Mr Rigg. I'll wait there for all of you; just in case anyone else tries to go after Major Lompton."

## Chapter Eighteen

The time travellers parted ways. Tiffany made her way through the tents and across the encampment, before doubling back to hide at the far side of the marquee. By now, the rest of the onlookers had gone about their own business. There was no longer any sign of the provosts. Someone had draped a blanket over Colonel Archambeau's corpse. Tiffany hoped that it would be enough to keep the carrion birds away from him. *It won't deter looters, but I don't think that he'll be left there unattended for long.*

Major Lompton's voice came from somewhere within the marquee. "It's nothing to worry over, my lord! I am sure that the young lieutenant was merely confused over what he saw outside. Doubtless, he had heard shots, and then he came upon me; standing over his colonel's body! Little wonder that he should react so furiously! Remember, my lord, that he could not possibly have seen the pistol in your own hand; for you were behind me. He may even have feared that I, the seeming murderer of his

colonel, intended to do you harm also!”

Lord Wellington spoke next; Tiffany recognised his voice from the supper at Château d’Archambeaux. “You speak sensibly, sir. Very well – I will leave it to you to explain the matter fully to the lieutenant when he regains his wits. You may discipline him or not as you see fit.”

There was a short bark of laughter from Major Lompton. “Thank you, my lord! Truly, I think him to have suffered quite enough at the hands of the provosts. He is a decent fellow. A stern talking to should more than suffice!”

“A pity that the same was not true for Colonel Archambeau.” Lord Ollerington interjected then. His voice sounded troubled. “What do you suppose caused it?”

“He was deranged! You heard him ranting yourself, my lords.” Major Lompton was quick to reassure the other two men. “Nothing he said made any sense, save, perhaps, to one as unfortunate as himself. I would hazard that he had been bitten by a mad fox. Certainly, that would align with a small part of his tortured ramblings. Lord Wellington’s action spared him a far worse death, I am sure!”

The field marshal and the general pronounced their reluctant agreement with the latter statement, and then made their goodbyes. Tiffany stayed where she was until she saw them both walk away from the marquee; accompanied by the two provosts.

Then she darted swiftly to the entrance flap, and ducked inside it. The front half of the marquee was empty. There were several large wicker baskets filled with linens and tableware stacked along one side of it. The folding tables used to make up the larger supper table were piled up next to them. Tiffany guessed that the supper would be cancelled now in the wake of what had happened to the intended host. *Surely, nobody in their right mind would want to attend it now.*

She tiptoed over to the door flap in the middle of the canvas wall that divided the marquee. The flap was closed, which meant that those on the other side of it had no way of knowing that she was there. It made eavesdropping on them much easier. *Ugh, here's hoping it's safer as well!*

Major Lompton spoke softly. "There now, Plunkett. No need for you to struggle. It was all simply a terrible misunderstanding."

"Aye, so you claim, sir, but why should I believe it? You want me to believe that Lord Wellington killed Colonel Archambeau, but you were there too, and everyone knows that the field marshal is a terrible shot!" Lieutenant Plunkett didn't sound at all convinced. "Frère Babineaux told us that your family is involved with a murder cult. Les Tueurs de Renards, he called them. He said that Tiffany and Mademoiselle Dupont were both in danger. Then time started going all weird, and now it's nine

days earlier again, and Tiffany has tattoos on her that move! And apparently, she was murdered by a cultist and came back. Well, I only know of one murder cultist around here, sir.”

“Ah. You remember things as they were, don’t you?” Major Lompton sounded intrigued. “How could that have happened, I wonder? And you say that Miss Sutton has acquired some curious tattoos? I shall need to investigate that!”

“You keep away from her!” There was a clinking sound, and then a scuffle. Lieutenant Plunkett yelped suddenly. “No! Don’t touch me!”

Major Lompton uttered a surprised oath. “What is this? Why, Plunkett, you have been hiding things from me!”

There was the faint sound of fabric tearing, and then an anguished gasp from Lieutenant Plunkett. “Sir, please...!”

Major Lompton murmured gently to him. “Steady now, my dear one. I won’t hurt you. Come now – do not tremble so. Let me look at you fully. Yes, that’s right. That’s better. My, but this is indeed quite the secret! I never would have imagined it to be so!”

Beyond the canvas wall, Lieutenant Plunkett gulped back a sob. He sounded broken. “Please let me go now, sir. I...I beg you!”

Tiffany suddenly understood what it was to see red. Whirling, she stalked across to the nearest

basket and pulled out the largest carving knife that she could see. Then she dashed back over to the door flap, and flung it open; storming into the rear section of the marquee. "Leave him alone!"

She glimpsed Major Lompton standing in front of where Lieutenant Plunkett sat slumped in a chair. Then there was a sudden pain in her sternum, and something slammed her backwards. Tiffany curled in on herself as she fell. Her ears were ringing. Was that gunpowder she smelled? And the voices – the ones which were now all but screaming her name. As if something terrible had happened. She tried to sit up, but failed. It hurt too much to move; or indeed even to breathe. *Oh. Major Lompton just shot me, didn't he?*

There was a soft thud as the pistol in question hit the floor beside her. Major Lompton had dropped it as he knelt. He seemed anguished. "Miss Sutton! I swear that I did not know that it was you!"

"Would it...would it even have mattered?" Tiffany coughed weakly, and felt something bubble. Her mouth tasted like copper. "You...you've killed me once already...!"

"Damn it all, Miss Sutton, that was different!" Major Lompton stroked her face. To her surprise, there were tears in his eyes. "And you shouldn't even remember it! Something must have gone wrong somehow with the ritual. Or perhaps that deuced pendant is to blame!"

Lieutenant Plunkett screamed again. “Tiffany! For God’s sake, someone please get in here and help us! Major Lompton has shot Miss Sutton!”

The major made no attempt to silence him. Instead, he drew Tiffany up into his arms and began murmuring in Latin. She realised dimly that it was the same strange chant that he had uttered whilst murdering her in the carriage. Once again, that eerie cacophony of inhuman sounding screams rose in her ears: despairing, and terrified. *And...and there’s the beeping again too...!*

She opened her eyes and stared at her alarm clock. It was the morning before Valentine’s Day 1989 again, and she was alive. A quick glance confirmed that she still had the time pendant and the mysterious tattoo. In fact, two of the stylised foxes were chasing each other in circles around her right wrist as she switched off the alarm. Ignoring their antics, Tiffany clambered out of bed and examined her reflection in the full-length mirror on the inside of her wardrobe door. There was no sign whatsoever of the bullet wound. *And still no white hairs as far as I can tell either. I’m choosing to presume that that’s a good thing!*

Tiffany wasn’t anywhere near as shaken this time. Dying and then waking up back in her own era twice in a row had taken the edge off the experience. It was still bizarre, and thoroughly confusing, but she wasn’t afraid of it. Especially not

now that she had managed to memorise the chant used by Major Lompton. The young conservator smiled grimly. *I can use those words to send my consciousness back to this point in time whenever I choose! Now, if I can just figure out how to activate the magic of the time pendant, I can return to 1814 and try to fix things.*

She frowned as she thought back through everything that had happened. How had her two trips through time begun? There didn't seem to be any connection between the events at the museum and those at the phone box. It hadn't even been the same time of day. Sir Cecil and Martina had nothing in common aside from them both being English. The only two commonalities were the pendant and Tiffany herself. *I doubt if the time pendant can activate itself! So, what was it that I did both times around? Ugh, this is so frustrating! I just wish I could remember...oh!*

It was simple now that Tiffany thought about it. Twice, she had wished aloud to be transported to 1814, and twice it had happened. The power of the time pendant could only be one thing: wishes. Was it restricted to the wishes spoken by the person who was wearing it, or would it respond to anyone within range? What was the range, anyhow? And did it need to be spoken aloud? Could it do anything other than transport one through time? *Argh, I have so many questions about all of this!*

Most of those questions would have to wait for now. But she could test out one of them safely enough, and without even having to leave her bedroom. Taking a deep breath, Tiffany spoke her chosen wish aloud. “I wish that my quilt cover was pink instead of green!”

For an instant, the air had that sudden strangeness about it again. Then it settled, and the quilt on Tiffany’s bed changed colour just as she had wished. She stared at it in wonder. “Wow!”

It dawned on her then that there might be a limited number of wishes that could be granted by the time pendant. What if it was like the magical lamp in the story of Aladdin? Had she just inadvertently wasted her last wish on making changes to her soft furnishings? Tiffany grimaced at the latter thought. *I guess there’s only one way to find out – I’ll have to try making another wish, and see whether it works.*

This time, she decided to wish for something less trivial. “I wish that the limits of this wish magic would now appear on paper in front of me in legible writing in a language that I can read!”

A standard letter sized sheet of plain white paper materialised instantly in front of Tiffany. She grinned as she read the answer to her question. *The wearer of the time pendant is the conduit for its magic. If a person speaking a wish aloud does so whilst they are within earshot of whoever is wearing*

*the time pendant, then their wish will be granted. And there's no limit to how many wishes can be made, or what they're for either!*

Tiffany shuddered as she imagined the sorts of terrible things that could be done using wishes. In the wrong hands, the time pendant was a disaster waiting to happen. But the opposite was true too, of course. There was plenty of good that could be achieved. Why, she could solve world hunger instantly, or cure all sorts of terrible diseases! Surely, that had to be the morally right thing to do with it? *I'm certainly not going to just use it for my own needs! That would be horribly selfish of me. But I'd best play it safe. I'll start small – little things to help others. Making big changes will need very careful planning first; so that I don't end up making things turn out worse in the longer term.*

The young time traveller smiled as she heard her flatmate's bedroom door open. Martina's familiar footsteps echoed softly along the laminate flooring of the hallway between their rooms as she made her way to the bathroom. This time around, Tiffany vowed silently, she would be careful not to drag her into the strange adventure. *It's much too dangerous! I've died twice now already, after all, and who's to say if Martina would end up looping back to life or not if she were killed whilst in the past?*

Tiffany thought about what she knew about what Martina aspired to do with her life. Then she

murmured softly. “I wish that my flatmate Martina Wilton will get the opportunity to attend RADA after all, if that’s still what she really wants to do.”

With that initial foray into secret fairy godmothering complete, Tiffany steeled herself for a less whimsical use of the time pendant’s power. Despite all the danger, she still felt obliged to go back again to 1814. Major Lompton’s family and their horrid murder cult would still be there either way. Who knew they might be planning? What if Frère Babineaux couldn’t stop them on his own? She frowned as she considered the matter. *Maybe Evelyn was right and I was always destined to go back; only not just because of the paintings!*

Yes, Tiffany decided then; nodding resolutely to herself: she *would* go back. She would solve the mystery of Major Lompton and Les Tueurs de Renards. She would find out if it really had been her who painted the canvases in Sir Cecil’s collection. And, most important of all, she would be reunited with dear Evelyn, and perhaps even with Colonel Archambeau too. *But first, I’m going to flipping well eat something!*

## Chapter Nineteen

Breakfast and a wish later, Tiffany once again found herself floundering in ice cold brackish tasting water. She sighed and wrung some of the water out of her hair; frustrated by the repetition. This time, instead of rushing straight to the bank and covering herself up with branches, she remained in the water for a few more moments while she wished that she was wearing an era appropriate outfit for a woman; including a gown with a high neckline and long sleeves, and gloves. *I might as well preserve my modesty a little, since I have the means to do so! And it can't hurt to try and hide my tattoos either.*

Satisfied with her appearance, she made her way clear of the Bidouze and waited. A few moments later, the small group of riflemen emerged from the trees. But this time, they were accompanied by a less than welcome figure. At the front of the group, flanked on either side by Lieutenant Plunkett and Sergeant Marsh, was none other than the man who Tiffany had known as Major Lompton! She gasped

as she recognised him. *What's he doing here? And...and why is he wearing the uniform of a colonel? He isn't even supposed to be in the Light Company – he was part of the Fourth Battalion of the 136<sup>th</sup>, yes, but he was always a fusilier before!*

It was still Lieutenant Plunkett who approached her first. He drew out the same neatly folded wool blanket as before, and proffered it to Tiffany. “Please, miss, take this, before you catch your death of cold! Colonel Lompton, I fear that she has been in the river, sir! Her clothes look soaked through, and her hair is drenched!”

“I suspect you to be correct there, Plunkett!” The colonel strode forwards; removing his cloak as he went. He draped it around Tiffany before she could protest. Then he wrapped her in the blanket as well, and bowed. “Rest assured, my dear girl, that you are safe in our charge. I am Colonel William Lompton, of the 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles, and this is Lieutenant Evelyn Plunkett.”

Lieutenant Plunkett bowed. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, miss.” Then he turned and called out to Sergeant Marsh. “Sergeant Marsh, see to it that there's space cleared on the mule for her. I'm sure that between the lot of us, we can manage carrying whatever's removed.”

“Aye, sir!” Sergeant Marsh set to work.

Colonel Lompton smiled. “The mule is a fine idea, Plunkett! I shall lead it from off my horse, and

you must walk at its head, too. I fear however, that the poor girl is either mute, or struck dumb with the shock of her situation.”

“Perhaps she is French, sir.” Lieutenant Plunkett turned his attention to Tiffany, and spoke to her slowly in French. “Parlez-vous anglaise, mademoiselle? Et tu es blessé?”

Tiffany gathered her wits. Steeling herself, she bowed politely to both men. “I speak English, yes, thank you, sir. And I’m not hurt. I was just...shocked. With the cold. The river, you see. I um, I woke up in it. I don’t know how I got there. My name is Tiffany Sutton, and I’m a travel writer for the British Museum. I think someone must have drugged me and put me in the river!”

Colonel Lompton tutted and smoothed a few strands of Tiffany’s hair back away from her face. He showed no sign of having recognised her. “How dreadful! Still, at least you have at last found your voice, eh? Get her up on the mule, Plunkett. We must return to the encampment before we are thought dead!”

“Aye, sir, at once!” Lieutenant Plunkett nodded to Tiffany. He seemed a good deal less embarrassed than on previous occasions. “I’ll help you mount now, Miss Sutton.”

“Oh.” Tiffany nodded feebly. “Um, so I haven’t ridden before. What happens if I fall off?”

Just as he had done twice before, Lieutenant

Plunkett hastened to reassure her. "Not to worry, Miss Sutton! I'll tell Sergeant Marsh to tie you to the saddle for safety."

Sergeant Marsh hurried over to speak with Lieutenant Plunkett; his voice low but urgent sounding. "Sir, I don't think tying the lass in place is wise. What if her father complains about it when he finds out?"

Colonel Lompton waved off his concerns. "I'll answer to him if he does, Marsh! Worry not."

Lieutenant Plunkett smiled kindly at Tiffany. "Don't worry, Miss Sutton. The mule is very quiet, and we'll soon be back at our encampment."

"Indeed, Plunkett." Colonel Lompton nodded his agreement. "I will approach the other officers when we arrive and request that they speak to their wives and older daughters about finding some dry clothing for you, Miss Sutton."

The journey back to the encampment in the hills behind Saint-Jean-de-Luz still went smoothly. Once there, Colonel Lompton excused himself to go and speak with some of the other officers as he had promised. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Plunkett escorted Tiffany to the officers' mess, where he introduced her to Captain Amberley.

As usual, the latter man bowed politely in greeting. "How do, Miss Sutton?"

Tiffany chose her words extremely carefully. "I wish that Captain Amberley and Lieutenant

Plunkett both now remembered what happened to them during my initial time loop, up to the point where Major Lompton took me away from Château d'Archangeaux in the carriage!"

Once again, the air around them seemed to snap in on itself, and then furl outwards again just as suddenly. Captain Amberley hissed wordlessly and bent forwards at his waist; clutching at his head with both hands. A few feet away from him, Lieutenant Plunkett staggered for a moment and shook his head. He looked dazed. Then he blinked. "Tiffany...? What's going on? Why are we back in the old encampment? Did Major Lompton bring you all the way here in the carriage from Château d'Archangeaux? He must have done, I suppose, but then how did *I* get here? And...wait. No. That's not right. Didn't Frère Babineaux tell us that the Lomptons were murder cultists?"

Tiffany shook her head happily and flung her arms around Lieutenant Plunkett. "I restored what you both knew; before Major Lompton reset things. I see he's a colonel now."

By now, Captain Amberley had recovered from the sensations caused by the wish magic. He glowered furiously. "The bastard has changed things somehow! He's got command of the entire bloody regiment, and Lord Ollerington's ear, too."

Lieutenant Plunkett shuddered as he composed himself. "I must say, remembering the events of

alternate timelines at the same time truly does give one the most dreadfully strange sort of feeling. I don't care for it one bit!"

"Aye, likewise, lad." Captain Amberley patted Lieutenant Plunkett on the back. "With me now."

Tiffany blinked and hurried along behind the two riflemen as they exited the tent. "Um, where are we going, sir?"

Captain Amberley nodded curtly towards the tents belonging to the baggage train. "It's too busy back there in the mess, lass. Someone might overhear us. I've no interest in being committed to an asylum, and nor do I want to risk word getting back to Lompton about what we know. If we follow along the same lines of what we did originally, then with luck he won't suspect anything."

Lieutenant Plunkett grimaced. "But surely, we can't take Tiffany to Mrs Rollant, sir! Not knowing what we do about what she did!"

"There won't be any repeat of what happened to her before, lad." Captain Amberley sounded determined. "I'll have a nice quiet word with our seamstress before you and I leave them. We need to go and find Major Archambeau and the sergeants. Then we can bring them to Miss Sutton so that she can restore their memories too."

"I still don't like it, sir!" Lieutenant Plunkett glanced anxiously at Tiffany. "Wouldn't it be safer for us all to stay together? I know you mean to

“speak with Mrs Rollant about her conduct, but what about Captain Hindle?”

Captain Amberley touched the hilt of his sword almost reflexively. “Just you leave that bastard to me, lad. He won’t be bothering anyone this time. I’ll make bloody sure of that.”

Unfortunately, the plan was stifled before the three had even reached Mrs Rollant’s tent. They were less than halfway there when Colonel Lompton caught up to them. He smiled jovially at his officers, but his eyes were cold as he spoke. “Ah, there you are! I was told that I had just missed you at the mess. Good of you to volunteer yourself as escort for the young lady, Simon, but I will see to her from here. You and Plunkett go and chase up Major Archambeau about the arrangements for that deuced supper our guest Mr Rigg insists on my holding tonight!”

Captain Amberley squared his shoulders and shook his head. “My apologies if you have not already been informed of it, sir, but Miss Sutton is my responsibility. She is my maternal cousin, twice removed.”

Tiffany and Lieutenant Plunkett both choked down gasps of surprise at this bald-faced lie. Colonel Lompton raised an eyebrow. “Really? You two are *cousins* to one another?”

“Twice removed, sir.” Captain Amberley’s voice was flat and calm as he reiterated his claim.

“Indeed.” Colonel Lompton dipped his head slightly to them; as if acknowledging defeat. Then he smiled. This time, there was an unpleasant glint to his eyes. “Well, in that case, I must insist that you bring her along with you to the supper tonight, Simon! Family is *so* important.” He turned his attention to Tiffany. “Surely, you will not refuse the invitation, Miss Sutton?” He bowed to her and pressed her hand. “Perhaps think of it as being an opportunity to return what I have given to you. On which subject, I have secured promises of assistance from several of the other officers on the behalf of their womenfolk.”

Captain Amberley inclined his head politely. “It was kind of you to take the trouble, sir. If you’ll tell us who has offered, and when they might be expecting to receive us, Lieutenant Plunkett and I will escort my cousin thence...!”

He was interrupted by the sudden sound of screaming from the direction of the baggage train. The initial cries soon gave way to shouting. At this distance, it was difficult to make out exactly what was going on, but it sounded bad. Tiffany, remembering how swiftly her last loop had fallen apart, yanked her hand away from Colonel Lompton. She grabbed hold of Lieutenant Plunkett’s sleeve with one hand and Captain Amberley’s with the other. “No! We’re not getting involved in whatever that is!”

Colonel Lompton gestured sharply to a nearby trio of fusiliers. "You men! Accompany Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett to the baggage train and investigate that clamour, immediately! Make haste, Simon, and you too, Plunkett! It may be something serious! I'll take care of Miss Sutton until you return."

Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett exchanged worried glances and then nodded reluctantly. The army's chain of command left them no other safe choice. Twisting away from Tiffany's desperate grip, they jogged off alongside the fusiliers; vanishing into the maze of tents.

Colonel Lompton grabbed hold of Tiffany and pulled her close; as if he were attempting to comfort her. His left arm was wrapped snugly around her waist, and he had trapped both of her wrists within the grasp of that hand. "Do as you are told now, Miss Sutton, or else it will go very badly for you indeed."

Tiffany kicked him hard in the shins, flinching when it hurt her foot more than it did him. "Ow!"

"Ha!" Colonel Lompton laughed at her renewed struggling. "I do so enjoy the fire in you, my dear one!"

It was too much for Tiffany's temper. She locked eyes with him angrily. "I hate you! You're a cultist, and you've killed me twice over already!"

He sighed and nodded almost contritely. "All

true, alas! But those were the mistakes and misdeeds of previous lifetimes. I have done so much better this time around, I assure you.” His eyes blazed. “I have sought to make myself into a man who is worthy of you, Miss Sutton. I traversed the known globe and unpicked time itself in my efforts. If you are not yet satisfied, then I swear, by every god and devil who was ever and never named, I shall go forth and do it all again!”

