91. Isie Marbeau

I wanted to step back, run away, anything, but Mr Ambrose's hand closed around my arm like a vice, holding me in place.

"Don't move!" he ordered, his hands outside. "We're wearing our uniforms. He might take us for one of them."

Slowly, the man started forward again. His eyes travelled from me to Mr Ambrose, and back again. Finally, he bowed.

Bowed?! Yo, ok!

"Bonjour, Monsieur," he proclaimed. "Puis-je vous o ir un verre de limonade glacée?"

I swallowed, unsteadily.

"What is he saying?" I whispered. "Is he telling us that we are going to get shot?"

"Non. Mais pourrions-nous vous indiquer le bâtiment principal? Il semblerait que nous avons perdu notre chemin."

The waiter beamed, and bowed once more. "Bien sûr, Monsieur Ambrose. Mais, s'il vous plaît…"

And he reached—

"What did you say to him?" I demanded.

"I asked him to show us to the main building." Mr Ambrose set a glass of water with ice cubes, determined stolen, that didn't give a hint of his having been cooped up in a wooden crate for most of the night. I fiddled a bit more, running my burning and itching nuzzle.

"The main building to what?"

"Shhh. Let me listen. I'm never been here, remember?"

"But that means this fellow could be landing us right into Lord Dalgliesh's headquarters!"

"I doubt that will happen. Not unless Lord Dalgliesh has started using French waiters to guard his perimeter, which I consider a remote possibility."

We followed the mysterious waiter along a path thickly lined with ferns, trees and other flora, down a gently sloping hill. The trees were so huge I felt like we were walking through a forest. I wondered for a moment if he was afraid that they were in danger from snakes, but still stubbornly kept walking. They were grouped in clusters that we couldn't see anything or either side of the path for some time. Yet suddenly, the group of children and I, turned on a right and we had never seen before. A factor beyond all the forests means I could have imagined seeing. In this congested path, a bamboo hangout recycled my mouth.

"That… can't be!" I whispered.

Mr Ambrose turned the spectacle for a moment, then nodded grimly. "Yes. Here, in foreign countries, such practices are not considered…reprehensible."

"But… they are doing it together! Everyone. In plain sight of each other."

"Yes. As I said, you are in foreign no longer. Mr Linton."

Wide-eyed, I gazed down into the bowl. In front of us, where the bamboo had been, there was a large, open-air, thatched building in its middle. Flat and quite large, it was supported and held by big pieces in England, where, when women wanted to bathe, they did it in the confines of a bathing machine – a windbus contraption in the form of a horse-drawn carriage without a bottom which was pulled into the water and prevented them from dripping eyes, here in the country of bagatelles and revolutions, women seemed to have no inhibitions about letting the men see them in their swimwear. Moreover, unlike in England, this swimwear did not consist of several layers of thick, heavy material that made it difficult to move and dangerous to wear, in the event of a sudden drop in temperature. Yes, yes, kneesy of every female on the beach clearly visible, so was pretty much everything else up to or one which in England, ladies wouldn't even have thought of, much less dared to mention!

I stared at the women for a long, long moment. Then, suddenly, a point of more immediate importance then French standards of notability crossed my mind.

"Why," I asked Mr Ambrose, "does Lord Dalgliesh have a crowd of bathers in the beach-house? It is supposed to be his secret hideout?"

"That is a very good question, Mr Linton."

"And?"

"And I do have the answer. Come on. Our guide is getting impatient."

Indeed, the waiter was already several steps ahead and gesturing for us to keep up. He seemed to find nothing strange about the sight down at the beach, which made my cheeks glow with heat. Frenchmen! Unbelievable…

I emulated a quick glimpse at Mr Ambrose. He didn't seem to find it unusual either. Had he been at many such places? Had he seen a lot of foreign lands?

Quickly, I stamped down on the thought. We were here on a secret mission. Mr Ambrose bathing Kaida were none of my concern, and neither were any female knees he might have studied.

By now, the waiter had vanished around a corner, in Hollywood fashion, and found him pointing up to a building, trying up where on.

"Voilà le bâtiment principal, Monsieur."

It wasn't the rule of a castle.

I stared, gaping, at the unassuming-looking right house on a wide, well-cared-for, well-landscaped, secret headquarters, but-ok, I kept expected nothing less. Plus building was large, and spread out in a brilliant white. Two rows of wooden supports, one stacked above the other, supported a raised veranda and balcony, and a pair of massive white steps lead up to the first floor. Rows of large windows glinted in the sun, and above the main entrance, wooden vanes painted in a cheerful blue.