Tiffany stared at him; stunned into silence by this unforeseen declaration. The colonel tightened his hold on her possessively. “Now – cease your struggling, my dear one, and come along with me. Refuse, and I will have to resort to more drastic measures.”

He strode off determinedly between two rows of tents; dragging Tiffany along with him. With her arms securely pinioned, there was little that she could physically do to resist. She was just about to try and kick him in the back of the knee, when Lord Wellington’s prized pack of foxhounds bounded past; focused only on the side of beef that they had stolen, and followed by a thoroughly embarrassed looking young aide-de-camp. Visions of frothing jaws and bloodied pelts rose in Tiffany’s mind. She cringed. “No!”

Colonel Lompton hissed angrily and let go of Tiffany’s wrists. Scooping her up in his arms, he cradled her against his chest as the hounds and their

would-be handler disappeared around the corner of a nearby tent. “The curse still affects you then! Well, it matters not. I will protect you regardless, my dear one; even from...!”

He stopped talking abruptly, and staggered for a moment. Then he toppled sideways and backwards onto the muddy ground. Tiffany fell with him. She gasped and scrambled clear of his now limp arms. “Oh my God! He’s dead!”

Captain Amberley reached Tiffany just as she gained her feet. He caught her by the elbow, and spun her to face him. She could see blood dripping from the bayonet of his rifle. “Miss Sutton! Did he hurt you, lass?”

Tiffany shook her head. “I...no. Not this time, sir. He...he claimed to have changed his ways.”

“Reckon as God can decide if that were true or not, lass.” Captain Amberley bent and swapped his bayonet with that of Colonel Lompton. He thrust the already bloodied weapon up through the lower jaw of the corpse; angling it so that the tip of the bayonet emerged from the original entry wound in the left temple. Next, he carefully positioned the colonel’s hands on the stock. “Let’s get clear of this now. With a bit of luck, folk will suppose that he tripped and fell on his own bayonet!”

## Chapter Twenty

Surprisingly, the supper that had been organised for Mr Rigg's visit was still held that evening. Lord Ollerington had stepped into the role of host. He did not seem remotely happy about the situation. Tiffany, who had somehow once again been seated as the female guest of honour, could readily understand his discomfiture. *Three dead bodies found in one day, and no one brought to account for any of them yet! I'd be stressed too, if I were him.*

As far as she could tell, Colonel Lompton's death was believed to have been an accident. The same was not to be said of the late Captain Hindle and Mrs Rollant. Tiffany doubted if she would ever forgive the pair for what they had attempted during her first loop. But that didn't mean that she couldn't still be horrified at their fates this time around. She hadn't seen for herself, but enough other people had that the details were by now common knowledge. From what Tiffany had heard so far, the screams of those who had discovered the bodies had been more than justified. She shuddered as she recalled some

of the whispered descriptions. *It really does sound as if they were torn limb from limb, but by what?*

Captain Amberley had confirmed that the rumours were all too accurate, and advised her not to listen to too many of them; lest she disturb herself. He himself had been so horrified by the gory scene inside Mrs Rollant's tent that he had blocked Lieutenant Plunkett and the youngest of the three fusiliers from even entering. Instead, he had sent the latter man to fetch the provosts, and dispatched Lieutenant Plunkett in search of Sergeant Moore and Sergeant Snoddy. Then, leaving the older two fusiliers to stand watch outside the tent until the provosts arrived, the captain had attempted to report back to Colonel Lompton. *Coming straight from the scene of a brutal double murder, only to find a known murderer carrying me off – no wonder he reacted so violently to seeing what was happening!*

The conversation at the supper was far more muted than it had been during Tiffany's initial visit to 1814. There was no particular interest expressed for the wonders of the baked ham and the tin can that had preserved it. Mr Rigg himself had two fewer officers to interview for his newspaper. The latter absences had altered the seating plan a little. Captain Amberley was still seated immediately to Tiffany's right, and then four of the other captains and their respective wives. The remaining four

captains were seated to Lord Ollerington's left, and were also interspersed with their spouses. Directly opposite the general, on the far side of the long table, sat Mr Rigg; with Major Archambeau on his right. There were still two fewer women present than there were men, but this time Lieutenant Plunkett was seated on the war correspondent's immediate left, opposite Tiffany. *Hopefully, Evelyn will have a nicer evening now that Captain Hindle isn't here to harass him.*

This time around, there were no paint stains on her fingers to draw comment from anyone. She had taken care to cleanse her hands thoroughly before embarking on her latest journey to the past. Unfortunately, there was no such means of removing the wandering images from her tattoo. Tiffany had tried her best to mitigate the latter problem; choosing to wear another high-cut, long-sleeved gown. This one was cut from a heavy sprigged yellow muslin. Tiffany had doubled down on her attempt to hide her skin by adding a white linen chemisette with a high ruffled collar. She had kept her gloves on to dine this time too; not wanting to risk giving her tattoo any extra opportunities to make trouble for her. So far, at least, the images hadn't ventured onto her face, and that was the only part of her skin that was currently exposed.

Fervently hoping that this would remain the case, Tiffany set to work slicing off another bit of the

cold roast beef on her plate. Her left sleeve caught on the edge of the table as she did so, and the cuff was dragged up a few inches; exposing half of her forearm. The fox there, which had apparently been sleeping, sat up, and then began to gambol in circles. It looked as if it was having a great deal of fun. Inwardly cursing her own clumsiness, Tiffany made to smooth down her sleeve. *I hope nobody saw anything!*

Lord Ollerington seized her exposed wrist before she could complete the action. He peered at the little fox chasing its tail for a long moment, before carefully adjusting Tiffany's sleeve to cover it for her. Then he lowered his head to murmur in her ear. "I will speak with you privately after this meal has ended, Miss Sutton."

Tiffany gulped. "Er, as you wish, my lord."

Only Captain Amberley seemed to have noticed their exchange. He tensed for a second, and then passed the bread across to Lieutenant Plunkett; addressing Tiffany as he did so. "How long has it been since you were last in England yourself, Miss Sutton?"

Tiffany replied much as she had the last time. "It's been over a year since I left for France, sir. All my writings and paintings have been lost to me now, of course, and so I have nothing left to send back to the museum. I shall have to start from scratch!"

Major Archambeau nodded across the table to Tiffany. “Mademoiselle Sutton, forgive my intrusion, but it sounds to me as if perhaps you have experienced some recent misfortune, qui?”

Tiffany blushed. “That is so, yes, my lord.”

He frowned. “I should like to know the whole of the situation, if I may?”

Captain Amberley answered him before Tiffany could do so. “The late Colonel Lompton and Lieutenant Plunkett found her in the woods earlier today, my lord. She’d been in the river, but we don’t yet know who put her there. She doesn’t remember what happened.”

Major Archambeau was once again aghast. “Mon Dieu! Such an ordeal for her to have endured! Mademoiselle Sutton, have you recalled anything at all since that time? And have you been seen by a physician?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Ah, no, my lord, to both of those questions. I haven’t remembered anything, but I didn’t think it worth my troubling the army’s surgeons. I mean, well, I shall either remember eventually, or not. There’s no sense in my making a fuss and bother about it.”

Lord Ollerington interceded. “I believe that the surgeons have quite enough extra work already. Given today’s events...well. At any rate, I will see to it personally that Miss Sutton’s curious situation is attended to.”

Major Archambeau inclined his head politely. He turned his attention to Mr Rigg. As before, they began a discussion on the current state of the Allied army. This subject inevitably required Lord Ollerington's input, which shifted his attention away from Tiffany. The young time traveller relaxed slightly, and spent the next while engaging in small talk with Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett. Just as previously, by the time that the supper concluded, her stomach was pleasantly full. She had, however, been careful not to drink as much wine as she had last time. The upcoming private conversation with Lord Ollerington had her worried. *He's definitely going to ask me some awkward questions about the tattoos on my skin!*

Tiffany tacked herself on at the very end of the line when it was time for all of those who had attended the supper to thank their host and depart. She wrung her hands worriedly while she waited for the general to finish bidding farewell to his other guests. There was no thought in her head of a romantic tryst this time! Instead, her mind was occupied by visions of the interrogation to come. What on Earth could she say that would even begin to explain away what Lord Ollerington knew he had seen? *Ugh! Why didn't I wish myself up some long gloves instead of short ones?*

Major Archambeau approached her then; having ducked out of line and circled back. He bowed

politely to Tiffany, and pressed her hand. "Bonsoir again, Mademoiselle Sutton. The young Lieutenant Plunkett; he suggested that I should perhaps seek you out."

Tiffany smiled up at him. Using her fan as cover, she beckoned for him to lean in a little closer. He obeyed her signal hesitantly. Glancing swiftly about her to check that no one else was within earshot, the young time traveller stood on tiptoe and whispered into the bemused major's right ear. "I wish that you now remembered what truly happened during my initial time loop, up to the point where Major Lompton took me away from Château d'Archambeaux in the carriage!"

Major Archambeau's eyes widened suddenly. He gasped and stepped backwards for a moment; shaking his head as if to clear it. Then he seized hold of Tiffany and pulled her to him. His arms tightened desperately around her as if he would never let her go again. "Ma chérie! I lost you, and I did not even remember it!"

Tiffany glanced over at where Lieutenant Plunkett was standing near the main doorway of the marquee. He blushed and smiled at her; nodding his head slightly. Beside him, Captain Amberley wore the look of a man who was trying very hard indeed not show his feelings. He caught Lieutenant Plunkett by the elbow and propelled him on out into the night. So far, no one else present even seemed to

have noticed the tender reunion that was occurring. Inwardly thanking her lucky stars for that small miracle, Tiffany turned her full attention back to Major Archambeau; melting into his embrace with a small sigh of pleasure. "I'm glad to see you too, my lord!"

He kissed the top of her head. "We are reunited now, *ma douce petite colombe anglaise*."

They rejoined the end of the line before their public display of intimacy could cause any offence. One by one, the guests in the line made their goodbyes to Lord Ollerington and exited the marquee, until only Tiffany and Major Archambeau remained.

The general peered at the two of them sternly as they approached him. He nodded curtly to Major Archambeau. "Do you intend to stand as chaperone for us, sir? Well, very good then! Miss Sutton has sparked a mystery that I would see resolved before I return to my headquarters for the night. What have you to say about the matter, my good miss?"

Tiffany gulped as he turned his attention squarely to her. "Er...well...it's really a terribly complicated story, my lord."

Lord Ollerington folded his arms. "I had suspected that it would be. Continue anyhow."

The young time traveller nodded. It had just dawned on her that Major Archambeau didn't know about her tattoo at all yet. "As Lord Ollerington saw

earlier, I have a curious tattoo. It was inflicted on me without my consent. It...ugh, this is going to sound insane, sorry! The images from the tattoo move. I don't actually know how it works, or at least, not exactly. I mean, I can't rationally explain any of it."

Major Archambeau inclined his head slightly. "Is it connected to what we once learned together at Château d'Archambeaux, mademoiselle?"

Tiffany nodded. "Yes! Very much so, my lord."

He hummed his understanding, and turned to address Lord Ollerington. "Mademoiselle Sutton is a traveller from the future, you see, monsieur. She has been targeted for death by a cult in this era called Les Tueurs de Renards. They have put a curse upon her. The late Colonel Lompton; he was believed to be one of them."

Tiffany spluttered. "You can't just tell him that!"

Major Archambeau shrugged. "Perhaps now that he knows, he can assist us, qui? The general; he is an important man, after all. And I am thinking that you could make it worth his while; with your knowledge of the future."

Lord Ollerington looked intrigued but also sceptical now. "You have merely added more questions with this bizarre revelation, sir! I will begin with how it is that you and Miss Sutton are acquainted with one another. It seems to me that she is not old enough to have known you during your

childhood at your familial estate here in France, and yet you speak as if she has been there with you. How can this be explained? And why should I believe this strange talk of travel from the future, and cults, and curses?"

"Because I wish that you would do so, monsieur." Major Archambeau buffed the fingernails of his left hand against his scarlet coatee as Lord Ollerington staggered and gasped. "Your mind, it is much more open now, *qui? Tres bien!* I wish that you would at once convince Lord Wellington to promote me to the rank of colonel, and give me the full command over the 136<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot."

The general's eyes glazed over slightly. "But of course, sir! What a capital idea!"

Tiffany caught hold of Major Archambeau's right arm. "My lord, please! You mustn't keep doing that. It's very dangerous magic. How did you even know how to do it in the first place?"

The soon to be Colonel Archambeau smiled. "Eh, it is not so difficult to comprehend, *ma chérie*. I heard what you said to give me back my memories. The phrasing used was clear to me. I simply copied it, but changed the subject."

"Oh." Tiffany blushed as she thought of how embarrassingly long of a time that it had taken for her to figure out the same thing. "Well, granted that was very clever of you, but please don't do it again,

my lord. It's really not something to waste on frivolities."

He frowned at her. "Do you think my career to be trivial then, mademoiselle?"

Tiffany grimaced. "That's not what I meant! I'm just worried in case something bad happens. For all that we know, it could have side effects!" She paused and moved in front of Lord Ollerington as he made to exit the marquee. "Er, it might be best if you stay with us for a little while longer, my lord. You look a bit dazed."

Lord Ollerington shook his head firmly. "I must return to headquarters at once, and petition Lord Wellington for this man's promotion!"

"Let him go, ma petite renarde innocente." Major Archambeau drew Tiffany aside. He bowed politely to the bamboozled general. "Bonne nuit, monsieur. I will bring Mademoiselle Sutton to meet with you again at some later point so that you may interrogate her more fully."

Tiffany made to protest, only for Major Archambeau to pull her close and kiss her playfully on the lips. By the time that she had managed to extract herself from his embrace, Lord Ollerington was gone. Tiffany was left scowling in angry embarrassment at how disparagingly her lover had treated not only her, but also the general. "Seriously, stop doing that! I'm *not* your obedient little plaything, my lord!"

Major Archambeau quirked his lips knowingly at her. “Non?” He embraced the young time traveller again, despite her thoroughly irritated squirming, and kissed her tenderly. His voice was a soft whisper in her ear. “I wish you would be only that from now onwards, *ma chérie*; until I grant you permission to be otherwise again.”

Tiffany felt the magic of the wish slide over her without ever taking hold; like oil dripped onto vinegar. The reality of what Major Archambeau had just attempted to do to her sank in. She gasped and shoved him hard in the chest; pushing him away from her. “You just tried to wish away my free will! You...you utter prick!”

Major Archambeau’s handsome face twisted abruptly into a cold scowl. He lunged at Tiffany; managing to catch hold of her by her elbows as she turned to flee. Hauling her backwards and enfolding her in a bearhug, he clamped his left hand over her mouth to silence her. “It did the general no harm! Ah, but I see now that you are as immune to wishes as you are to changes in history, *ma chérie*! Eh, it is no matter. There are far simpler ways to contain a mere woman.”

Taking care to keep his hand over the young time traveller’s mouth, he dragged her along with him, and back into the rear half of the marquee. The handful of civilian staff who were in there clearing away after the supper stared at them both. Major

Archambeau nodded politely and spoke in his usual soft tone. "A little assistance if you would please, qui? This young woman is hysterical."

Tiffany kicked futilely at her captor's shins and stamped on his feet to no avail. She could tell by the expressions on the other men's faces that they believed him. Her heart sank as she realised that he could simply wish for them to support him anyhow. *And I have the sudden horrible suspicion that he would, too!*

She soon found herself being carried bodily across the encampment by Major Archambeau and one of the civilian staff. The latter man held her ankles, whilst the major remained at her shoulders; gripping her by her upper arms. They had bound her wrists tightly in front of her, and gagged her with a wadded-up handkerchief to prevent her from disturbing anyone who was sleeping. A third man walked alongside them with a lantern; espousing the excellence of the army surgeon whose lodgings they were going to, and suggesting that the unfortunate young lady be dosed with laudanum. To Tiffany's horror, Major Archambeau agreed wholeheartedly.

The surgeon, one Doctor Ambrose Freston, was billeted in one of the houses close to the edge of the town. He was a bald, cadaverous looking man, with red-rimmed brown eyes, a bulbous nose, and a thin grey moustache that he had waxed into a neat curl at each end. It took several minutes for him to answer

the door to his late-night visitors, and when he did, he was still wearing his nightshirt and banyan. He yawned as he let them in. "What seems to be the matter, major? And why is this girl so restrained?"

Major Archambeau laid Tiffany out on the sturdy oak table used by the surgeon for his patients. He pinned her there by pressing down firmly on her stomach with his right hand; digging his thumb in just enough to make her wince. "I had presumed her merely to be drunk and hysterical, monsieur, but as you can see, she is in pain too. I wish that you will keep her confined here at your lodgings as your patient until I return to take charge of her again."

Doctor Freston blinked for a moment, and then nodded obediently. His eyes had taken on the same glazed look as Lord Ollerington. "But of course, my lord! I shall be happy to do so."

The two men who had accompanied them departed quietly whilst Major Archambeau described Tiffany's supposed symptoms in greater detail to the surgeon. Doctor Freston instantly agreed that she would need to be given something to help calm her. He hastened off out of the room; calling back as he went. "There are straps affixed to the underside of that table, my lord. They will keep her from moving during her treatment."

Tiffany bucked and squirmed helplessly while Major Archambeau secured the straps as instructed. There were twelve in all. Three of them went across

her legs, and the others across her torso and around her arms. They were crafted from heavy brown leather, and fastened with steel buckles. The staining to the leatherwork hinted at a gory history. Tiffany shuddered as she imagined how many injured men had likely strained against them during surgery. *Doctor Freston must have had this table purpose built for his work! And now I need to find a way to get free from it!*

Major Archambeau finished restraining Tiffany's upper arms and elbows with the straps and began untying her wrists. "You will be more comfortable with your arms by your sides, ma chérie. I am sorry that we must do things this way, but c'est la vie!" He set the rope down and straightened out her right arm so that he could position the straps around her elbow and wrist on that side. "Once we are safely installed at Château d'Archambeaux you will be free to move around again."

Tiffany raised her left hand and tugged desperately at the thin length of cord that had been knotted around her head to hold the handkerchief in place in her mouth. It was hopeless. The gag couldn't even be loosened one-handed, never mind removed. She clawed at it anyhow; her tongue wholly immobilised. *If I could just get the words out, then I could use wish magic to fix all of this!*

## Chapter Twenty-One

Doctor Freston returned all too soon with a dark brown glass bottle of something and a rag. He set both items down on the dresser and took hold of Tiffany's left arm. "I'd best take her pulse before I secure this hand."

Tiffany turned her head to her left, and stared beseechingly into the surgeon's eyes. *Please, please understand that I need your help!*

Major Archambeau finished buckling the final strap on his side of the table. He turned Tiffany's head gently but firmly to the right; forcing her to look at him instead. "She is very special indeed to me, monsieur. I must insist that you do not permit anyone else to visit with her in my absence. Also, I wish that you will ignore the images upon her skin, as well as any pleas that she may make to be released from your charge." He paused as if thinking, and then smiled. "How does it go in English – I wish that you will be immune to any wishes that she might voice.

"Hmm, a curious way to phrase things, indeed,

but I shouldn't think that that any of that will be a problem, my lord." Doctor Freston patted Tiffany's hand as he turned her wrist over to take her pulse. "She will be perfectly safe in my charge, I assure you. I am well accustomed to doing what is in my patients' best interests!"

Tiffany glared angrily at Major Archambeau; furious and afraid not only for herself, but also for everyone else whose will he was suppressing! How was she going to stop him from abusing his new found power? *I've got to think of something!*

"Her pulse is indicative of extreme nervous stress. Pupils are dilated. Limbs tense. Attitude abnormal, but not openly vicious." Doctor Freston smoothed down Tiffany's sleeve and finished securing her arm. "Definitely hysteria! I hazard that the pain you mentioned is connected to her uterus in some way. It is a common problem in young unmarried women. The laudanum I have brought will help her to rest."

Tiffany squirmed helplessly as the sweet-smelling rag was pressed firmly over her face. She thought despondently of her remaining allies as her eyelids slowly drooped shut. *Surely, they'll think to look for me soon...!*

When she next woke up, Tiffany found that she was no longer strapped to the table. She had been stripped down to her chemise and moved to a bed in a different room whilst unconscious, and was now

lying with her head, neck, and shoulders propped up with pillows. Her arms were secured by a length of plain white linen, which had been passed around behind her with the ends fitted snugly around her arms just above her elbows. It allowed her some movement, but not enough that she could reach to free herself. Several more strips of linen were stretched right across her torso; binding her to the bed. Her legs were free, but the handkerchief was still in her mouth. Tiffany grimaced as she bent her arms up; straining to reach the gag. *Ugh, it's no use! I probably couldn't undo it one-handed anyhow.*

Giving up on trying to remove the gag, Tiffany turned her head and looked at her new surroundings. The room was small, with a single narrow window directly opposite the foot of the bed. The shutters were open, and she could see that the sky outside was grey. On the wall to her right, was a fireplace, with a fire crackling in its grate. There was an oak armoire to one side of the fireplace, and a matching dresser with a ceramic jug and basin on top of it to the other. The wall to her left was bare of furniture. A heavy looking wooden door with brass fittings was set into the middle of it. *Something tells me that it isn't likely to be left unlocked.*

Tiffany's mind swam with questions. How long had she been unconscious? Where was this room? Was she still in Doctor Freston's lodgings at Saint-

Jean-de-Luz, or had she had been spirited away to Château d'Archambeaux? What had become of her friends, and of dear Evelyn? Were they all still safe and well? *Who knows what further chaos Major Archambeau might have wrought by now!*

There was the sound of a key turning in a lock, and then the door swung open. Doctor Freston entered the room. He closed and locked the door again behind him. Tucking the key away in one of his pockets, he walked over to the left side of the bed and peered down at Tiffany. "Awake, eh? Good. Now – I shall remove that cloth from your mouth after I have examined you, but you must remain calm. Any further bouts of hysteria and I will have no choice but to sedate you again. Is that understood?"

Tiffany nodded, and forced herself to lie still and quiet as the surgeon took her pulse. She eyed him warily as he removed the bedspread from over her lower body and her legs, but she knew better than to risk objecting. *I can't use wish magic to affect him, but if I can persuade him to leave me alone ungagged, then I can still use it to escape from this nightmare! If he's within earshot, then he could gag me again before I finish making my wish, or worse, he might figure out what I'm doing; just like Major Archambeau did.*

Doctor Freston spent several long minutes groping his way along Tiffany's legs as if he

expected to find something of great importance by doing so. Next, he made a great show of palpating her abdomen, and feeling her breasts for unnatural lumps or contusions. Finally, he pronounced himself satisfied with her general condition. The young time traveller tamped down the urge to scream blue murder at him as he at last untied the cord and removed the handkerchief. "Thank you, sir. I truly am very sorry for any difficulty I've put you to during my affliction. Um...might I please have something to soothe my throat? I am terribly thirsty, you see."

He nodded solemnly. "You may have some tea, and a little light beef gruel."

Tiffany gritted her teeth until after the surgeon had exited the room to fetch her meal; locking the door behind him as he went. Then she whispered as quietly as she could. "I wish that Captain Amberley was here!"

Six foot six inches of startled English rifleman instantaneously materialised out of thin air right on top of Tiffany. The look of sheer and utter confusion on Captain Amberley's craggy face gave way immediately to concern as he took in what he was seeing. "What the ruddy blazes is going on here, lass? Why are you tied to a bed?"

The young time traveller squirmed. "Major Archambeau had me confined as hysterical by one of the army surgeons, but I swear that I'm *not*, sir!

Please, you must believe me!”

Captain Amberley scowled and clambered off her to stand by the left side of the bed. He took out his knife and set to work slicing through the linen strips which held Tiffany down on the bed. “I thought that you and Monsieur le Compte were right happy together. Did I miss something between the end of last night’s supper and now?”

Tiffany sighed. “I...he...he figured out that I’d wished his memories back, and then he started making wishes of his own! That’s the real reason why Lord Ollerington is promoting him to the rank of colonel so very swiftly. He wished for it to happen.”

The rifleman listened in silence as Tiffany recounted all that had happened after he and Lieutenant Plunkett had left the marquee. The young time traveller blushed and sniffled as she described the events here in Doctor Freston’s lodgings. She finished up by explaining why she had wished for Captain Amberley to come to her rescue instead of anyone else. “I...I just sort of thought that you’d stand the best chance against him if it came to a fight, sir. And I wasn’t sure if I could wish myself away.”

Captain Amberley nodded his understanding of her reasoning as he cut through the last of the strips. “Because of how that bastard’s attempt at controlling you didn’t take.”

There was the sound of footsteps outside the door of the room then. The lock rattled as a key was inserted. Tiffany, her arms still restrained by the linen shackle, sat up on the bed and clutched desperately at Captain Amberley's nearest elbow. "I wish that we were both somewhere safe!"

The air around them stretched and snapped in on itself as the magic of the wish transported both her and Captain Amberley away. An instant later, Tiffany felt the gentle prickling of grass against her bare feet. "Ugh, unbelievable! My flipping arms are still tied, damn it!"

Captain Amberley blinked. "Did you just wish us away, lass?"

Tiffany blushed. "Sorry. I panicked when I heard the door opening, sir."

"Aye, well." Captain Amberley set to work freeing Tiffany's arms from the shackle. "Reckon as you might have been wise to do it and all. Saves me from having to deal with that ruddy surgeon. But where exactly are we now?"

"Um, I don't know yet." Tiffany stared at the unfamiliar landscape. "Somewhere warm, at least. I could try using wish magic again to find out?"

"Might be an idea, aye." Captain Amberley worked the tip of his knife carefully under part of the linen shackle. "So, this wish magic that you mentioned having used – how does it work?"

"Um, you just make a wish." Tiffany shivered

then as she thought of how readily Major Archambeau had misused that information.

“Sounds right useful. Hazard as it’s dangerous too, mind. Especially in the wrong hands. Dread to think what the likes of Bonaparte might do with it!” He paused in his efforts at freeing Tiffany. “This blasted thing is fitted tightly, lass. Worse, it’s been stitched instead of tied for some bloody reason. Hold still. I’d hate to catch you with this knife.”

Tiffany nodded. “Alright, sir. I’ll try and find out where we are once you’ve freed me.”

The mystery of their whereabouts was solved without magic, when a kiwi sprinted past; vanishing back into the surrounding knee-high grass as quickly as it had appeared. Tiffany gasped in amazement. “Wow! A kiwi! We must be somewhere in New Zealand. Well, I suppose that I *did* ask for us to go somewhere safe, and there’s very little that’s dangerous here.”

Captain Amberly sliced carefully through the stitches securing the linen straps around Tiffany’s arms. Sheathing his knife again, he pulled the shackle off and crumpled it into a ball. “How do we get back, lass? Young Plunkett and the rest of my lads will be wondering where I am by now. And, whatever rank Archambeau is, like as not he’s searching high and low for you; unless he’s still being kept busy at headquarters.”

Tiffany scowled and kicked at the grass. “Lord

Ollerington has probably already promoted him to colonel! Just as he wished would happen – ugh, that...that opportunistic bastard!” Anger at how she had been mistreated was rapidly overtaking her other feelings. “Ugh, I hate that I ever slept with him!”

Her companion scowled. “Blast it all, so I *was* right then! You really did throw poor Plunkett over for a man with a title! I’d thought better of you than that, Miss Sutton.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Tiffany shook her head. “It was back during my initial time loop. Evelyn and I had agreed that we’d make a go of things as a three with Major Lompton. He said that he’d be willing to pursue both of us romantically, you see. And since Evelyn and I both like being with men *and* women, it all seemed as if it would be fine! But then the major went and proposed to Mademoiselle Dupont, and I...I...ugh!” She flung up her hands and stamped her foot in frustration. “I was pissed off about it, alright? And I’d been drinking too, obviously; which never helps things. I slept with Colonel Archambeau to spite Major Lompton, that’s all.”

“Don’t reckon as that makes things much better really.” Captain Amberley folded his arms; his jaw set in a look of stern disapproval. “Still wasn’t fair to young Plunkett. Not like he’d done anything to hurt you.”

“I know that!” Tiffany sighed and took a deep breath to calm herself before continuing. “I felt awful about it afterwards, and I still do. I confessed what I’d done and apologised for it as soon as I had the chance to speak to Evelyn alone. For what it’s worth, he forgave me.”

Captain Amberley shook his head. “I reckon I should talk to him about this matter. He obviously needs guidance!” He glanced at Tiffany then, and quirked his lips slightly. “Reckon as you do too and all. Not sure if you’d welcome it coming from the likes of me, though. Still the offer stands.”

Tiffany smiled ruefully. “Thank you, sir. I’ll keep it in mind.” She yawned; the aftereffects of the laudanum still in her bloodstream. “I’ll wish us back now. Then I’d better try to undo the changes that Colonel Archambeau’s wishes have made. Hopefully, he hasn’t caused too much damage.”

Captain Amberley’s jaw clenched. “I don’t mean to overstep, but maybe you should see about making him forget that wishes are real.” He hesitated for a moment, and then went on. “Maybe make him forget about everything that’s happened between the two of you and all. It isn’t like the bastard deserves any better, after how he’s mistreated you.”

“That’s a good idea.” Tiffany sighed. “Ugh, first Major Lompton and his horrible cult, and then all of this! Perhaps Evelyn and I should just be content

with one another from now on!”

“Some might reckon so, aye.” The rifleman sighed. “Still, I suppose I can understand why the two of you might seek something more. Don’t lose heart over it. There are good men aside from young Plunkett out there, lass.”

Tiffany huffed out a sigh. “I suppose there are.”

A sudden breeze gusted past them then; ruffling their hair, and causing Tiffany’s chemise to flap up. She squeaked and tugged it back into place. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. Thankfully, Captain Amberley was gracious enough not to mention the eyeful that he’d just had. He turned away instead and stared at the spot where the kiwi had disappeared. “Odd looking little creature that! Sort of a bird and yet not. Do you know if it’s safe to eat it?”

Tiffany spluttered. “What? No! I mean, yes, it is safe to eat, but you mustn’t! They already end up as an endangered species as it is.” She grimaced then; realising that people in this era had no understanding of such things even being possible. “Contrary to popular opinion now, species of animals and birds can and do end up extinct. And it’s almost always because of humans, too. Hunting them too much, reducing or destroying the sorts of environments that they need to live in, introducing other species that either kill them directly or just out compete them for resources. It’s a serious problem.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.” Captain Amberley nodded his acceptance of her explanation, but he didn’t turn around. “Thank you for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.” Tiffany looked down at herself thoughtfully. “Hmm. Maybe I should wish myself up some more clothes to wear, too.”

“Reckon as it couldn’t hurt, lass.” The rifleman folded his hands behind the small of his back. “I’ll keep my eyes averted for now.”

A feeling of euphoria swept over Tiffany at this simple demonstration of gentlemanly behaviour. She sighed happily and hugged herself; swaying on the spot. “Thank you, sir. You...you’re a good man yourself; you know that?”

He made a soft, non-committal sound at the back of his throat. “Laudanum has some right strange effects on folk, lass. That’s all that I have to say about the matter. Go on now and get yourself dressed, aye?”

Tiffany pouted. “I wish I was fully sober right now. You might take me seriously then, and...! Oh. Oh dear. Um...so, can we agree to forget about this part please?”

“If you like, aye.” Captain Amberley sounded wholly nonchalant about the matter. “No need to blush over it though. At least you have your wits about you again now.”

Tiffany hurriedly wished for all the clothing that she needed. She set to work dressing herself as soon

as the items finished appearing; wishing vehemently as she did so that Colonel Archambeau would no longer remember anything whatsoever about wish magic, time travel, or his interactions with her beyond their brief conversation during the previous night's supper. "I'll unwish the changes that he's made to things once I'm sure of what they are. I might as well leave him his new rank, I suppose. It's what he was originally. Major Lompton must have done something to change things this time around; to have command of the 136<sup>th</sup> himself. I wonder what he was up to there."

"Don't rightly know, lass." Captain Amberley turned around to face Tiffany as she tugged at his sleeve. "To be fair, he didn't do too bad a job with being colonel. Neither of them did. Decent enough sorts of officers, all things considered." He gestured for her to turn around so that he could secure the fastenings on the back of her bodice. "You'd best keep your wits about you whilst the rest of us are off at Saint-Palais. I don't doubt that our late Major Lompton was behind what happened to Captain Hindle and Mrs Rollant, but he might well have had help. And there's still that bastard Freston, too. You mentioned as you can't use wishes against him."

"Ugh, good point!" Tiffany shivered as she remembered how the surgeon's hands had lingered on her hips the night before. "There's *definitely* something off about him!"

“Opium fiend, or so they say. Heard tell he joined the army to escape a scandal.” Captain Amberley looked thoughtful. “Hmm. I might just have an idea on how to manage him for you. Do you mind if I try wishing on your behalf, lass?”

“Oh!” Tiffany clasped her hands together excitedly. “Yes! That will work! You’re a genius!”

“Well, I wouldn’t go *that* far, but I do have my moments of insight.” The rifleman chuckled. “Give us a moment or two to phrase the thing right. Then you can wish us safely back to the encampment. Me and my lads have got a battle to win.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Tiffany was once again left behind at the encampment for the duration of the conflict at Garris and Saint-Palais. This time around, she waited in Captain Amberley's tent; filling in her waking hours sketching the faces of her friends here in 1814 from memory. She drew them on foolscap in simple pen and ink; using Captain Amberley's writing materials. Eventually, however, even this beloved activity proved unsatisfactory. As Tuesday evening fell, and darkness slowly reclaimed the landscape, Tiffany pulled on her cloak. Picking up a lantern and lighting it with a taper, she carefully doused the oil lamps in the tent and set out to wait by the edge of the encampment for the returning troops. *I've already wished that Lord Ollerington won't remember there having been anything unusual about me, so I'm sure that it won't cause any harm for me to talk to him again on his arrival.*

Just as before, Lord Ollerington rode directly across in front of her. Tiffany readied herself to call out to him. Then she noticed how slumped he was

in the saddle, and how his head lolled against his chest. The reins for his horse were slack; the animal choosing his own path. Darting forwards and catching the weary chestnut by his bridle, Tiffany coaxed him into a halt. This close, she saw that the general's skin was pallid. Both of his arms hung limply at his sides underneath his cloak. His chest wheezed and rattled with each weary breath. He was unconscious, and, to judge by the amount of blood dripping from his tattered right sleeve, mercifully so.

Tiffany opened her mouth to call out for help. Before she could voice even a syllable, a second horse trotted past, and then a third. Both were riderless. Somewhere off in the darkness, a man's terrified voice cried out faintly in warning. "The French are coming! For God's sake, make ready! They are almost upon me...!"

The sound of a musket cut through his words; just as the ball from the weapon had likely cut through the man himself. Tiffany clung on tight to the startled horse's bridle with her right hand; tugging at it until the animal quietened again. Dropping the lantern, she closed her left hand around the general's right ankle. "I wish that Lord Ollerington was awake and wholly unharmed, and that the French would abandon their pursuit of our soldiers and fall back from here to their own lines at once!"

Lord Ollerington shuddered and opened his eyes as the wish took effect. He blinked for a moment and then sat up straight in his saddle; peering down at Tiffany. “Am I dead, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany shook her head. “No, my lord.”

“I should be.” The general felt about himself in open confusion; searching for wounds that were no longer there. “The day is lost, and the French victorious! They will be on their way here. We must warn the rest to prepare – here, let go of Lightning and climb up before me. Quickly now, my dear, quickly! We cannot tarry even a moment!”

“We have time enough, my lord.” Tiffany snatched up the lantern again and let him pull her up onto the pommel of the saddle nonetheless. “The French are falling back for now.”

“If you are correct about that, then God’s will has surely spared us this night.” Lord Ollerington wrapped his left arm about her waist; taking the reins in his right hand and urging Lightning on into a brisk trot. The heavy fabric of the sleeve of his frock coat was still in shreds; as was the shirt beneath it. “Have you a fellow whom you are praying for, Miss Sutton? I know that you are not long installed in our encampment, but perhaps some brave officer has secured your favour?”

Tiffany nodded. “Lieutenant Evelyn Plunkett of the 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles, my lord. I have a few more friends amongst that company too.”

The general gave a deep sigh. "The 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles did very bravely today. Their captain especially will be commemorated. Be confident that I shall see to your protection from this point hence. I owe a debt to Captain Amberley and his brave riflemen that will be hard to repay."

Something in his phrasing sent a cold chill of dread through Tiffany. "I...what exactly are you saying, my lord? You speak as if...as if...!"

Lord Ollerington tightened his arm around her. There was a faint tremor of sadness to his voice as he replied. "I am truly sorry, Miss Sutton. The 136<sup>th</sup> Rifles died to a man in my defence; after we were betrayed from within our own ranks! If not for their courage, I would now be a prisoner at best. And worse still, despite every effort to protect him, Lord Wellington himself has fallen!"

Tiffany felt the wail escape her throat as much as she heard it. "No! No, that *can't* be true! That's not what was supposed to happen!"

"I understand your shock, my dear girl." Lord Ollerington reined his horse left then; making straight towards an approaching trio of scarlet coated officers. "You three there – rouse the men, and make ready to defend this place! We have lost the battle, and our field marshal, but the war goes on yet, I assure you! If Hill comes back alive, then send him straight to me. I will be at headquarters; reconvening with Beresford and the rest."

Tiffany was too shocked to pay much attention to what happened for the next while. Her mind had been left reeling by Lord Ollerington's news. She all but swooned in his arms as they rode on through the encampment and down into the town itself. Here they dismounted and entered the house that had been claimed by the late Lord Wellington for his headquarters. Tiffany kept her footing, but she couldn't stop crying. When the wife of one of the surviving senior officers offered her a glass of brandy laced with laudanum, the young time traveller accepted it gratefully; glad to slip away into sleep for a time.

When she next regained her senses, it was once again full daylight. Someone had placed her on a small fainting couch in an upstairs room. They had taken off her cloak, and removed her pattens and her kidskin half boots; leaving her otherwise fully clothed. Her cloak had been draped over her in place of a blanket. A tall silk screen divided the corner where the couch sat from the rest of the room. Emerging from behind it, Tiffany spotted her now unlit lantern atop a dresser. Checking it, she saw that it had been left to burn itself out. *I suppose whoever left it here must have thought that I might need the light from it for comfort if I woke up during the night.*

The young time traveller pulled on her boots and laced them up; leaving her pattens and her cloak

behind for now, along with the lantern. Smoothing out her skirts and ignoring the wild mess of curls that was her unbrushed hair, she ventured out through the open door of the bedchamber and onto the landing beyond it. *If I'm going to fix things, then I need to find out exactly what went wrong during the battle. I can't just wish everyone back alive again without knowing all of the facts; not when Lord Ollerington said that we'd been betrayed by someone within our own ranks! It wasn't Evelyn or Captain Amberley, or either of the sergeants, I'm sure of that much. And I very much doubt if any of the other riflemen were to blame either.*

Tiffany was halfway down the stairs when she spotted the familiar figure of Colonel Archambeau standing in the hallway below. He had his back to the stairs, and was speaking in French to someone who was standing out of sight. Backing away carefully up the stairs, Tiffany ducked behind the topmost newel post, and crouched down to listen. She was leery of trusting her former lover now that she knew how ruthlessly he would exploit those around him given the opportunity. *Why is he speaking French, anyhow? Is he just talking to one of the locals, or is it something more sinister?*

The colonel's words proved unambiguous. "It is not my fault that Ollerington escaped both times. And it matters not, anyhow. Wellington is dead. We have taken the town, and the encampment along

with it. There is nowhere that the general can hide, and no one left alive who will aid him. He will be recaptured soon enough, I am sure.”

Tiffany decided that she had heard enough. She rose silently to her feet and tiptoed away from the top of the stairs; intent on somehow slipping clear of the house and then going in search of Lord Ollerington. *I have the feeling that he'll need all of the help that he can get!*

A man's ungloved left hand closed suddenly over her mouth, and his other arm wrapped tightly around her waist. Tiffany squirmed helplessly as she was dragged backwards along the landing, and then on through a narrow door into a gloomy little rear stairwell. Her captor bent his head and whispered in her ear. “You must be quiet, Miss Sutton! They cannot know that we are here!”

Tiffany relaxed as she recognised Lord Ollerington's voice. She stood by nervously whilst he carefully closed the door between them and the main part of the house. Only once he turned back to look at her did she dare to speak, and she kept her voice low. “My lord – what has happened?”

Lord Ollerington looked haggard. He had parted company with his cloak and his cocked hat since she had seen him. His still tattered frock coat hung open. Both it, and the rest of the clothing underneath it, had been encrusted with blood and other viscera. His neck kerchief was absent, and his

auburn hair lay matted against his head. He rubbed at his bright blue eyes tiredly as he replied. “We were overrun during the night. That damnable traitor Archambeau and his accomplices were behind it! They have seized control of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. And the brutality of how they did so – no, no, I cannot describe it to you! Suffice it to say that until I found you, I had feared myself to be the only survivor.”

Tiffany shuddered. “We need to get away from here right now, my lord! Somewhere safe; where they won’t find us.”

The general sighed and shook his head. “I promise to do everything in my power to assure your safety, Miss Sutton. Alas, that power is sorely limited by our current circumstances.”

“Luckily, mine isn’t, my lord.” Tiffany stepped forwards and caught hold of Lord Ollerington’s hands; ignoring his startled flinch. “I wish that we were both somewhere safe!”

The magic of the wish transported them instantly. Lord Ollerington uttered an oath. He wrenched his hands free of Tiffany’s grip and sprang away from her; gazing around in wild eyed confusion. “What is this new strangeness, Miss Sutton? Where are we? How did we get here?”

Tiffany glanced at a passing kiwi. “We are in New Zealand, my lord. I brought us here using...er...well, magic. I’ve done it before. I don’t

really know why it keeps choosing New Zealand as the location, but at least there's no risk of our being found by the enemy here!"

Lord Ollerington opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he closed it again, and sucked in a deep breath instead. Finally, he nodded. "Magic."

"Yes, my lord." Tiffany eyed him worriedly.

He took another deep breath. "Magic that transports people from France to New Zealand."

Tiffany nodded carefully. "Um, yes, my lord. I mean, it can do other things too! I just felt that getting away was the main priority."

The general took another wary step away from her. "Does this mean that you are a witch, then, or a sorceress?"

"Oh no, my lord!" Tiffany hastened to try and reassure him. "It's nothing like that! Let me tell you the whole thing from the start. Um, you see, it all began back in London, when I was gifted this pendant."

Lord Ollerington stood and listened to Tiffany as she explained the convoluted series of events which had led her from her studio in the British Museum in 1989 to the grassy area where the two of them now stood. He did not interrupt her, although his expression hardened at times; especially whenever Colonel Archambeau was mentioned. Finally, when Tiffany reached the conclusion of her account, he spoke. "You removed all knowledge of what that

dastardly wretch Archambeau revealed to me on Sunday then?”

“Um, yes?” Tiffany scuffed her foot nervously against the grass. “I had to, my lord. I needed to keep my being from 1989 a secret, and I also couldn’t risk anyone else getting the same idea that he had; about abusing wish magic, I mean.”

Her companion scoffed. “You believed me to be capable of such despicably selfish acts! I suppose that I cannot rebuke you for your fear. Not after what you have endured. But I am *not* he, Miss Sutton. And, more importantly, he is not who you think either.”

“I’d sort of gathered as much by all of the betraying and murdering, my lord.” Tiffany folded her arms. “Or is there something more specific about him that I’m not aware of yet?”

“Yes, there is.” Lord Ollerington’s tone was grim as he replied. “You spoke of having been persecuted by Les Tueurs de Renards, and of how the late Colonel Lompton was connected to them in some way. I must tell you now that there is more to that matter. Archambeau is also one of them. I know this for I was forced to watch as he sacrificed poor Beresford to whatever vile entity it is that they worship. He, and that depraved monk, Frère Babineaux! The way in which they killed him...those terrible plants...!” He broke off then; his voice ragged with grief.

Tiffany ran to him, and flung her arms around him in attempted comfort. “I’m so sorry, my lord! I really thought that you’d be better off not remembering how he’d tampered with your free will. It was meant kindly.”

The general shrugged her off and turned away. “If you are truly remorseful, Miss Sutton, then you will restore those memories to me.”

“Okay.” Tiffany exhaled slowly. “Okay, I can do that for you, my lord. But...um...what if I *also* gave us both the chance to stop the cultists from ever enacting their evil scheme?”

Lord Ollerington whipped around to face her again. “Continue, please. I would hear this plan.”

Tiffany smiled bitterly. “I’ll need to make a wish first; to set things in place so that you have your memory restored. And then...ugh...then, I’ll need you to kill me – slowly, by the way! There’s a special chant that needs to be spoken during my death for this to work. I’ll wish up some writing materials and jot it down for you. It’s in Latin, and it’s a bit long, so I’ll need you to be able to take over saying it for me if I pass out or whatever partway through dying.”

“I presume that this would be the same chant that you told me Major Lompton utilised?” Lord Ollerington looked disturbed by the idea. “Is there truly no other way for us to accomplish the latter aspect of the plan?”

“No.” Tiffany sighed and shook her head. “It’s just how this thing works, I’m afraid, my lord. I die, I wake up in 1989, I use wish magic to loop back to the river again, and then I use it to restore everyone’s memories of what happened during this loop. By everyone, I mean you and those that we can trust, of course. And not all at once. We don’t want anyone running off by themselves to try and deal with things alone and then getting killed or captured, or anything like that!”

“No, of course not.” Lord Ollerington nodded his agreement regarding the latter concern. “But why can you not simply wish yourself back to the river *without* dying first?”

Tiffany blinked. “Er...um...I hadn’t considered trying that. Huh. Good point, my lord. Yes – let’s go with that idea instead!”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

One wish later, Tiffany was neck deep in the Bidouze for the fourth time. She shivered as she trudged out of the brackish water. “Wow, that’s cold! I’m glad I didn’t end up dying, but I still hope that this is the last time that I’ll have to do this!”

Once again, she wished herself into the right sort of clothing and clambered out of the river. Just as she stepped onto the bank, hoofbeats thudded within the nearby woods. Turning towards the unexpected sound, Tiffany gasped as she saw a stocky bay horse with a hogged mane emerge from the treeline. The scarlet coated blond man riding on top of the animal was all too unpleasantly familiar. *Oh no! What’s Captain Hindle doing here?*

Captain Hindle reined in as he spotted her. For a moment, he looked flummoxed. Then a cruel, predatory smirk covered his features. “Well, well! What surprise delight is this that I have found?”

Tiffany bolted away from him; sprinting desperately towards the opposing treeline. She felt disinclined to risk waiting for Lieutenant Plunkett

and the other riflemen to show up. *If one thing has changed, then other stuff might be different too! I need to try and make it into a thicker bit of the woods, and hope that he loses interest in chasing me once his horse isn't able to make it through the undergrowth!*

To her horror, she could hear Captain Hindle laughing as his horse galloped up behind her. "Come here, my pretty wood nymph! I won't bite you too hard!"

Tiffany screamed as she felt him grab hold of her by her hair. She stumbled as he reined in his horse again; the animal's momentum dragging her backwards and to the left. "Let go of me!"

"Ah, so you speak English, do you?" Captain Hindle bent in his saddle and hauled Tiffany up in front of him. He draped her face down over the pommel; grabbing her wrists and pinning them behind her back as he did so. "A civilised tongue, at least! The rest of you could do with a little taming though – a task that I will enjoy!"

There was the sudden blare of a hunting horn somewhere off in the woods to their left. It was followed instantly by the mournful clamouring of hounds in full tongue. Tiffany froze as the sound of the dogs triggered another bout of irrational fear in her. The howling twisted itself into eerie inhuman screaming. Her mind sank under a tidal wave of gory images: frothing jaws and hot, rancid

breath...white teeth rending through even whiter fur...small bones splintering...red blood spilling forth in a wave of pain and despair...!

When Tiffany next regained her senses, she was alone again. It was dark, but not completely so. To her surprise and confusion, there was the soft flicker of a candle to the right of her head. Sitting up gingerly, she realised that she was in a bed; inside a darkened room. Her hair felt as if it had been towelled dry. Throwing back the bed covers, Tiffany found that a soft linen night gown covered her body from knees to neck, and that there were woollen stockings on her feet. Bewildered and still wary, she climbed out of bed and padded across to the door of the bedchamber. *How did I get here? And where's that creep Hindle gotten to?*

The door was unlocked. Tiffany opened it carefully; peering around the edge of the frame at the landing outside. This area was much better lit, with candles burning brightly in numerous sconces along the walls. Tiffany relaxed slightly as she finally recognised her surroundings. *This is Lord Wellington's headquarters in Saint-Jean-de-Luz! In fact, this is even the same bedchamber that I woke up in the last time that I was here. It's just that this time, I was in the bed instead of on that little couch in the corner.*

The muffled sound of raised voices came from somewhere downstairs. One of them was that of

Lord Ollerington. Tiffany couldn't quite make out the words, but to judge by the tones involved, someone down there was in a lot of trouble about something. She strained her ears to no avail. *Ugh! I guess I'll need to get closer if I want to find out what's happening.*

Not seeing anyone else on the landing, Tiffany crept along it to the top of the stairs. Just as she reached them, a door opened somewhere in the hallway below. The voices became fully audible. Lord Ollerington sounded coldly furious as he addressed whoever it was that he was speaking to. "The rules on such behaviour are clear, sir!"

Another man spoke then. "Your general is wholly correct, sir. I will not turn a blind eye to this for your sake, or for that of your alleged friends at court. As field marshal, it is my decision that you will hang tomorrow; as early as may be expedient. Take him away, and see to it that he does not dishonour himself any further by escaping."

Once again, Tiffany ducked behind the topmost newel post. This time, however, it was mostly just to preserve her modesty. Peering around it, she watched as two burly provosts dragged a still protesting Captain Hindle past the foot of the stairs and on out of sight again. There was the sound of another door opening; followed by a cold draught of air. The door slammed shut again a moment later, but the cold air remained. Shivering in her scanty

outfit, Tiffany decided to slip back to the bedchamber she had woken up in. *At least there's a fire in there! I wonder where my clothes are.*

The young time traveller was halfway along the landing when she heard brisk footsteps ascending the uncarpeted stairs behind her. Hoping to avoid being seen, she bolted towards the door of the bedchamber. Her stockinged feet slipped on the polished wooden floor. Tiffany yelped as she tumbled forwards onto her hands and knees. "Ouch!"

Behind her, the footsteps quickened. Then the familiar voice of Lord Ollerington spoke. "Miss Sutton! Are you well, dear girl?"

Tiffany grimaced as he helped her up. "I'm fine, thank you, my lord. Just bumped my knees a little, that's all." Then her brain caught up fully to what he had just asked her. "Wait – how do you know my name already?"

"Ah, yes – that." Lord Ollerington had the good grace to at least look a little bit guilty as he explained. "I am afraid that I have a small confession to make to you, Miss Sutton. When you were busy making your, er, travel arrangements, I decided that it would be better if I went along on the journey too. I did as you did, and now, well, here I am. As it happens, I arrived earlier than you did in the end. I have been here since yesterday afternoon. It is now a little after eight o'clock in the evening

on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February, just in case you had wondered over that aspect at all.”

Tiffany stared at him, aghast. “I...you...argh!” She flung up her hands in defeat. “Why do people keep on *doing* this?”

The general blinked. “Doing what?”

“Tossing wishes about all willy nilly!” Scowling angrily, Tiffany stomped back to the bedchamber; Lord Ollerington walking alongside her. “This power is incredibly dangerous, my lord! We’re literally rewriting reality each and every single time that we use it.”

“I assure you, my dear girl, that I am wholly aware of that fact.” The general closed the door of the bedchamber behind them. “I have made no other wishes since arriving back in myself, so to speak. Which is not to imply that I have not been sorely tempted to do so!”

“Oh, really?” Tiffany folded her arms and glared at him. “Then what happened in the woods today? Why was everything so different to how it’s always been up until this loop?”

“You refer to Hindle’s disgraceful conduct.” Lord Ollerington’s voice became very grave. “I am sorry that you endured such dire mistreatment at his hands. It may comfort you to know that he was apprehended before he could even remove you from the riverbank. Beresford and I spied him through the trees just as he captured you. That is why I blew

the horn; to gather all the other hunters to us, along with the dogs. There is no way for Captain Hindle to deny his role in the matter. Although, he did attempt to argue that he was merely assisting you. Naturally, Beresford and I both instantly decried the latter deception, and Wellington knows us to be trustworthy. Hindle is to hang tomorrow.”

“Yes, I know. I overheard from upstairs.” Tiffany sighed as she realised who she had heard speaking. “Thank you. Not just on my behalf, either. I’m sure that there are others who won’t miss him, and for all too similar reasons.”

“You and they are most welcome.” Lord Ollerington smiled benignly down at Tiffany. “I despise such behaviour, but somehow it is worse whenever it is a man of good breeding who commits the misdeed, as opposed to one or other of the common scum.”

“I have half a mind to tell you about Marxism now, just because I can, but I won’t.” Tiffany sat down on the edge of the bed. “Anyhow, why was there a hunt going on in the first place, my lord?”

The general suddenly seemed very interested in his own feet. “Well, you know. The field marshal always enjoys a spot of hunting. And it’s an excellent sport. Very invigorating for the participants! It...er...it helps raise the spirits!”

Tiffany scoffed and glanced down at the foxes capering along the length of her forearms. “That’s

truer than you know it to be! But there wasn't a hunt before. What changed?"

He sighed resignedly. "You are going to be annoyed by my answer, Miss Sutton."

"Let me guess, my lord." Tiffany drummed her fingers against the counterpane. "You thought that it would be a good idea if you were to go and wait in the woods for me to arrive, but then you needed an excuse to be out there. Hence the impromptu fox hunt. Which then in turn led to Lieutenant Plunkett and the other riflemen not being where I expected them to be."

Lord Ollerington's ears pinked slightly. "Yes, well, when you put it like that, I suppose that I must grant that it does sound a little less than wholly reasonable."

Tiffany shuddered as she thought of how bad the outcome might have been. "Captain Hindle was out there as part of the hunt too, wasn't he?"

"In hindsight, I *might* have been better waiting here for you instead." Lord Ollerington appeared very contrite now. "Still! All's well that ends well, as the saying goes. Moreover, at least this way, Hindle has been removed sooner and more completely than he was previously."

"Yes, well, I'm still annoyed about my near miss, my lord." Tiffany scowled mutinously. "And anyhow, what about Mrs Rollant? Wait – oh my God, is she even alive? I mean, last time around

both she and Captain Hindle were brutally murdered together in her tent sometime today!”

The general curled his lip slightly in distaste. “She has been ordered to pack her things and will travel back to England on the next boat.”

“Right, good to know.” Tiffany nodded. “Um, so just that leaves the question of how we’re going to deal with Les Tueurs de Renards. Who’s major and who’s colonel this time around, by the way?”

Lord Ollerington looked guilty again. “Well firstly, it may intrigue you to learn that Lompton is once again a major in the fusiliers; just as you had initially known him to be! I have no idea what caused the reversion, but he appears well. I have avoided speaking with him so far.”

Tiffany frowned. “Huh. I guess it probably ties in somehow to him knowing about the time loops, but how? And why would he choose to go back down in rank?”

“I believe we should interrogate him together, Miss Sutton.” Lord Ollerington glanced at his pocket watch. “We might do so after the supper tonight. I have taken the liberty of arranging for it to occur here at headquarters. I will have them send a maid up to help you dress. There are a few things set aside for you in that armoire. This is my room, and I thought it best to arrange for your provision in advance. The clothes you had on were soaked. Some of the women saw to putting you to bed.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Tiffany smiled at him gratefully. “But does that mean that Compte Archambeau is the colonel of the 136<sup>th</sup> again?”

“Yes, indeed it does.” Lord Ollerington nodded. “Or at least, it *did*, right up until I had him clapped in irons for intended treason this morning.”

Tiffany spluttered. “Wait, what?”

The general shrugged. “There seemed no sense to me in delaying. I remember last time all too vividly.” He grimaced; clearly repressing a shudder at the thought. “Anyhow, it is done now. Nothing will be gained by arguing over it, my dear girl!”

“That’s not...you...argh!” The young time traveller flung up her hands again, and flopped back across the bed. “I give up! Let’s just hope that you pre-emptively removing him like that doesn’t end up derailing any important historical events further on down the line.”

“If it does, then so be it.” Now that he had at last confessed the matter to her, Lord Ollerington was unrepentant. “Perhaps history *needs* changing. But enough talk now! We must both dress for dinner. I will go and make use of Beresford’s hospitality for my own needs, and send up a maid for you.”

Despite the change in venue, the seating plan at that night’s supper was largely the same as it had been the last time; save that Major Lompton now sat on Mr Rigg’s right. Tiffany took some comfort from having Captain Amberley seated immediately

to her right again, and Lieutenant Plunkett directly opposite her. Not that either of them had engaged with her so far. Lieutenant Plunkett was avoiding so much as making eye contact with her, and Captain Amberley was his usual taciturn self. It was hardly surprising; given how neither of the two riflemen knew her again yet. Wishing their memories back without being there to tell them about what they had missed hadn't seemed like a good idea. And just which memories should she try to restore for them anyhow? Where exactly was the cutoff point? *I doubt if they'll want to remember dying, after all! But they might think that it would useful to know about what happened earlier on in the battle.*

Mr Rigg had once again provided the officers of the 136<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot with the gift of a finely baked ham in a tin can. Tiffany felt strangely reassured by that one constant. The novelty over the preserved meat also helped to take some of the attention away from her own curious circumstances. The young time traveller cringed inwardly as she glanced at the carefully schooled expressions on the faces of the other guests. *Young woman found alone in woods spends time unchaperoned with unmarried man...ugh, no prizes for guessing what the gossip will be regarding that!*

Tiffany sighed sadly as she sliced off a little bit of cold roast beef. She felt more alone tonight than she ever had before during this event. Lord

Ollerington was of course still on her immediate left, just as before, but he was no more talkative than Captain Amberley. Besides which, Tiffany was leery of appearing too friendly towards the unmarried general. The thought of people labelling her as his latest conquest made her blush. *Why does he have to be such an incorrigible rake?*

Major Lompton pointedly caught her eye then. “You have had quite the day, Miss Sutton. I hazard that it must have left you famished! Would you care to have some more of the baked ham? It is from a *tin can*, if you can believe that! Mr Rigg was kind enough to bring it with him from England. Lord Ollerington, I am sure that you are thrilled to have the opportunity of trying it!”

The general’s hand closed a little more tightly around his fork as he replied. “It is an intriguing and convenient thing indeed, sir.”

Oblivious to the tension, Mr Rigg beamed indulgently at Tiffany whilst the major stood up and reached across the table to place another slice of the tinned baked ham on her plate. “I expect that such modern inventions are quite the talking point in your usual social circles, hmm, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany managed to nod politely in response. “Yes, sir. It is just as Lord Ollerington says.”

Major Lompton smiled thinly as he retook his seat. “You know, I cannot help but to think it all rather surreal, in a way. The art of preserving

things, I mean. There is such a very thin barrier between the preserved thing and all which would ruin it. Quite miraculous that it works!”

“And yet here we are, sir.” Lord Ollerington’s voice was almost eerily placid. “Enjoying the outcome of that miraculous act of preservation.”

Captain Amberley grunted. “It’s not bad, aye. Reckon it could have done with a bit less salt, mind. But might be as that’s how they make it stay fresh inside the tin can.”

Tiffany turned her attention to him in relief. “I think you’re probably right about that, sir! I mean, salt has long been proven to be an excellent preservative, isn’t it?”

To her steadily increasing mortification, the rifleman looked at her with the same carefully schooled blankness of expression as his fellow officers and their wives. “I have heard so, aye.” He passed the bread across to Lieutenant Plunkett. “How long has it been since you were last in England yourself, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany launched immediately into her by now well-practised excuse. “It’s been over a year now since I left, sir. It’s such a shame that all of my writings and paintings have been lost to me. I have nothing left to send back to the museum. I shall have to start over again from scratch!”

The round-faced and brown-haired regimental wife seated immediately to Lieutenant Plunkett’s

left raised her eyebrows at this information. She gazed speculatively at Tiffany. "You are an *artist*, then? Gracious, how very modern a profession for a woman! And is it true that you were found in the woods today?"

By now, Tiffany knew that her cheeks and her ears very likely matched the scarlet satin and lace evening gown that the general had provided for her. She forced herself to nod politely back to her questioner. "Yes, it is."

Lord Ollerington interceded for her then. "Miss Sutton is under my protection now, Mrs Jennings. She has endured much, and is to be commended for her fortitude."

Lieutenant Jennings, who was a lanky young fusilier with mousy hair and exceptionally wiry sideburns, gave his wife a significant look. Then he spoke across her to Lieutenant Plunkett; in what seemed from Tiffany's perspective to be a desperate attempt at changing the subject. "I say, Plunkett, old fellow! You will know, I am sure – who was it that had need of another mule? I am selling one myself, you see. I have bought a dear little pony for my wife's use, and so we shall have no further need for the beast! I feel sure that there was a fellow in your company who was looking to buy one, but I do not recall his name."

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded. "You are thinking of Corporal Boal, sir. I will tell him."

Given the recent arrests of two officers from the 136<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, most especially that of its colonel, there was no discussion broached about the current state of the Allied army. Instead, Mr Rigg seemed focused on getting to know the remaining officers as individuals. He spent the supper arranging to meet with each of them independently; the better to interview them all for his newspaper. Everyone else present contented themselves with making polite conversation. Tiffany suspected that most, if not all, of the officers and their wives were worried in case Lord Ollerington would now decide to disband the entire regiment in disgrace. She made a mental note to remind him not to do that. *Goodness knows that he's made more than enough changes to history already! Although, if we're really unlucky, then Lord Wellington himself might yet take the decision out of Lord Ollerington's hands.*

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The general used the regiment's current need for a new commanding officer as his excuse for instructing Major Lompton, Captain Amberley, and Lieutenant Plunkett to remain behind at headquarters after the supper ended. Tiffany followed the four men into a small parlour with no small amount of trepidation. She trusted Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett implicitly, but she still had no idea whose side Major Lompton was on in this strange conflict of cults. *True; Compte Archambeau and Frère Babineaux massacred all of those at Saint-Jean-de-Luz last time, but that still doesn't excuse the major killing me at the end of my initial loop!*

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven o'clock as the five of them sat down. Major Lompton glanced towards it and sighed. "Would that it was midnight! Somehow, that hour feels more appropriate for such meetings."

Lieutenant Plunkett blinked. "What do you mean, sir?"

“Ha!” Major Lompton barked out the laugh. He looked oddly resigned. “You do not know yet, then, eh? Well, I doubt if that will last! Miss Sutton – may I presume that you still retain *your* memories?”

Tiffany shrugged. “Perils of having an eidetic memory, sir. And from what you said to me in the carriage, I’m not sure if the time pendant would let me forget anyhow.”

By now, both Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett were eyeing Tiffany and Major Lompton with no small amount of concern. Lord Ollerington interceded before any of them could speak further. He nodded to Tiffany. “Miss Sutton – it is time.”

Tiffany carefully recited the wish that would restore both officers’ memories, excluding the events of her most recent loop’s conflict at Garris and Saint-Palais. She smiled ruefully at them once they had gathered their wits again. “I had to loop back. Things didn’t go as they were supposed to. Lord Ollerington will explain the details.”

Major Lompton settled himself more comfortably in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. “Perhaps he will also do me the immense favour of clarifying how it was that I died. I know that it must have happened whilst I was speaking with Miss Sutton, but I recall nothing of how it happened. I presume that it was sudden?”

Captain Amberley glowered at him. “Aye, sir. Very sudden indeed, sir.”

Lord Ollerington interceded. “You tripped and fell on your own bayonet, sir. One might well argue that you were fortunate to have done so; given what fate awaited the rest of us.” He launched into a terse recap of the events between then and the present conversation.

Both of the riflemen were openly horrified by the general’s revelations. Lieutenant Plunkett rose to his feet partway through and gathered Tiffany into his arms; holding her tight as if he would never let her go again. Captain Amberley did not move from his chair, but his craggy face was almost grey with shock at the details given. He shook his head grimly as Lord Ollerington finished speaking. “What you describe as having happened to your fellow generals, my lord – it matches the injuries that were inflicted upon Captain Hindle and Mrs Rollant last time around. I saw what was left of them. It still haunts me.”

Major Lompton nodded. “You are correct in that observation, sir. Colonel Archambeau has several unpleasant interests. Cultivating bloodthirsty thorned vines is but one of them. I must confess that last time around I was so incensed with hatred towards the victims involved for their mistreatment of Miss Sutton that I permitted him to indulge in it. Usually, you see, I step in and sabotage his efforts. Such actions are part and parcel of my role within the Order of the Unknown.”

Tiffany gasped. “But we thought that you were...um...I mean, Frère Babineaux claimed that...oh. Yeah. He’s evil, isn’t he? Part of Les Tueurs de Renards along with Colonel Archambeau. Right. Probably shouldn’t believe anything that he told us. Sorry.”

Captain Amberley frowned. “Did you intervene this time then, sir?”

Major Lompton shook his head. “I had fully intended to do so; given how my lack of action was rewarded! However, with Colonel Archambeau’s arrest, such intervention seemed unnecessary. Then, with such unforeseen change already wrought, I deemed it best to wait and see how things played out before deciding what to do next. Hence why I did not attempt to meet with Miss Sutton prior to tonight’s supper.”

Lieutenant Plunkett gestured at the major’s uniform. “Forgive me for being blunt, sir, but you were a rifleman last time around, and a colonel too. Why have you gone back to this instead?”

“When I – hmm, when I *fell* on my own bayonet – the precautionary ritual that I had in place of course transported my consciousness back through time to the usual point.” Major Lompton paused in his explanation to smirk a little. “I dare say that you would all like to know when and where that point is, eh? Well, I do not trust any of you enough to reveal it! Anyhow, when I arrived there, I decided

to go back to the rank and company that had not seen me die. A silly whim on my part, perhaps. But I am *alive* now, which I was *not* before! And besides which, I look far superior in scarlet.”

Tiffany felt a brief twinge of shame for their having collectively misjudged Major Lompton. Then she thought about how he had quite literally murdered her in the carriage, and the feeling dissipated just as rapidly as it had arisen. She scowled at him from the shelter of Lieutenant Plunkett’s embrace. “You aren’t the only one who’s died, sir! I accept that the second time was an accident, but why did you kill me in the carriage?”

Major Lompton grimaced. “It was a ritual, Miss Sutton. If it had worked as intended, then it would have freed you from the curse that had been placed on you by Les Tueurs de Renards. In theory, you ought to have awoken back in your own era, with no memory of what had happened to you during your time here in 1814.” He paused; gesturing at what could currently be seen of the images which were prowling her skin. “As you know, something far more curious occurred instead! I suspect that it may have been connected somehow to your eidetic memory.”

Lieutenant Plunkett tightened his arms around Tiffany as he voiced a question. “Are you saying that she is still cursed then, sir; despite the strange lock of white having gone from her hair?”

The major nodded solemnly. “I have witnessed her reaction to the presence of hounds, Plunkett. The fear that grips her is not truly her own. Rather, it stems from the combined memories of the previous sacrificial victims. That, you see, is who the tattoos represent, Miss Sutton. They depict the women in the forms in which they were slain.”

Tiffany shuddered. “Wait – so you’re saying that these other women were what...transformed into foxes, or something? But how? And why?”

Major Lompton shrugged. “The how of the thing is simple enough to answer! It was magic, of course. Soul magic, to be precise. A twisting of the physical to access the metaphysical. As to the why, well. Who can truly say why an evil cult does anything? Power? Unquestioning adherence to prophecy? Whatever the alleged excuse, I suspect that any sane person would deem the deeds involved to be nothing more than further proof of the twisted depravity within the hearts and minds of those responsible!”

Captain Amberley scowled. “I recall the image that was painted on the fan that you gifted to Miss Sutton, sir. Between that, and what you have now told us of her fear of dogs, I reckon as I can guess well enough at what became of those poor lasses!”

The answer clicked into place for Tiffany then too. She gasped, and huddled closer to Lieutenant Plunkett. “Oh my God! Those poor women! They

were used as prey in a hunt, weren't they?"

Lord Ollerington and Lieutenant Plunkett murmured in horror as Major Lompton nodded. He gazed approvingly at Captain Amberley. "A fine deduction on your part there, Simon! Yes – the fan depicts one of their hunts. It is enchanted to protect the wielder. I had hoped that it would keep Miss Sutton safe during our visit to Château Archambeau, but alas it was not to be so simple. The fur mantle that was provided along with it possesses even greater power. It is crafted from the pelts of the murdered women. Had you but worn it as instructed that fateful evening, Miss Sutton, then their souls might all be at rest by now."

"Ugh, that's even more horrible than normal fur!" Tiffany grimaced at the thought. Then she huffed crossly. "You might have told me up front what was really going on, you know, sir!"

Major Lompton shrugged. "Such openness of conduct was not an option to me at the time, my dear. Members of the Order of the Unknown are pledged to secrecy. Our vows are unbreakable. I could not begin to explain the matter until you had stumbled onto the edges of it for yourself. Now, however...!"

There was a sudden sharp knock on the door of the parlour. A man's voice pleaded to be permitted entry. "Please, Lord Ollerington, I am sent with an urgent message!"

Lord Ollerington rose to his feet. "Come in!"

The door opened, and a young aide-de-camp entered. He saluted smartly. "My lord, Colonel Archambeau and Captain Hindle have escaped together on horseback!"

Captain Amberley and Major Lompton sprang up from their respective chairs before the messenger had even finished speaking. A curt gesture from Lord Ollerington bid them to sit down again. Tiffany and Lieutenant Plunkett swiftly followed their example; albeit still clasping hands with one another for comfort as they did so. Dismissing the aide-de-camp, Lord Ollerington waited only for the door to close behind the young officer before reclaiming his chair and addressing his companions. "They must be caught! What transpired here last time cannot – *will not* – be permitted to repeat."

Major Lompton nodded. "I hazard that our errant colonel shall make straight for his ancestral home! It is a proven stronghold for Les Tueurs de Renards. The servants there are wholly loyal to him, just as they were to his father, and to those generations previously. Cultists, the entire damnable lineage! That vile dolt Hindle may yet live to regret his choice of ally. He will make for an adequate sacrifice, should such an act be required."

Captain Amberley scowled. "Doubt as there's many who would miss him, sir! But if the servants there are all truly so very in league with the

Archambeau family, then why did the colonel's mother feel the need to flee with him to England during the Revolution? Had they run out of murder plants to send after their enemies?"

A faint sorrow showed on Major Lompton's face as he replied. "The comtesse douairière fled not only from the revolutionaries, but also from the fiend whom she had married; whose malign influence she feared even after his death. She hoped to keep her then young son from ever embracing the evil traditions of his father's ancestry. I was but a child too at that time, of course, but other members of the Order of the Unknown assisted her in her escape, and in her subsequent resettling in England. Unfortunately, Les Tueurs de Renards proved to have a longer reach than anyone had anticipated. As best as we can gather, they approached the boy whilst he was away at school and informed him of what his mother had so diligently denied him. When he returned home to her over the next school holidays, the comtesse douairière vanished. Officially, no trace of her was ever found."

Tiffany gulped. "And...and unofficially, sir?"

Major Lompton shook his head. "A week later, two servants found the remains of a white fox just outside the gate of the property. I am sure that you can all parse what had happened without my describing any of the grislier details. At any rate, by then the young Compte Archambeau had already

departed for his next term at school. With his mother absent, provision for his care passed into the hands of an old friend of his late father; one Frère Michel Babineaux. And yes, it *is* the same man, before any of you ask. He...ages slowly. He is no longer wholly human, you see.”

Lord Ollerington looked grim. “A horrid tale indeed, sir! Murder, betrayal, and the corruption of both an innocent child and a fine sport. Still, at least we have it in our power to reach Châteaux Archambeau ahead of our foe. We can lay in wait for him there. I propose that we raze it to the ground once this is all finished.”

Tiffany bit back a sharp retort on the implied worthiness of hunting. There was, she reminded herself unhappily, no use in arguing that point with someone like the general; especially not in this era. She focused on the suggested ambush instead. “I agree we can get there easily, my lord, but what about the servants? They’re loyal to Compte Archambeau, after all. And there could be other members of Les Tueurs de Renards there too.”

Captain Amberley nodded. “Even if we do get to Châteaux Archambeau in advance and seize control of it, that won’t change the distance between here and there. It could be days yet before Archambeau and Hindle reach the place. We don’t have that time to spare if we’re going to play our part in the war. The Battle of Garris won’t win itself, after all.”

“You are both correct, of course.” Lord Ollerington frowned pensively for a moment. “Is it likely that our enemies will attempt to repeat the vile horrors which they committed there during your last loop, Miss Sutton?”

Tiffany sighed. “I honestly don’t know, my lord. I’ve done my best to undo Compte Archambeau’s knowledge of wish magic, but that still doesn’t guarantee that things will play out as we anticipate. You had him arrested and charged with treason. He has no reason to feign even the smallest loyalty to our side now. And don’t forget that every change that we make, no matter how insignificant it may seem, starts yet another set of ripples. Change too much, and my knowledge of history will be worthless to us.”

Lieutenant Plunkett squeezed Tiffany’s hand in attempted comfort. “Like dropping a stone into a pond. I remember you explaining that to me back when you first arrived in our encampment.”

“A fine metaphor for it indeed!” Major Lompton drummed his gloved fingertips against his knees and scowled in frustration. “By now, I fear that the pond in question may well be half filled in!”

Captain Amberley grunted. “Seems a right pity to me that one cannot simply take the problematic stones back out again, so to speak.”

At this, Lord Ollerington sprang to his feet once again; this time with a triumphant exultation

spilling from his lips. "By Jove, sir! I declare that you have struck upon the solution!" He spun on his heel and snapped his fingers at his audience. "We *shall* remove the stones from the pond! All that is needed is for us to wish that the knowledge which we each now possess should be removed backwards through time into our various erstwhile minds as they were during Miss Sutton's first loop. Then we may all of us work together to resolve things."

Major Lompton nodded warily. "That *could* work, yes, but only if we are wholly scrupulous in preserving the original flow of events. There must be no deviation whatsoever from what originally occurred." He aimed a significant look at the general as he continued speaking. "Any pre-emptive machinations, no matter how well intentioned, might result in disaster."

Lord Ollerington gazed back at him unabashed. "You refer, of course, to my own recent attempts at improvement, sir! Very well – you have my word that I shall refrain from acting upon my knowledge until the proper moment is reached. I feel confident in presuming that both these other fine officers may be relied upon to do likewise."

"You may indeed, my lord." Captain Amberley spoke on behalf of himself and Lieutenant Plunkett. "I reckon as it would be best to have us all remember what we know now no sooner than the morning of the supper at Château d'Archambeaux.

That ought to make for the least risk of our accidentally mucking things up for ourselves.”

Tiffany nodded eagerly. “And we must be sure to include Sergeant Marsh and Sergeant Moore too! We can trust them to help us.”

Major Lompton quirked his lips approvingly at the suggested additions. “I suppose that seven *is* held to be a fortunate sort of a number! I see no harm in involving those two men. But no others!”

The general frowned. “I had intended that Lord Wellington, and perhaps also a few of my fellow generals might be...!”

“No others!” Major Lompton’s voice was sterner than Tiffany had ever heard it to be. “This is an ancient and powerful magic that would be best forgotten forever, my lord. The more who know of its existence, the worse the danger of it being made known to those who would misuse it! Why, I do not even intend to speak of it to the other members of the Order of the Unknown, and they at least are well versed in such strangenesses.”

Tiffany shuddered as she thought of what had happened when the then Major Archambeau had learned of the power. “Major Lompton is right, my lord. It’s far too dangerous a thing to risk.”

Lord Ollerington reluctantly nodded his agreement. “I cede to your advice. Come – let us determine the precise wording that is required.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Unfortunately, things did not play out quite as simply as Tiffany and her companions might have hoped. Indeed, it took a total of three attempts before they at last struck upon a safe and successful way of wording their collective wish. The two preceding attempts had both gone horribly wrong.

There had been the initial wish; wherein poor Sergeant Marsh and Sergeant Moore were both driven irrevocably insane when the influx of memories of events that they had not yet lived through flooded into their minds. Tiffany recalled a moment too late that neither of them had ever been told about wish magic. She had swiftly wished for a do over of the preceding discussion in Lord Ollerington's parlour at headquarters. This time, the rest of the group had made sure to send for the two sergeants and explain everything to them in detail, before proceeding onwards with the plan.

The second attempt had seemed to be going as intended. It was only after Lord Ollerington failed to arrive at Château d'Archambeaux that Tiffany

and Major Lompton became concerned. A messenger had appeared soon afterwards with grim news: the general had fallen from his horse en route, and broken his neck. The other officers who had been accompanying Lord Wellington on the ride back from Saint-Jean-de-Luz all claimed that Lord Ollerington had appeared to suffer a sudden fit; clutching at his head and crying out as if pained. He might well still have remained seated; had not his horse stumbled a little at the same instant. The supper was cancelled out of respect, and Tiffany and Major Lompton had rejoined their surviving companions at the encampment. The group spent the rest of the evening drinking themselves into near oblivion, before jointly wishing for another do over of the discussion in the parlour. It was agreed upon that the wish be reworded again, so that everybody involved in the scheme would receive the information whilst they were still in their beds.

To Tiffany's relief, so far, the third attempt seemed as if it might be going to plan. She crossed her fingers for luck as Major Lompton escorted her into the grand entrance hall of the château. As before, their host was already mingling with his other guests. Tiffany and Major Lompton hastened to find Lord Ollerington amid the bustling crowd. Neither dared to voice their fear, but they were both eager to confirm that the latter man had indeed survived his journey from Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

Lord Ollerington greeted them both happily as they handed off their respective cloaks to one of the servants. Despite the rigours of travel, the general was still far more animated than he had been during the original flow of events. He clasped Major Lompton's hand and bowed deeply to Tiffany. "How do again, my dear Miss Sutton, and you too, of course, my good sir! As you can see, there has been no disaster this time."

Major Lompton hummed warily, and glanced about him. "Not yet, at least, my lord! Come, both of you, please – follow me. I must advise my parents of our arrival. Both are loyal members of the Order of the Unknown. They are older now, it is true, but pray do not think them incapable."

Tiffany pulled the fox fur mantle closer about herself to better hide any images that might choose to wander across her neck or her décolletage. The curse had somehow followed her consciousness back to her previous self. So far, she had succeeded in hiding it from everyone not involved in the plan. She glanced up at the major as he linked arms with her to escort her through the crowd. "Aren't you concerned that they might try to matchmake for you again, sir?"

"Ah, yes, that." Major Lompton looked briefly pained by the reminder. Then he sighed. "I fear that I have a confession to make to you both about my parents' behaviour during our original visit here."

Lord Ollerington peered at him across the top of Tiffany's head. "Permit me to make an educated guess, sir. Your parents deliberately attempted to create a scene during the supper; for some yet to be explained purpose. Our poor Miss Sutton was merely an unfortunate pawn in their efforts."

Major Lompton laughed bitterly. "I see that you have the measure of things already, my lord!" He winced as Tiffany dug her fingers into his left forearm. "Please now, Miss Sutton, be of good temper about it, I beg of you! I assure you that there was a very good reason for the charade."

"I should bloody well *hope* that there was!" Tiffany snapped open the enchanted fan with an angry flick of her left wrist. She held it up to cover her lower face as she glowered at the major. "Please, do tell us all about it, sir."

He patted her hand. "It was all a distraction, my dear girl; something intended to keep our diabolical host's attention squarely on his guests! As you know, I have a younger brother, named Edward. He too is a member of the Order of the Unknown. On the original evening of the supper, he was engaging in a spot of secret reconnaissance work. Searching the château's grounds; that sort of thing. The goal was for us to at last determine where Les Tueurs de Renards acquire those damnable vines from! We have cause to believe that there is perhaps a hidden garden where they are cultivated, or...!"

“Or a conservatory!” Tiffany interrupted him with a gasp of fright. “There is, sir! I’ve been in it!”

Lord Ollerington and Major Lompton both immediately pressed closer to her; ducking their heads low so that she could whisper an explanation of what she knew. The general muttered an oath as Tiffany described the events in the conservatory. “Miss Sutton, I fear that you may have come all too close to encountering some of those terrible plants firsthand! It is indeed fortunate that our enemy sought you out when he did. I shudder to think on what might have become of you otherwise.”

Tiffany felt a little faint. “Those rustling sounds that I heard! Oh my God – it was the murder plants! I thought it was just a bird, or...or a cat, or something equally harmless like that!”

“Ah well, not to worry, my dear girl!” Major Lompton was a good deal more sanguine about the matter. “You survived, after all; which is far more than might be said of most poor souls who find themselves within sight of the vegetation in question! And you succeeded where Edward failed, too. He found no trace of any such conservatory in his search of the grounds.”

“Perhaps it is hidden on the outside.” Lord Ollerington looked thoughtful. “A walled courtyard of some sort would suffice to keep the secret; especially one that is accessible only from within the château itself.”

Major Lompton nodded his agreement. "That would certainly explain why Edward's search came to naught, my lord! And let us not forget that there was also the matter of the supposed search for Frère Babineaux that night. In truth, of course, Colonel Archambeau and his fellow cultists were performing the ritual which cursed Miss Sutton; hence her initial collapse at the baying of the hounds. But Edward was still forced to flee the grounds sooner than he would have liked. He told me about it afterwards. I had used Mademoiselle Dupont's discomfiture over my proposal as an excuse to journey back to our encampment in my parents' carriage instead of in Mr Rigg's. My mother sent her maid along as chaperone for he and the girl; since I was not to be there, and of course you had apparently gone on ahead of us alone, Miss Sutton." He paused for a moment, and sighed. "Would that any of us had known the truth of your situation in time to prevent it from happening! I regret that it happened to you, my dear. A pity that my attempt to free you from the curse proved unfruitful."

Tiffany scowled up at him again. "Hmm, yes; because stabbing someone to death is so very socially acceptable when it works, sir!"

The major waved off her grumbling. "Ritualistically stabbing, my dear girl! A far cry indeed from common murder! Ah – there they are."

Sir James and Lady Lompton were seated underneath the window, just as before. Major Lompton hastened to introduce everyone. He granted his parents a few moments to express their pleasure at meeting Tiffany for the first time, and then informed them that both she and the general were allies. “Miss Sutton and Lord Ollerington know of our family’s involvement with the Order of the Unknown. They have pledged to assist us against Les Tueurs de Renards.”

Sir James beamed approvingly at this announcement. “Splendid news, my dear boy!”

Lady Lompton nodded elegantly. “We can certainly do with such aid! Have you told them yet about Edward, and his mission?”

“I have indeed, yes.” Major Lompton had a triumphant gleam to his eyes. “Miss Sutton was able to provide some much-needed intelligence upon that matter! There is a conservatory that is not mentioned on any of the known plans for Château d’Archambeaux. It is almost certainly where the plants that we seek are housed and cultivated.”

His father gestured eagerly. “Then why do we yet tarry here, William? Come, come – let us make every haste to the conservatory and put an end to the dastardly things once and for all!”

So determined, they set out again; this time as a group of five. Lady Lompton linked arms with both Tiffany and Major Lompton as they made their way

through the crowd and out into the vestibule, whilst Lord Ollerington and Sir James followed close behind them. From there, Tiffany guided them swiftly to the open doors of the conservatory. She nodded to her companions. “This is it. Um...so how exactly are we going to do this? Won’t the plants attack us as soon as we’re within reach of them?”

The three gentlemen began a murmured discussion of how best to engage their leafy foes, and whether it might be best to wait instead, and return on the morrow with armed assistance. Lady Lompton, however, proved herself to be possessed of a more proactive mentality. Striding forwards into the conservatory, she pointed triumphantly up at the nearest sconce. “The lamps, my dears! We shall burn the whole thing down – and yes, the rest of the château too, if need be!”

“A fine solution, my good lady!” Sir James took a half-step towards his wife. Then he paused and glanced back a little guiltily at the general. “I trust that you do not protest our solution, my lord?”

Lord Ollerington shook his head solemnly. “From what the major has disclosed to us, this place is steeped in evil, and those who dwell in it little more than base fiends! I pray only that the fire may prove enough to cleanse the land utterly; that it might later be home to some other family. Preferably one *not* inclined towards vile practises.”

“Agreed, my lord!” Major Lompton nodded.

“Arson it is then!” Tiffany tucked her fan into her reticule, and hurried over to assist Lady Lompton, who was by now attempting to remove the lamp from the sconce. “Let’s get a move on; before we’re discovered!”

The gentlemen followed their example. Soon, all five of them were armed with a merrily burning oil lamp. Inevitably, the removal of the lamps from their high sconces affected the lighting in the conservatory. As the darkened area loomed larger, an ominous rustling sound began. The same sweet, slightly spicy fragrance that Tiffany remembered from her first visit filled the air.

Major Lompton uttered a soft oath. “The plants have released their noxious odour! Be careful, all of you, lest it render us insensible!”

“Ugh, because of course that’s what it does!” Tiffany scowled and covered her nose and mouth with her handkerchief. “And to think that I wanted to have perfume made from it!”

The familiar soft tones of Colonel Archambeau came from the still open doorway behind the group of would-be heroes. “I admire your taste in scents, Mademoiselle Sutton. What a pity that your choice of companions is so very lacking by comparison.”

Tiffany whirled to face her erstwhile future lover. To her horror, he was not alone. Six burly male servants flanked him; three on either side. They were armed with muskets; the barrels pointing

at Tiffany and her allies. The colonel himself held a small duelling pistol, which he had trained squarely on Lord Ollerington. Desperate to preserve the already tattered timeline from any further damage, the young conservator choked down her fear, and stepped in front of the general. “No! I won’t let you kill them!”

Behind Tiffany, all but one of her companions gave murmured gasps of concern for her safety. Major Lompton hissed at her angrily instead. “Damn it all, Miss Sutton! Be still, for God’s sake; lest these brutes harm you!”

Colonel Archambeau appeared mollified by the latter intervention. He nodded curtly. “Wise advice, indeed, monsieur! Now – set down those lamps, all of you, and move back away from us by ten paces. Do not attempt to escape. We will not hesitate to shoot you if you do.”

Tiffany scowled at him, but obeyed. Lord Ollerington caught her hand and pulled her closer as they retreated; as if he hoped to shield her with his own body if need be. His mouth was pressed into a thin line, and his eyes were almost as haunted as they had been after the massacre at Saint-Jean-de-Luz. To their left, Sir James and Lady Lompton leant on their eldest son’s arms as they moved to the appointed distance.

Whilst four of the servants kept their muskets aimed at the prisoners, the other two men

shouldered their weapons. They strode forwards and picked up the lamps; carrying them out into the hallway. Colonel Archambeau gestured sharply to his remaining servants; signalling for them all to withdraw. Muskets still ready and aimed, the four men edged backwards and out through the doorway. Their employer turned on his heel and strode after them. He paused as he reached the bright sanctuary of the hallway. Turning back, framed by the light like one of the saints in an illuminated manuscript, he gazed for a long moment at Tiffany. Then he held out his right hand; beckoning to her. "I am feeling generous, Mademoiselle Sutton. Your companions here will die tonight, but you do not need to share their fate. Come – take my hand, and I will spare you."

Tiffany drew herself up to her full height; the memory of the eerie screams of the murdered women echoing in her mind as she glared at Colonel Archambeau. "Go fuck yourself, my lord!"

The treacherous colonel flinched backwards slightly in the face of her vehemence, or perhaps just at her vulgar language. Then he caught himself, and sneered. "You will soon regret your choice, mademoiselle!" He holstered his pistol and gestured again to his servants. "Verrouillez les portes!"

The heavy oak doors closed and locked; plunging the five prisoners into all but total darkness. The only source of illumination remaining

in the conservatory was the moonlight filtering in through the glass. With all other sources of light now gone, the rustling of the still unseen deadly plants intensified.

Lord Ollerington broke the silence; his hand still wrapped firmly around Tiffany's own. "Miss Sutton, Major Lompton – I feel that it may now be time for us to use that *special* advantage again."

Major Lompton voiced his agreement. "Indeed, my lord! Certainly, I can see no other way out."

His words gave Tiffany a sudden idea. She tugged at Lord Ollerington's hand. "There's a secret passage over near the door, my lord! We can use it to escape. It runs from here up past the *salle haute*, and on into the master bedchamber, or if we go in the other direction, then it goes down past the kitchens and into the wine cellar."

The general gasped. "But of course! I recall you telling me of it previously, Miss Sutton."

"Splendid!" Lady Lompton sounded relieved. "Shall we make haste then? Or do we intend to wait until the plants reach us?"

Sir James chortled nervously. "Indeed, my dear! Come, come – let us away, and quickly too! We can return anon; with fire and reinforcements aplenty."

"Depend upon it, sir!" Major Lompton's voice echoed in the darkness. "Everyone, make your way over to the door. Just walk forwards; that should get us all to the right spot readily enough."

Several nerve-wracking moments later, the group reconvened at the correct section of wall. Tiffany set to work searching for the entrance to the hidden passageway. Another idea occurred to her, and she seized upon it instantly. “Ugh – I wish that I could get this beastly secret entrance open!”

Her fingers tingled as they touched on a faint notch in the stones. The hidden panel swung open without a sound; the colder air of the passageway wafting out into the humid conservatory. Tiffany sighed with relief. “It’s open! Let’s get out of here.”

The five companions hastened into the passageway, and closed the panel up behind them. Seconds later, a muffled thudding against the wall indicated that the plants had likely been a good deal closer than anticipated. When Major Lompton at last found and lit the nearest of the candles which dotted the walls along the length of the hidden passage, the flickering light from it revealed grim expressions and pale looks on everyone present.

It was Lord Ollerington who broke the tense silence. “Well – shall we see to summoning those reinforcements now, or do we attempt to rejoin the other guests for supper first? I fear that I must confess that the correct etiquette for such events as these quite escapes me in the present moment.”

His dry humour tipped the mood over into relieved merriment, and everyone smiled at it. Sir James then offered to go and find Edward; who was

anticipated to arrive at the northernmost edge of Château d'Archambeaux's grounds within the next quarter of an hour. The ageing baronet was keen to inform his younger son about the conservatory. "And of this convenient passageway, too, of course! If we are clever, and perhaps also a little fortunate, then it may prove to be the ideal route back into this deuced place when we make our final assault."

Major Lompton nodded his agreement. "I will accompany you, sir! We left word with four others from the 136<sup>th</sup> Foot that they should wait near the château tonight and be prepared to lend their aid when summoned. I will signal to them whilst you explain things to Edward. Lord Ollerington – might we presume upon you to remain here as guardian to the two ladies?"

To Tiffany's pleased surprise, Lady Lompton spoke up before the general could reply. The older woman shook her head firmly. "Nonsense, William! We three are most certainly *not* going to lurk about in this ghastly little place between the walls whilst you and your father go gallivanting off with Edward to engage the enemy! Either give us some other useful thing to be about, or else resign yourselves to our accompanying you."

"Oh, very well, then, if you must insist on it!" Major Lompton sighed resignedly. "But do remember that it is terribly cold outside, and neither of you ladies have your pattens with you. Indeed,

dressed as you are presently, and with the snow to be considered, I fear that the grounds may prove to be impassable for you both. Hence why I put forth my previous suggestion.”

Tiffany already knew from experience that she could tolerate the feel of the snow outside through her slippers well enough, but she wasn't sure if Lady Lompton could do so too. She tried to keep the peace between mother and son. “Well, why don't the three of us do something else instead then, sir? Something indoors.” She brightened as she thought of a way to help deal with the threat in the conservatory. “Oh! We could raid the wine cellar for spirits, and fetch back some bottles to use as fuel to burn the murder plants!”

Lord Ollerington clapped his hands approvingly. “A fine solution indeed, Miss Sutton! Now – let us all make haste about our assorted tasks, and then regroup here once they are complete. I hazard that ten brave souls shall be more than enough to burn down the monstrous things beyond this wall! God grant that the fiends who command them shall prove equally simple in turn to overcome.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The cellars at Château d'Archambeaux proved to be well stocked indeed. By the time that the Lompton men returned to the hidden passageway along with the rest of the reinforcements, Tiffany and her two companions had secured more than enough spirits for the planned act of herbicide. They had also requisitioned an assortment of rags to cram into the various bottles and casks as makeshift fuses. This was the task that they were engaged in when the other would-be arsonists joined them.

Captain Amberley nodded approvingly at what he saw. "Aye; those will do well enough, I reckon. And by the sounds of it, the way that the conservatory has been built should mean that the fire is contained to that area alone. The one wall that's made out of stone will stand for longer than any of the glass will. Once those panes shatter, the snow outside will start to put the flames out. Still – we'd best not linger in this tunnel for too long. Smoke has a nasty way of finding an egress through even the finest of cracks."

Edward, who was a younger, lankier, blue-eyed copy of Major Lompton, seemed disappointed. “I must confess that I find it a terrible pity for the rest of this evil place to be spared! But I suppose that at least it means that the other guests at the supper shall be at no risk of harm.”

Lady Lompton was less optimistic. She shook her head worriedly. “I suspect our host may very well have dire plans for at least one of the poor unsuspecting souls at his table this night! Contained or not, we must hope that the fire is enough to deter anyone from accepting an invitation to stay here at Château d’Archambeaux for the night.”

Tiffany blushed as she exchanged glances with her six fellow wish makers; all of whom were fully cognisant of her original course of action. She cleared her throat a little. “Um...so, what exactly is it that you think Colonel Archambeau might attempt to do, my lady?”

The older woman sighed. “The same evil thing that his cult always does, my dear! He will want a sacrificial victim – another hapless woman to transform into a white fox and then murder.” She nodded at the mantle Tiffany was still wearing. “Has my son informed you yet about the truth behind those furs, Miss Sutton?”

Major Lompton scowled irritably. “Really, madam! Had I not yet done so, then *now* would scarcely seem to be an appropriate moment!”

Lord Ollerington interceded smoothly. "We have all heard the story about the murdered women, yes, Lady Lompton, and there was also a vague mention regarding some mysterious power in the mantle. Might you clarify the latter for us? Can we use it in some way or other?"

"We can indeed, my lord!" Lady Lompton's eyes gleamed in the candlelight. "There is a ritual that can call forth the souls of the murdered women forth and bind them to their earthly remains. This would grant each of them the powers of an avenging revenant. Powers which could then be directed against Les Tueurs de Renards! Revenants are notoriously powerful combatants, you know; regardless of how weak they may have been in life."

The general inclined his head politely. "I must confess that such curious matters are wholly unfamiliar to me, madam."

Tiffany thought of Major Lompton's botched attempt to rid her of the curse, and of the resultant horde of images which now roamed her skin. "What about afterwards, my lady? Will the souls of the victims all be put to rest?"

Lady Lompton nodded. "Their vengeance upon those who wronged them shall set them free, yes."

Lieutenant Plunkett looked nervous. He clasped Tiffany's hand in his as he spoke. "Forgive me for my curiosity, my lady, but how exactly is this ritual performed? Is it dangerous?"

“Oh, well, you know how it is, Plunkett!” Major Lompton seemed keen to avert such questions. “Danger is a part of living! One cannot avoid it.”

His brother frowned. “Whatever do you mean to achieve by such wholly needless double speaking, William? Surely, you must know as well as I do that only those who have performed the curse in question, or else who have been marked as victims by it, would be affected by the cleansing power of the ritual in question! The whole point of it is to see their respective souls transported onwards from this life to whatever divine judgement they deserve.”

Captain Amberley scowled. “If that’s the way of things, then I reckon as we might be wise to just let well enough alone then, wouldn’t you say, sir?”

“I concur wholeheartedly with the captain.” Lord Ollerington stepped in front of Tiffany and Lieutenant Plunkett; as if to shield them both from any sudden actions made by the three Lomptons. “There is to be no such ritual. Am I understood?”

Sir James blinked in confusion. He raised his hands in a gesture of pacification. “Come, come, please! We are all allies here, are we not? Why do you behave so very coldly towards us, my lord? Do you not trust that the ritual would be of benefit to our mutual cause?”

“Not if it costs Miss Sutton her life, sir!” Lord Ollerington glared sternly at the abashed looking Major Lompton. “Ask your eldest son for the rest.”

“Ugh, seriously, for goodness’ sake, let’s not fight about it!” Tiffany sighed and took off the mantle to reveal herself. “I was cursed by Colonel Archambeau! Major Lompton tried to free me from it by stabbing me and sending my soul back through time to my earlier self, but his attempt failed; probably because of my having a perfect memory. Hence the randomly moving artwork.”

“By Jove!” Sir James gasped in wonder at the unusual sight. “Are they...does that hurt, dear girl?”

“No, it doesn’t actually feel like anything, sir.” Tiffany ignored Major Lompton’s angry spluttering over her revelation. “And if it’s going to be a choice between living with it, or not living at all, well, then I choose life. I’m sorry if that makes me unheroic.”

Lieutenant Plunkett scowled fiercely at Major Lompton. “Well, I for one think that it makes you very sensible, Tiffany! And...and to the Devil with any who say otherwise!”

Captain Amberley nodded in agreement. “Aye, well said, lad!”

“You’ll certainly have no argument about it from myself, or from Sergeant Marsh, either.” Sergeant Moore glanced at the other sergeant. “Isn’t that so, Sergeant Marsh?”

“Aye, Sergeant Moore, it is.” Sergeant Marsh pointedly adjusted his grip on his rifle as he nodded. “Reckon as it must be a sin to go about killing folk for the sake of them as are already dead!”

The younger Lompton brother looked decently abashed by this statement, but Major Lompton seemed as if he was about to argue. Fortunately, his mother spoke before he could. She inclined her head solemnly to Tiffany and her defenders. “Very well then, Miss Sutton! We shall defer enacting the ritual until after you have passed of natural causes. And may that date be far off indeed! Now – let us get on with the task in hand. Those wretched vines deserve no such stay to *their* executions!”

They opened the panel in the wall cautiously; in case the plants were still hunting for the prey that had eluded them. Sure enough, the candles held up by Sir James and Lord Ollerington revealed a roiling mass of emerald green tendrils less than ten feet away from the entrance to the passageway. One glimpse of the vicious looking thorns was more than enough for everyone involved. They hurled their freshly lit projectiles as hard as they could into the conservatory, and then slammed the panel closed once more. The muffled crackling of flames was heard soon afterwards, but thankfully, and despite Captain Amberley’s concerns to the contrary, no smoke made it through the wall.

Edward shook his head in bemusement at the latter. “This house really is an architectural wonder, you know! The seal around that panel must be completely and utterly airtight! A rare thing indeed, that. Most convenient, too; from our perspective.”

Leaving the fire to do its grim work, the ten companions made their way along through the hidden passage between the walls Château d'Archambeaux; having collectively decided that it couldn't hurt to check in case Frère Babineaux was hiding in the armoire of the master bedchamber again. Tiffany led the way up to the room in question, but it was Captain Amberley who opened the panel once they arrived, and Lieutenant Plunkett who was first to step through it. The two sergeants followed close at the young officer's heels; moving swiftly to flank him once they had exited the passageway. All three of them had their rifles levelled, and their bayonets fixed in preparation. Padding silently across the chamber, they lined up in front of the armoire: ready and willing for action.

As soon as the other three soldiers were in position, Captain Amberley darted out through the open panel in the wall. He was beside the armoire in ten paces. Keeping himself well clear of the line of fire, he yanked open the door; hissing grimly to the startled figure who was revealed within. "Step out here nice and quietly like, Frère Babineaux, or it will go the worse for you, you murdering scum!"

The fake monk sneered as he clambered out of the armoire. His right hand was clenched tightly around his amulet. "Imbéciles anglais! You cannot harm me! I wear une amulette de sanctuaire – its power protects me from all physical assault!"

“Damn it all, he’s right!” Captain Amberley growled as he realised their mistake. “I’d forgotten all about that ruddy thing!”

Tiffany whispered a swift but very carefully worded wish underneath her breath so that none of the others could hear what she was saying. Then she scrambled out into the chamber; grinning victoriously. “Well, I hadn’t, sir, and what’s more, I’ve got a plan for how to deal with him despite it!” She paused and pointed across the chamber. “Frère Michel Babineaux – I command you to go and jump out of that window right now!”

Their opponent’s eyes went wide with horror as he obeyed with a bleak wail of disbelief at what he was doing. “Non! Non, qu’est-ce que je fais? De quelle sorcellerie s’agit-il?” His words trailed off into an incoherent scream whilst the glass shattered around him as he jumped to his death.

Lord Ollerington hummed approvingly. “Jolly well done, Miss Sutton! Couldn’t have happened to a worse fellow! Now – what to do about the rest of our enemies here at Château d’Archambeaux?”

“A moment, please, if you would, my lord!” Lady Lompton gestured at Tiffany. “I should like to know how Miss Sutton was able to command a man to leap out of the window like that!”

“Pythagorean mysticism, madam.” Major Lompton lied smoothly to his mother. “I am told that it is fast becoming all the rage in some circles!”

Edward eyed his older brother cynically, but said nothing to deny the explanation. Mercifully, Sir James and Lady Lompton appeared satisfied. Discussion broke out about what to do next. Shuddering at the guilt of having used wish magic to bind Frère Babineaux's will to her control, Tiffany sat down in a chair by the fire. *I know he deserved it, but I still feel bad for having killed him.*

In the end, the ten companions adapted what had been the enemy's plan to their own use. Major Lompton climbed into the armoire to wait for Colonel Archambeau to retire to bed for the night. He had his pistol gripped firmly in his hand, and was wholly resolved upon killing the remaining leader of Les Tueurs de Renards by himself. The others in the group withdrew into the hidden passageway; closing it up behind them as they went. Lady Lompton linked arms with her husband and her younger son, and the three of them strode ahead on the way back down to the ground floor. Not deigning to bother waiting for their companions, the trio soon vanished into the gloom of the tunnel. Tiffany found herself ensconced in the very middle of the second group; walking arm in arm with Lord Ollerington. Captain Amberley and Lieutenant Plunkett were just in front of them, whilst the two sergeants brought up the rear.

A few paces along, Captain Amberley stopped, and held up his hand for the others to do likewise.

He nodded to Lord Ollerington. “Reckon as the Lomptons are well out of earshot by now, my lord.”

“Good.” The general sounded tired. “Sadly, it cannot be denied that insanity gallops through that family! I do not fully trust them, and I suspect that I am not alone in such concerns.” There was a collective murmur of agreement to his words. He smiled thinly as he continued. “We shall all six of us go back then, I take it? To the master bed chamber – lest Major Lompton prove unsuccessful in his task there, or worse.”

Tiffany gulped. “Um, we should probably think about finding a different way out of the château once we’re done, too, my lord. Just in case the other Lomptons turn on us, or something.”

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded worriedly. “They *did* seem terribly keen to get ahead of us just now! I do not generally like to think ill of people, but perhaps we might be wise to expect the worst from them.”

Sergeant Moore piped up with a suggestion. “That big room where the supper is being held – sure, isn’t it only one floor up from the ground outside? If we can slip in there after everybody else has gone for the night, then we can get out through one or other of the windows safely enough. Snow makes for a nice soft landing, so it does.”

“Good idea, sir!” Tiffany nodded eagerly. “What’s more, according to what Colonel Archambeau originally told me, this passageway

opens into the *salle haute* too, so we shan't need to risk being spotted creeping about in the hallways."

Sergeant Moore shivered. "Reckon it'll be right cold, mind you! Jumping down into the snow, I mean. Like as not, we'll all end up halfway buried in it when we land!"

"We men shall all endure it well enough, I am sure, sir!" Lord Ollerington patted Tiffany's arm reassuringly. "Still, it is fortunate indeed that you have these furs to huddle into, Miss Sutton. You will feel the cold far harder than we."

Captain Amberley glanced warily at the mantle that Tiffany was still wearing. "If it were me, I'd like as not take that thing off in the meantime, lass. No need to chance it being a danger to you."

"Ugh, good point, sir! And there's that creepy looking fan as well, of course. Even if Major Lompton *did* claim that its power was protective." Tiffany hurriedly took off the snowy white garment and bundled it up underneath her left arm. Then, rummaging through the contents of her dainty reticule, she pulled out the enchanted fan and tucked it in amongst the soft fur. "I'll bring them with me, though; just in case we need access to them later."

The six of them made their way back to the panel that led into the master bed chamber. It became immediately apparent that they were not a moment too soon. The muffled sound of fighting filtered out

through the wall, punctuated by two familiar voices; both raised bitterly in anger. Colonel Archambeau, having apparently retired upstairs considerably earlier than anticipated, was engaged in mortal combat with Major Lompton. And by the sounds of things, the latter man was losing!

Placing Tiffany and Lord Ollerington safely to one side, the others hastened into the room to assist Major Lompton. With such an imbalance of numbers on their side, a victorious outcome was inevitable. Moments later, Lieutenant Plunkett reappeared at the still open panel in the wall. He nodded politely to Tiffany and the general. "We have the dastardly fellow securely in our power! Captain Amberley says that it is safe for you both to join us again now."

Lord Ollerington assisted Tiffany out of the passageway, and then followed her himself. He strode across the room to where Sergeant Moore and Sergeant Marsh were standing guard over a kneeling Colonel Archambeau; whose fair hair was freshly matted to his scalp with his own blood. Glaring down only briefly at the captured villain, the general praised both sergeants for their work. Then he turned his attention to the other two officers. "Major Lompton – I see that you are hurt, sir! Captain Amberley – how bad is his wound?"

"We need to make haste and staunch it properly for him if he's to live through even the next hour,

my lord.” Captain Amberley kept his hand clamped firmly over Major Lompton’s injured left shoulder as he answered. “And it would help matters considerably if he’d only blooming well agree to sit down and rest before he drops!”

The scarlet cloth of the major’s coatee hid the blood well, but his face was pale and pained as he spoke. “It is but a scratch, my lord! Simon here worries too much, that is all.”

Tiffany hurried over to join them then, whilst Lieutenant Plunkett went to secure the door of the room. The young conservator gasped as she got a better look at Major Lompton. “That is *not* just a scratch! Sir, please, you really do need to sit down and let us help you.”

Major Lompton sighed and scowled as he was bundled forcibly into the nearest armchair; Captain Amberley and Lord Ollerington having each seized hold of him by an arm and all but carried him thence. “Truly, all of you, I am...ah...very well; wounded, yes, I confess it! But really – there is no need to panic over it. I have endured worse!”

Lord Ollerington shook his head firmly. “Be still and rest now, sir! Miss Sutton – have you any, er, *special understanding* that might aid us here?”

Tiffany gulped. “Yes, but I’ll need the sergeants to move the colonel well away from us first, my lord. I have an idea of what to do, but given what it is, I don’t want *him* witnessing it.”

Lieutenant Plunkett returned from locking the door then. He was frowning. "Begging your pardon, but does anyone know yet why the colonel is even up here this early in the night? Surely, he ought to still be at the table with his guests!"

Colonel Archambeau glowered at his assorted captors. "They have already departed! There was a mysterious fire in the conservatory, you see. Or perhaps, not so very mysterious at all, eh?"

Captain Amberley shrugged. "Reckon as you only have yourself to blame for it, Monsieur le Compte! No one likes murderous cultists, or bloodthirsty abominations either." He nodded curtly to the sergeants. "Get him up, lads, and move him over to the other side of the room! Bind his arms tight first, though. Best to be safe."

The colonel snarled and struggled as he was restrained and then dragged across the room. "You dare to lay hands upon me? You will die for this – you will all die!"

Lord Ollerington gestured at the broken window. "Perhaps, sir, it might do you well to consider where your fellow cultist may have gotten to since you last saw him."

"A merry jest indeed, my lord!" Major Lompton laughed bleakly. "I can certainly assure you, Archambeau, that he is no longer hiding in the armoire! But then, you had likely guessed as much already; since that is where I ambushed you from."

“Ah, bien – so, you confess that you have indeed killed Frère Babineaux, then, eh?” Colonel Archambeau tossed his head imperiously. “Bah! I do not need his help to deal with the likes of you; vous, pauvres imbéciles trompés!”

Tiffany decided to ignore the rest of his ranting. She turned her attention fully to Major Lompton instead; carefully deciding on how exactly to phrase the wish she was about to use. “Okay...okay, I’ve got this.” She lowered her voice so that it was little more than a whisper. “I wish that Major Lompton’s wound will now immediately heal itself; with no pain, and no negative after effects from the wound or the healing of the wound either!”

Major Lompton shuddered a little as the magic did its work. Then he rose to his feet triumphantly; shrugging off Captain Amberley as he moved. “As I had already told you all – it was but a scratch!”

Captain Amberley’s voice was utterly deadpan as he replied. “I am pleased to have been so very mistaken in my concerns for you, sir.”

“Very good!” Lord Ollerington beamed at the sight, and then returned his focus to Colonel Archambeau. “You have much to answer for, sir! What have you to say?”

Colonel Archambeau blinked in confusion. “But...but this cannot be! Major Lompton; a moment ago, he was dying! My blade had cut through almost to his heart, I am sure of it!”

Major Lompton smirked. “Dear Miss Sutton has some unique skills, one might say, sir! It is indeed a great pity for you that she is on our side.”

“Witchcraft!” Colonel Archambeau began to splutter. “That is the only possible explanation for such...such strangeness! Mademoiselle Sutton est sûrement une sorcière d’un grand pouvoir!”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Ugh – typical! Witness just one little thing that you can’t understand, and suddenly the nearest woman *must* be a witch!”

Her words resulted in a bout of considerable merriment amongst her allies; all six of whom being fully cognisant of how she had in fact healed Major Lompton. In stark contrast, Colonel Archambeau demonstrated no such good humour. Struggling futilely against his bonds, he raged at them all, but especially at Tiffany. “Maudite salope! Je jure que je te verrai mort pour ça!”

Tiffany shrugged off the latter insult easily enough, but that made no difference to the reactions of her companions. Even those who had not been privileged to have an education knew enough spoken French to be offended on her behalf by the colonel’s words! Not feeling especially generous to him after all that had happened so far, Tiffany stood back and let the other men present rebuke Colonel Archambeau verbally. *Hmm, I must admit, it’s nice being stood up for so gallantly! Probably makes me a terrible feminist for liking it, though.*

She busied herself with making a thorough search of the room for anything that might prove relevant to their fight against Les Tueurs de Renards. This soon proved to be a sensible choice. An unlocked drawer underneath the elaborately carved oak writing desk held a leatherbound diary belonging to Colonel Archambeau. Tiffany grimaced as she read through some of the contents. Closing the horrid account, she set it down atop the desk, and turned to speak to the others. “Gentlemen – there’s a diary here. It’s...well, it’s not pleasant reading, but it also proves beyond any shadow of a doubt the sort of evil that we’re up against.”

Leaving the two sergeants standing guard over Colonel Archambeau again, the other four men hastened to join her at the desk. They took turns at leafing through the diary. Major Lompton was able to identify references to several especially diabolical rituals, including the one responsible for the curse that had been placed on Tiffany. He scowled as he explained it to his companions. “This diary confirms what we had feared regarding Miss Sutton’s unfortunate situation! I am terribly sorry, my dear. There truly is no way of removing the curse from your soul whilst you still draw breath.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Major Lompton's solemn announcement caused a gloomy silence amidst the group. Not liking to see the others so unhappy, Tiffany did her best to appear sanguine about her fate. She forced herself to smile at them. "Oh well, I'm sure that I can keep hiding the images on my skin; I've managed it so far, after all. I'll just have to get used to, um, avoiding dogs and such. It's still better than dying!"

Captain Amberley blinked at her words. Then he suddenly began to smile. "Tell us a thing, if you can now, lass – how are you at holding your breath?"

Tiffany stared at him in confusion. "Um...why?"

Major Lompton laughed triumphantly as he caught on to what Captain Amberley was thinking. "Of course, sir! That is indeed the way for us to go about things! But I shall need to consult with my family on it first; especially my mother. She has far greater knowledge of ritual magic than I do. I must warn you now, Miss Sutton, that it may well take quite some time for us to determine how exactly we are to lift the curse from you."

“Not to worry, lass.” Captain Amberley nodded to Tiffany. “Gives you the chance to practise holding your breath.”

“Holding my – oh!” Tiffany gasped. “Because if I’m holding it, then I’m not drawing breath! That’s so clever, sir!”

The captain shrugged. “Eh. Reckon I have my moments of clarity; same as any other fellow.”

Lord Ollerington hummed. “I trust then that you will vouch for your family’s probable intentions towards Miss Sutton and the rest of us, sir? Forgive me for the impertinence of asking, but we could not help but wonder at their having slipped away from us whilst we were yet in the hidden passageway.”

Major Lompton sighed and nodded. “Worry not, my lord! I shall speak with them and explain the matter fully. Pray, forgive them, all of you. As members of the Order of the Unknown, they are in the sorry position of weighing the risks posed to all against the misfortunes borne by one.”

Lieutenant Plunkett glared at him, and caught hold of Tiffany’s hand. “Your word on it, please, sir! Swear to us now that you will not permit them to harm Tiffany; no matter the supposed cause!”

“Steady on there, Plunkett!” Major Lompton looked amused by the younger officer’s vehemence. “Miss Sutton is quite safe, I assure you. And yes – I will make certain that my family are informed of our new scheme.”

Tiffany eyed him warily. She hadn't missed the way that he avoided actually making the promise that Lieutenant Plunkett had asked of him. *Ugh! Why does he always have to be so bloody slippery about everything?*

Lord Ollerington's face gave no hint of what he thought on the matter, but he stepped closer to Tiffany and took hold of her other hand; nodding to Lieutenant Plunkett as he did so. "I shall escort Miss Sutton on our way out of the château, sir. Might I presume upon you to guard our backs? We cannot be sure that there are no servants who might be traversing the passageway. The sergeants will of course be busy with our prisoner, and Captain Amberley should keep close to Major Lompton; in case his earlier wound exhausts him during our journey. The stairs that we must descend between here and the *salle haute* are very steep, after all."

Lieutenant Plunkett released Tiffany's hand and stood immediately to attention. "Aye, my lord!"

Captain Amberley nodded to the sergeants. "Gag the scum and bring him along with us, lads! Blindfold him too, whilst you're about it. No sense taking chances when we don't have to."

They made their way back through the panel in the wall, and on along the passageway. Captain Amberley and Major Lompton went first. The two sergeants followed close behind them with the still struggling colonel. Tiffany and Lord Ollerington

were next. Lieutenant Plunkett brought up the rear of the group; his rifle once again readied.

Tiffany kept the mantle and the fan bundled up underneath her left arm as she walked. Her right arm was linked through Lord Ollerington's left. The general had tucked the diary away inside his coatee for safekeeping. He ducked his head and spoke quietly to Tiffany. "I fear that we cannot fully rely upon the major, Miss Sutton."

"You noticed him dodging that promise too then, my lord?" Tiffany sighed. "I'm just hoping that he doesn't try to kill me again this time around!"

Lord Ollerington patted her hand. "I would wish you back to life at once if he did, my dear!" He gasped then; as if something of great importance had suddenly occurred to him. "Deuce it all, but we are fools! Miss Sutton – why do we not simply wish away the curse that afflicts you?"

Tiffany felt her jaw drop. "Um...well...I fear perhaps because we have all been just a tad stupid about the matter, my lord?"

The general chuckled warmly, and patted her arm again. "Interminably so, my dear girl! Now – do you want to phrase the thing for yourself? I am willing to attempt it for you, should you so prefer."

"I'll do it, thank you, my lord." Tiffany mused carefully on how she should wish. "I wish that I was no longer cursed, and that there would be no negative consequences whatsoever from this wish!"

In hindsight, Tiffany realised, it might have been wiser for her to have waited until they were somewhere more spacious than the hidden passageway before experimenting with wish magic as a means of resolving the curse. As it was, the abrupt swirl of indescribably coloured light that rose from her skin and sank into the mantle was fortunately no larger than an averagely sized vixen. It still illuminated the area around them for quite some distance, which naturally caught the attention of the rest of the group.

Major Lompton guessed the truth of what had happened almost instantly. He frowned at Tiffany; taking in the sight of her now wholly unadorned skin. “That was a very dangerous thing to do, Miss Sutton! Still, I suppose that I can guess at your reasoning. I trust that you were appropriately cautious in your wording?”

“Very much so, sir!” Tiffany nodded happily to Major Lompton as she handed him the now glowing mantle, along with the enchanted fan. “You can have these back now. I’m sure that your mother will want to have access to them.”

“Eh, it gives us one less thing to have to bother over later, at least.” Captain Amberley was his usual stoic self. He nodded his approval to Tiffany. “Reckon it likely frees up the Lomptons to use whatever rituals they choose and all to help free the souls of the other victims. Good thinking, lass.”

“Um, it was actually Lord Ollerington’s idea, sir.” Tiffany smiled up at the general. “I’m very glad that it occurred to you, my lord.”

Lord Ollerington inclined his head politely in response to her thanks. “As am I, my dear girl. Well – shall we continue along on our way?”

The remainder of their journey back down to the *salle haute* went by without any further incident. The grand room in question stood empty, and in utter darkness as the group slipped out through the panel in its wall; with not a single candle left alight. Thankfully, Captain Amberley was prepared for such eventualities. He produced a small tin-plated lantern, which he lit from one of the candles in the passageway to help light their way over to the nearest of the tall windows. “I thought this might come in handy tonight! Shame I didn’t plan on us needing a rope to climb down as well.”

Sergeant Moore was optimistic as he unlatched the window and swung it inwards; revealing a miniscule balcony area. “Ah, sure, but it’s only ten feet from here to the ground, sir! We’ll be grand without the rope.”

Sergeant Marsh nodded in agreement. “Aye, sir, he’s right! Ten feet is next to nothing, really. Reckon we could likely manage it safely enough even if there were no snow to soften things for us!”

Tiffany peered at the pitch dark beyond the open window rather less confidently. She shivered as a

sudden flurry of snow gusted in. “Um...not to be cowardly, but can I please not go first? I think on balance that I’d much rather have someone down there to catch me!”

Lord Ollerington was swift to assuage her concerns. “Rest assured that there was never any doubt of our proceeding otherwise, Miss Sutton. Special allowances must always be made for those of the fairer sex. No gentleman would ever even think to argue otherwise.”

“Well said, my lord!” Major Lompton nodded his approval. Then he glanced at their prisoner, and smirked rather nastily. “I believe that the colonel should go first. See to it, sergeants!”

Sergeant Marsh patted Colonel Archambeau on the shoulder as he and Sergeant Moore manhandled him into position by the carved balustrade. “Remember to bend your knees as you land, sir!”

“We’d best aim to try and drop him into that bit.” Sergeant Moore pointed down at a thick bank of snow that had built up along the base of the wall of Château d’Archambeaux. “The snow there looks to be at least two feet deep by my eye, and the ground underneath it is part of a flowerbed too.”

Lieutenant Plunkett stepped forwards. “Wait – let me go down first! That way, I can catch the colonel. Evil though he is, he is still our prisoner, and it would be shameful of us to risk him breaking his neck when he lands.”

“Good lad, Plunkett.” Captain Amberley nodded to the younger officer. “Sergeants, you two go down straight after the prisoner. Secure him, and then make sure that the three of you stand ready to help Miss Sutton and the general with their descent. Major Lompton and I will go last of all.”

They all reached the ground safely, and set out towards where the horses and ponies belonging to the members of the 136<sup>th</sup> had been left picketed. By now, the blizzard had blotted out any light offered by the moon or the stars. The soft glow from the lantern provided the group with small comfort in the pitch darkness. After Tiffany stumbled on some unseen hazard, it was decided that she would need to be carried the rest of the way. None of the others present would be swayed on this matter, and so Tiffany submitted to being lifted and placed in the general’s arms. Major Lompton tucked the mantle in around her to keep her warm, and then they all set out again.

After perhaps a quarter hour of trudging through the snow, the group reached a small, wrought iron wicket gate in the north wall of the grounds of Château d’Archambeaux. Passing through it, they spied their animals waiting patiently, along with the other three members of the Lompton family. Edward, it soon transpired, had only just returned. He had left his parents here with his own dark bay mare, and then slipped back into the grounds to

fetch the pair of elegant grey geldings which had drawn the Lompton family carriage earlier. He had also gathered up their coachman, the burly footman who accompanied the baronet and his wife on all such excursions, and Lady Lompton's wide eyed young maid. The carriage itself had been abandoned, since the only unguarded way in and out of the grounds was by the nearby wicket gate.

Lady Lompton raised an eyebrow at the sight of Tiffany being carried. "Gracious, Miss Sutton! Have you turned an ankle?"

Tiffany shook her head. She was too tired and cold to feel embarrassed. "No, my lady, I have not. Not even metaphorically."

Major Lompton sighed. "The snow is very deep, my dear mother, and the poor girl's pattens were left back inside the château, along with her cloak! Kindly do not make any more of it than that."

Lord Ollerington calmly ignored the implied impropriety of the situation, and instead inquired after his own horse. "I rode here alone this evening, and so I have no human servants to worry over, but I should not like to trust dear Lightning's wellbeing to any within that dread estate!"

"Ah, yes – that big chestnut gelding, you mean, my lord? With the ragged looking blaze!" Edward nodded his comprehension. "I saw him in the stables, but thought that perhaps you might go out by that way yourselves, and so I left him there."

Tiffany had a sudden nasty suspicion that they were all about to have to risk an awful lot for a horse. She grimaced at the thought. "What a terrible pity that you didn't bring him with you, sir! I wish that he had broken out by himself and followed your parents' horses to here for company. Horses do such things sometimes, after all. It would have been wonderfully convenient if he had! Think you not so too, my lord?"

The subsequent loud whinny from just beyond the still open wicket gate surprised only those who weren't aware of wish magic. Captain Amberley nodded to Lieutenant Plunkett. "What a very fortunate coincidence! Best go and catch him for the general, lad."

"Aye, sir, at once!" Lieutenant Plunkett hurried off through the gate. He returned a few moments later with a prancing Lightning; having taken off his scarlet sash and looped it around the horse's neck. "He seems to be feeling well, my lord! But I am afraid that he has no bridle or saddle."

Lord Ollerington shrugged off the latter problem. "I expect that we will manage well enough, sir!" He set Tiffany back on her feet beside him. "I often ride him bareback. Improves one's seat, you know."

Captain Amberley looked about the group for a moment as if he was counting. Then he nodded. "Reckon the others will each have to carry two riders, my lord. Thankfully, it's a short journey

from here back to our encampment at – look out, all of you, damn it!”

The black clad figure of Frère Babineaux had erupted from the shadows into the small circle of light provided by the group’s handful of lanterns; his fair hair contrasting sharply with his florid complexion. Gleaming even more palely were his teeth, which had lengthened considerably since they had last seen him. He snarled and snapped furiously at the empty air like a mad dog as he dove at the nearest person: the Lompton’s coachman. That poor fellow seemed frozen to the spot; his jaw dropping open in frightened surprise at what was happening. A faint cry escaped him as Frère Babineaux closed with him; the cultist wrapping his arms tightly around the other man as he drove him to the ground. A terrible crunching sound was heard, followed by a rattling gurgle, and then obscene slurping. The coachman’s arms and legs flailed helplessly for a moment, before limpness overtook him.

During those final, horrid throes, the coachman’s fingers clutched around the amulet of sanctuary. His death grip held even as his arms dropped, and the chain of the magical amulet snapped against the strain. The protection granted to its wearer ceased immediately. Everyone else present who had access to a ranged weapon set to work at once in utilising them. Nine shots rang out; a mix of pistols and rifles alike. The combined volley tore into and

through Frère Babineaux and his unfortunate victim. Even more blood spattered onto the already churned up snow. The two collapsed in a heap. Those with rifles fired again as swiftly as they were able to do so, and then for a third time also, before at last lowering their respective weapons.

Tiffany, who had seen enough horror films to recognise what had just happened, whispered the word hoarsely. "Vampire!"

"Indeed, Miss Sutton!" Major Lompton seemed impressed by her knowledge. "We had best cut off both of their heads before we depart, or they shall rise again within the hour."

Sir James sighed morosely as he holstered his still smoking pistol. "Poor old Tibbet! He was a fine servant, you know. Very good with the horses. Lady Lompton and I shall be hard pressed to replace him. Have you your axe with you, Edward? Yes? Good! Come, Higgins! We have work to do."

"You might have bloody well warned us of the truth about Frère Babineaux, sir!" Captain Amberly rounded angrily on Major Lompton; simultaneously catching Lady Lompton's maid up in his arms as she fainted. "Vampire, indeed! What else haven't you mentioned, eh?"

Major Lompton blinked. "I *did* say that he was no longer wholly human, Simon! Sometimes I forget that others cannot parse such hints. A failing on my part, true. You must forgive me for it!"

Sergeant Marsh called out then. “Begging your pardons, sirs, but Colonel Archambeau is dead! It looks as if he must have tried to slip off whilst we were all distracted by Frère Babineaux, only for him to have been caught up in the shooting.”

Those parties who were still conscious and not engaged in the grim business of decapitation moved at once to attend to this new concern. Captain Amberley carried the maid along with him. Sure enough, the captured man lay flat on his face at the base of a large tree. The snow around the left side of his head was stained crimson.

Lord Ollerington looked immensely guilty. “Ah. Yes – that was likely my doing. It was not intentional, of course! I would never knowingly kill a helpless prisoner. But I saw movement in that direction and feared that perhaps another assailant was lurking. My apologies nonetheless.”

Major Lompton hastened to reassure him. “Worry not, my lord! I sincerely doubt if Archambeau would have told us very much when questioned anyhow. And this way, perhaps we might yet be able to hide the truth of what was going on here from those yet unwitting of it.”

Lady Lompton nodded her approval of the latter suggestion. “Quite right! I doubt if Lord Wellington would be easy to convince of such otherworldly goings-on. And even if he *did* believe us, there is painfully little that he could do to assist.”

Tiffany glanced back over her shoulder towards Château d'Archambeaux. The shutters were closed for the night, but she suspected that there would be people there awakened by the sound of the shots. "We should hurry up and get clear of here. The noise will have carried. If any of the servants think to check with their master about it, then they'll find him missing. And I know for a fact how good at tracking the dogs in his kennel are."

"A fine point, Miss Sutton." Lord Ollerington nodded to Major Lompton. "You should ride back with your family to their estate, sir. Leave the bodies here; let it be believed that we stumbled upon a plot to abduct Archambeau, but were alas too late to save him from those responsible. The rest of us shall return to the encampment; before anyone there grows concerned for our collective wellbeing in the wake of tonight's reported fire. We can reconvene on the morrow; to decide how best to deal with the evils of the rest of those dwelling in Château d'Archambeaux."

Major Lompton agreed readily. "It shall be as you say, my lord! I dare say that my brother's mare can carry us both. My parents and their two remaining servants will share the carriage horses." Then he turned to Tiffany. "Which group will you go with, my dear?"

Tiffany hesitated. "Um...well, there aren't enough horses for me to go along with you, sir. I

need to ride with someone, after all, so it's not as if I can even borrow one of the ponies whilst the sergeants share the other."

Captain Amberley handed the still dazed but slowly reawakening maid off into Major Lompton's arms. "Miss Sutton will ride with young Plunkett, sir. Excuse me if I offend you, please, Lord Ollerington, but the young lady is no rider, and your horse is in obvious high spirits. I reckon that it would be too dangerous to combine the two."

"Very good, sir!" Lord Ollerington whisked the mantel away from Tiffany's shoulders and draped it over the hapless maid. He tucked the fan into her hands too. "To keep you warm on the journey. It all belongs to your employers anyhow."

"Oh!" Tiffany hurriedly removed the diamonds she was wearing. She deposited them in the hands of the by now very confused looking maid. "You'd best see to it that these are returned safely too! I've been worrying about misplacing them long enough. Thank you for lending them to me, sir."

Major Lompton frowned slightly. "Hold a moment yet before you depart, Miss Sutton! Pray, remember that our friend Mr Reed and his companion will have spied our absence from the carriage on their departure from the supper. Tongues may wag if you are seen to return on the arm of the general instead of my own." He smiled wolfishly at Tiffany's reaction to that. Then his

voice became softer; as if to coax her into compliance. "Oh, come with me, do! Lieutenant Plunkett can ride as part of our group just as readily. I am sure that Captain Amberley will see to it that he is not declared a deserter for doing so!"

"No, I think not." Lord Ollerington took hold of Tiffany's right arm, and linked it decisively through his left. "My apologies to you, sir, but I have decided to steal Miss Sutton away for myself! I am sure that no one will find it surprising. You know my reputation."

With that said, the general turned on his heel, and strode off towards the horses. Tiffany found herself propelled along with him. She glanced up at him curiously. "Er – thank you, my lord?"

"You are most welcome, my dear girl." Lord Ollerington met her gaze and winked. "Rank has its privileges, after all!"

He said nothing further to Tiffany until after he had lifted her up to sit side saddle behind Lieutenant Plunkett; whose sash he then returned. Then he advised her to hold on tightly to the young officer during their ride. "Safety over propriety, Miss Sutton! And you, sir – mind how you go, won't you? I should hate for us to have to live through the events of tonight all over again if either or both of you were to take a tumble!"

Lieutenant Plunkett blushed, but nodded as he finished retying his sash. "Aye, my lord!" He

hesitated briefly. "So...so is it indeed all over now, do you suppose? The whole strange matter that we have endured, I mean."

Lord Ollerington shrugged as he vaulted easily up onto Lightning's broad back. "One would certainly hope so, sir! Or our part in it, at least. Doubtless, the Lomptons will yet need to perform that ritual they told us of. Still, that should not involve any of us. Miss Sutton is free of the curse now, after all."

"It feels strange, my lord." Lieutenant Plunkett urged his horse on after Captain Amberley's steed. "Our finally being done with it. And nothing went wrong this time."

Captain Amberley grunted. "Mind out that you don't break our luck, lad!"

Tiffany glanced back briefly over her shoulder. The two sergeants were riding only a few strides behind. Beyond them, she caught a glimpse of the Lomptons and their surviving servants as they turned their horses and made for a different route. Major Lompton's expression was thunderous. Tiffany shivered and turned her face back to watch the view across Lieutenant Plunkett's left shoulder instead. A nervous energy roiled in her stomach. *Ugh – something tells me that Major Lompton won't let my snubbing him like this go unanswered!*

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

There was soon no time to spare for worrying further about Major Lompton. The encampment at Garris was abuzz with rumours regarding the fates of those supper guests who had so mysteriously vanished from Château d'Archambeaux. Although it had indeed been contained, the fire in the conservatory had only served to create more concern. In fact, Lord Wellington had been in the process of arranging for a group of armed men to return to the château and demand answers! It took no small amount of diplomatic skill on Lord Ollerington's part to explain everything away to the field marshal's satisfaction. Unfortunately, such excuses required sacrifice; as Tiffany discovered to her mortification during the recounting of them. Upon their arrival at Garris, she had been lifted down from behind Lieutenant Plunkett, and bundled into headquarters without any preamble. Now, ensconced in an armchair by a roaring fire in Lord Wellington's private sitting room, she could only bear witness to Lord Ollerington's explanation.

“Before departing for the supper, I had ordered Captain Amberley to take a few trusted men out with him tonight for a spot of reconnaissance. And lucky it proved to be, too!” Lord Ollerington’s voice was now very grave. “Miss Sutton and I were travelling with the Lomptons and their servants. Our group was set upon shortly after our departure from Château d’Archambeaux. Had Amberley and his men not been scouting the lands near the château, then the madman who set upon us with axe and with teeth alike would very likely have killed us all; for we had but three pistols between us, and he seemed not to so much as heed them! As it is, Sir James and Lady Lompton lost their coachman to him before he was stopped. Afterwards, we discovered that there had been another victim.” Here, he paused in his explanation. Tiffany guessed that he was thinking carefully on how to proceed with it.

Lord Wellington frowned as he waited for the general to continue. “You seem troubled, Ollerington! Was this other victim known to you?”

Lord Ollerington nodded. “It was none other than Colonel Archambeau himself, my lord! He had been bound and shot. We surmised that our assailant had somehow abducted him; most likely with the assistance of others. With the latter in mind, we felt that we had no choice but to leave the bodies where they lay. Sir James and Lady Lompton insisted upon returning to their estate

instead of coming here, and so Major Lompton accompanied them thence. He feared for their safety otherwise, if it transpired that our assailant did indeed have companions. Their carriage was caught up in the blaze, or so the servants at Château d'Archambeaux had claimed anyhow, and so they too were travelling by horse."

"Understandable." Lord Wellington nodded slowly. "And do you now doubt the veracity of what young Archambeau's servants said?"

Lord Ollerington smiled thinly. "I mistrust the lot of them deeply after the horrid business involving young Archambeau! But before then, I thought merely that some barrier in language might have occurred between them and the Lomptons. I am sure, my lord, that you can guess at the chaos which was unfolding at that time!"

"I can indeed, Ollerington. It was likely very little better during my own departure. The news of fire tends to create such panic, and understandably so. Doubtless, that was when poor Archambeau was taken. The fire was likely set as not only as a distraction, but also to drive away all the guests; the better to isolate him!" Lord Wellington gazed flatly at his general. "But such speculation aside, none of this explains where you, Miss Sutton here, and the three Lomptons, had all vanished to *prior* to the announcement of the fire! I noted your collective absence at the supper table."

Lord Ollerington sighed. "You have, I fear, raised a far more delicate question there, sir!" He glanced down at Tiffany from where he stood beside her chair, and smiled a little more ruefully. "I believe that Lady Lompton had felt a trifle unwell. Her son, and of course Sir James, escorted her outside into the gardens to take the air. They requested that Miss Sutton and I inform our host of the situation, but...well. You know how these sorts of things can sometimes go!"

"Hmm. I suppose that I might, at that, yes." The field marshal busied himself with prodding a fire iron into one of the crackling logs in the grate. He pointedly avoided even looking at Tiffany. "So, the Lomptons left the two of you unchaperoned. And in the end, none of you made it back to the supper."

Tiffany blushed furiously as she caught on to what was being implied. *Ugh! Goodbye, reputation!*

"Lady Lompton *did* look horribly pale." Lord Ollerington wore the mildly chastened look of an important man who knew himself to still be well within the confines of what he could get away with. "I confess that it was very poor form of me not to have passed on the message to young Archambeau. Although, I did *intend* to do so, I assure you!"

Lord Wellington straightened up and finally looked at Tiffany, but only briefly. His voice hardened slightly. "Our late host claimed that all five of you had left together for another party."

Tiffany stared down at her gloved hands, which were folded primly in her lap. In hindsight, it made sense that Colonel Archambeau would himself have attempted to cover up their disappearances, she supposed ruefully. *But how are we going to explain it away to Lord Wellington?*

To her surprise, Lord Ollerington's voice remained steady as he improvised further. "Ah. It is as I feared then. Miss Sutton and I were seen. Well. Unfortunate, that. Decent of Archambeau to make excuses for us, mind you! I suppose that he must have left instructions with one or other of his servants to warn us off from attempting to rejoin the other guests once we...ahem...afterwards."

Lord Wellington inhaled slowly through what Tiffany suspected to be clenched teeth. "I would appreciate a cessation of this abominable attempt at deception, Ollerington! It may surprise you to learn that I can always tell whenever you are lying. This is because you are in fact very bad at it."

"Oh, blast it all!" Lord Ollerington flung himself down into a chair. "What belies me, if I might ask?"

The field marshal made an amused sort of sound before replying. "In this instance, sir? Well, one might begin with how terribly unlikely it is that the Lomptons would have continued strolling about in the gardens in such bitterly cold weather until after the fire had been discovered! Especially if, as you claimed, Lady Lompton had been unwell."

Lord Ollerington hummed. “A fair point, yes. Very well – I admit it! The thought of spending all night at table bored me. I took it into my head that it would be fine sport to go riding bareback through the woods instead; see if I might find Captain Amberley and his patrol. So determined, I made my way to the stables, mounted dear Lightning, snatched up Miss Sutton here as company, and told the servants to make our excuses to their master. I have no idea where the Lomptons were then. We had all parted ways a short time earlier; after I rebuked the major for his uncouth treatment of Miss Sutton. He stormed off, and his parents followed. Miss Sutton attached herself to me, and the rest you know. We next saw the Lomptons upon our return.”

Tiffany glanced furtively at Lord Wellington, who had sat down behind his campaign desk. She wondered if feigning muteness would work for her. *Maybe I should just pretend to faint, or something!*

“You went riding in the dark then. And without saddle, or bridle, either. Gracious.” Lord Wellington sounded oddly sanguine about such behaviour. “By my recollection, this would be the tenth such excursion that you have indulged yourself in since ever I have known you, Ollerington. And the sixth wherein you brought along a companion.” He paused and looked at Tiffany. “A lesson in not going off unchaperoned with peculiar gentlemen, my dear! Too late now, I suppose, but there it is.”

Bristling indignantly at the field marshal's open hypocrisy, Tiffany raised her chin and stared at him. "I had hoped that he would bring me back in time for me to ride the coach, my lord." She noted his start of surprise with satisfaction, and continued before he could speak. "Mr Rigg's coach, I mean. Or is it a carriage? Oh, I always confuse such things! Forgive me, please, both of you. Anyhow, Major Lompton and I travelled to the supper along with Mr Rigg and his companion, you see. Mademoiselle Dupont. She is just out, the dear girl, and we were to be chaperones of a sort to each other tonight. I did not intend to leave she and Mr Rigg faced with an awkward situation for their journey back to Garris, even if Major Lompton had made it wholly clear that he would not be in my company for a moment further! The latter is why I chose to refrain from attending the supper, my lord. And then, well, Lord Ollerington, he was so very kind to me in my distress – so polite, and attentive! How was I to refuse his invitation?"

Lord Ollerington bent forwards in his chair as Tiffany finished speaking. He looked and sounded as if he were suppressing a sudden painful bout of coughing. "Ahem! Excuse me, please, both of you. Swallowed something. A fly, I think."

"The claret is in its usual spot, Ollerington." Lord Wellington had recovered his composure. He eyed Tiffany speculatively, and then nodded. "Very

well, then! Given the unpleasantness that Miss Sutton has referred to, I shall presume that Major Lompton and his parents must also have intended on avoiding the supper, and likely informed our late host of that; hence his subsequent explanation. He would have wanted to avoid arousing any gossip; such was his way, from what I knew of him. Doubtless, Sir James' horses required time to rest before making the journey back to his estate, else they and the carriage would surely have been long gone before the fire was discovered."

"A rational deduction, sir." Lord Ollerington sprang to his feet. "A glass for each of us?"

"I'd honestly prefer tea, my lord." Tiffany shivered and huddled back in her chair. "It was so horribly cold out there! I was very foolish to have gone riding with you without a cloak. But then, you *did* promise me that we would not be out long."

"He always does that." Lord Wellington looked amused now. "And do you know, I think his promises to be quite genuine? It is only that he loses track of the hours when riding. The latter is his passion, you see, Miss Sutton. Although, some might call it a vice, I suppose."

Tiffany opted to pretend that she hadn't noticed the blatant double entendre. She batted her eyelids at him sleepily, and raised her hand to hide a genuine yawn. "Oh! Excuse me, please, my lords. I am quite exhausted." Her stomach rumbled loudly

then, and she blushed. “Er, and rather hungry, too, I must confess. It is my own fault for not attending the supper, of course!”

Lord Wellington took pity on her, and a tea tray was sent for whilst he and Lord Ollerington drank their wine. The tray arrived complete with a selection of cold cooked meat and bread for all three of them. If the servant who brought the tea things and the food deemed it to be inappropriate for a young lady to dine alone with two gentlemen who were unrelated to her, and at such a late hour too, then he gave no hint of it. Quite forgetting that in this era it was expected for her to ignore the staff, Tiffany smiled at him, and murmured her thanks, before tucking into her share of the food as fast as could still be counted as seemly. She listened carefully to the remainder of the conversation between the two gentlemen, but found to her relief that it was nothing which required her input. Instead, Lord Wellington took the opportunity to debate potential tactics with Lord Ollerington. The general seized upon this change in subject happily, and an hour passed before he and Tiffany at last departed from the field marshal’s company.

It was the latter man who had the last word. Having bid them both farewell and goodnight, he bowed once more to Tiffany; expressing pleasure at having met her. What he said next, she could only hope was to be blamed on the wine! “I do hope that

Ollerington here has the good sense not to bother hiding the truth of his involvement with you from here onwards, my dear girl. It has been clear to me ever since he first made mention of having intervened on your behalf!”

With that, he smiled brightly, and closed the door of the sitting room between himself and his erstwhile guests. Tiffany gathered her wits and glared furiously up at Lord Ollerington. “I demand that you escort me back to Captain Amberley at once, my lord! Before anyone else mistakes our situation for more than what it truly is!”

Lord Ollerington looked contrite for something less than an instant. Then he chuckled, and pressed Tiffany’s hand. “I assure you, Miss Sutton, that I shall forever strive to be the consummate gentlemen in all our dealings hence! Well – unless you should prefer that I be otherwise?”

By now, it was past midnight. The ground floor of headquarters felt eerily quiet as the two stared unblinkingly at one another. Tiffany moved first: standing on tiptoe to kiss the general full on his lips. His response was equally keen. Moments later, they were upstairs together; he having scooped her up into his arms and carried her. Quite how he succeeded in opening the door of his room without dropping her must remain a mystery for the ages.

The morning afterwards at length arrived, and with it, an abrupt desire on Tiffany’s part to be

anywhere other than where Lord Ollerington's manservant might walk in on her still in bed with his employer. This concern in mind, she dressed hurriedly, kissed the drowsing general goodbye, and then wished herself safely back to her bedroll in Captain Amberley's tent. To judge by the soft snoring from beyond the makeshift curtain, the rifleman in question was still asleep. Tiffany sighed and set to work changing her gown and combing out her hair. *I can at least try to look presentable for when I explain where I've been all night long!*

Mercifully, Captain Amberley attempted no such interrogation. He merely nodded to Tiffany when she at last emerged into the main part of the tent after hearing him get up. "Wished yourself back then, eh? Clever way of managing things, that. Especially with the snow." This placid observation made, he returned to shaving.

Tiffany blushed anyhow. "Um...so, you noticed that I wasn't here last night, sir?"

"None of my blessed business, lass." Captain Amberley paused for a moment and looked at her carefully. "Unless something's wrong?"

"No!" Tiffany hastened to assure him. "No, I'm fine, thank you! Lord Wellington had questions about what happened at Château d'Archambeaux. It took a while for us to explain it all to his satisfaction. And then he had tea brought in for me, and some food for the three of us."

“Sounds very pleasant, lass.” Captain Amberley nodded towards the door of the tent as he wiped off his razor between swipes. “You’d best go and find young Plunkett at your earliest convenience, mind. He’ll be worried for your safety until he sees you with his own eyes. Moore and Marsh too, I expect.”

Tiffany nodded. “Yes, I’ll do that now. Um...see you later then, sir.”

Leaving the captain to finish his morning shave in peace, Tiffany put on the pale grey velvet pelisse and the white lace foundling cap which matched the walking gown that she had chosen for today. The latter garment was high-necked, and crafted from white jaconet muslin, with a lot of frilled lace to offset the plainness of its colour. Thus attired, the young conservator slid her booted feet into her remaining pair of pattens, and ducked out of the tent; pulling on a pair of soft grey kidskin gloves as she went. The snow was by now almost shin deep in places, and her feet were once again freezing by the time that she neared Lieutenant Plunkett’s tent. Shivering as she spotted the young officer a few paces ahead of her, Tiffany called out a polite greeting to him. “How do, sir? Are you going to breakfast?”

Lieutenant Plunkett spun to face her; a relieved and happy expression spreading across his face. “Tiffany! I am glad to see you well! Er – yes. Breakfast. Would you like to accompany me?”

“Yes, please!” Tiffany linked arms with him happily and they set out towards the sergeants’ mess; both eager to meet with Marsh and Moore.

Along the way, Lieutenant Plunkett made a shy request. “I have been wondering, Tiffany – do you suppose that wishes could make me...er...whole?”

Tiffany blinked for a moment in surprise. Then she nodded. “Yes, of course they could, Evelyn! Is...um...would you like to phrase it yourself? It seems very personal, and I’d hate to somehow magic you up the wrong er...you know!”

“Oh, indeed, yes!” Lieutenant Plunkett sighed in obvious relief. “I would much prefer to do the thing myself, thank you. It will be wonderful not to need to hide any longer!”

They took a shortcut in between two snow covered supply carts. When they emerged at the other side, Lieutenant Plunkett was beaming, and a little taller and broader than he had been previously. He raised his free hand in wonder and touched the faint hint of blond stubble along the line of his jaw. “I will have to shave from now on, won’t I?”

“Yes, I expect that you will!” Tiffany squeezed her companion’s arm happily. “Congratulations, Evelyn! No more hiding.”

By now, all the sergeants of the 136<sup>th</sup> Foot had grown accustomed to Lieutenant Plunkett and Tiffany eating meals in their mess. As such, no one commented on their arrival; although a few of the

more observant souls present did take a second glance at how much the young officer had filled out since the last time they had seen him. Pretending not to notice the stares, Tiffany and Lieutenant Plunkett made their way carefully through the already crowded tent to where Sergeant Moore and Sergeant Marsh were seated. The latter two men scrambled to their feet at once; to exchange not only the usual morning pleasantries, but also murmured surprise and excitement over the swiftly explained change in Lieutenant Plunkett's physique.

Sergeant Marsh grinned and nudged Sergeant Moore as the four of them took their usual seats around the little folding table. "I hazarded that he'd think of it himself before we could suggest it to him, you know!"

Sergeant Moore inclined his head in acknowledgement, and congratulated Lieutenant Plunkett again. "Aye, sure but you'll be breathing easier now, so you will, sir! No more worrying about who might see what, or any of the rest of it."

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded as he helped himself to his share of the bread. He was still beaming. "Now my only fear is that I may wake suddenly to find all of this a dream!"

"Ah, here, we'll have none of that talk now, sir!" Sergeant Moore poured a generous measure of tea into each of the four cups. "I'd fear for the wits of any man who dreamed of such weather as this!"

Sergeant Marsh nodded fervently. “Dreams should have only ever summer in them, or else a nice warm spring day at the very least!”

“Oh, but I do love a spring wedding, so I do!” Sergeant Moore sighed wistfully. “Just after the middle of March – wasn’t that when we agreed it should be? So as the banns can be finished first.”

“And so that the lieutenant can get himself a nice new coat too, aye.” Sergeant Marsh produced an impressively thick wedge of blue cheese from somewhere in his pockets. He set to work slicing it into equal quarters. “You have even more need for one now, sir! Reckon as you ought to have some bigger shirts and such too.”

Lieutenant Plunkett blushed to the tips of his ears, but he didn’t stop smiling. “I haven’t grown by so very much! This coat feels exactly the right size now. Although, you may be correct about the shirts. And my boots do pinch a little.”

Tiffany shrugged as she sipped her tea. “At least it’s easy for us to fix those sorts of things. We might even do so for the others around us; if we’re careful not to ever be found out, that is. And there’s really no cause for us to stand by and let anyone go hungry, either.”

The two sergeants exchanged furtive looks. Then Sergeant Marsh nodded towards the cheese. “Aye, pet; we might have had a few thoughts about such matters ourselves and all, like.”

In answer, Tiffany reached out calmly and picked up a piece of the perfectly normal looking cheese. “As I said – just don’t get caught, sir.”

Lieutenant Plunkett nodded. “I am sure that it cannot be any sort of a crime, or a sin either, when it is so very impossible of a thing to begin with!”

## Epilogue

Dear reader, it may be surmised by any with sense that people such as Miss Sutton and her assorted brave companions, are quite incapable of living quiet, ordinary sorts of lives! That they attempt to convince themselves otherwise is of no consequence. Fate has other plans for them. Wrongs await righting, secrets languish undiscovered, and valiant acts yearn to be committed. Wedding bells too may yet be rung! Therefore, be assured that our heroes will return – although, to when, and to where, cannot be told here. It matters not. For the present, you have most assuredly reached the final page of the book. Go away now, this weary writer must beseech you, and do something else. Doubtless, Major Lompton would suggest raving keenly about this work to any who might be prevailed upon to attend, but *he* is quite mad, and must therefore be excused.

## About the Author



Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig, who also writes under the pseudonym of Eibhlín Valdys, is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and to date they have received funding as an individual artist via the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2018/19, 2020/21, and 2023/24, and also via the University of Atypical's DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.