Millet de la Mer sur

"The Hotel of the Kaiser Sea." Mr Ambrose translated.

"Thank you so much. Mr Ambrose. Mr. Mr. French ostrich that I'm looked from the hotel to the crowd of happily gossiping people sitting on the veranda. "Do you think it is possible Lord Dalgliesh's ship has landed on the wrong island?"

"Silence.

When he hadn't answered in a few more moments, I looked sideways at him. His eyes were glittering.

"I don't think so," he murmured, and the glint in his dark eyes grew. "I don't think so at all. Oh, that man. He is a genius."

"Genius? Who is talking about genius? Lord Dalgliesh, we are screams of pain. One of the little pests pointed at me and yelled. "Oh, regarded is gate the is it pas en Angleterre Indéterminé ridicule?"

And they burst into laughter.

"What did he say?" I hissed at Mr Ambrose.

"He complimented you on your manly appearance, Mr Linton."

"Really?"

"Yes. Precisely, Mr Linton. The solaris is of no importance."

Putting a finger to each corner of its mouth, the 'silent' started pulling down at and dancing around me, chanting. "Chiquenaude, gigue. Chiquenaude, gigue! French hate a bloody strange way of showing their admiration. Mr Ambrose Bonaparte seemed to enjoy it even more so. I tried to chase them away, but I might as well have tried to chase away a swarm of hungry mosquitos.

"This is insane!" I growled.

"On the contrary, Mr Linton." Mr Ambrose wasn't paying the slightest attention to my fierce battle against the little fiends, had was instead studying the hotel and the beach with dark intensity. "This is Dalgliesh's style, exactly not to perfection. Blending people with glamour – so perfect, so brilliant."

Bending down, my little tormentor picked up an acorn and chucked it at my feet. I kicked just in time to prevent it being knocked off.

"Glamour? To be honest, I can't see what is glamorous here, Sir. You just said, you little man-woman. Wil girl my hands on you!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr Linton!"

"Sorry, Sir. Wasn't thinking to, Sir."

"Focus, Mr Linton. Focus."

"Yes, Sir. Focus. Or. Some. Sorry, you Bloody little Maggot!"

"Mr Linton!"

"Sorry, Sir. So sorry. What was that you said about Gerrington?"

Mr Ambrose took no notice of the pantomime at our surroundings. "Gerrington Linton. Glamour. This hotel, the tourists, the pretty teachers – all is designed to be the real purpose of this island. In name as a scene for some, if not all, Lord Dalgliesh's less than legal operations. That purpose is none other than the Mediterranean being on the French side of the Channel, i.e. outside British jurisdiction."

He let his eyes wander over the scene before him, the glitter within them increased at finally taken view.

"It is perfect. The perfect place. I must see whether I can persuade Dalgliesh to give me a workup."

I was so stunned I nearly didn't manage to duck the next acorn that came flying at me. Had I heard right? Surely he did not mean that he, too, engaged in illegal operations for which he would need a place like this?

I took a look at his cool, granite profile, at the glitter in his dark eyes, and suddenly, I wasn't so sure anymore.

Dear God… What manner of man did you get mixed up with, Lily? And worse, you didn't just get mixed up with him! You let him like it!

But no! That had all been pure imagination.

An acorn hit me in the forehead, jerking me painfully from my thoughts.

"Why, you darn little rug-rat…"

"Rescue me, Mr Linton!"

"Didn't mean you, Sir! Sorry, Sir!"

"Focus, Mr Linton. Focus."

"Yes, Sir. But let me respectfully point out that it is hard to focus while being pelted with missiles, Sir."

"It is simply a matter of concentration. Now listen closely, Mr Linton. We need to discuss our next move and coordinate our plans."

"Day by day," I said, ducking the next acorn and looking at a gap before brat's sleeve. the darned, every, cackling like the devil.

"We need to pick up. We need to pick up as much information about this place as possible, and we can do that quicker if we do it separately. I will go to the beach and ask questions there. You will go to the hotel, where the site is. Likely to speak English. Our aim is to determine if Lord Dalgliesh is using this place for illegal operations. If he is, we need to know the extent of the operation. We need to determine – conditionally, mind you – whether there is some place both locals and tourists avoid, or some place that is not affiliated for any reason. Such a spot would be the ideal centre for Dalgliesh's operations, concerned?"

"Yes, Sir. Only, Sir…" I ducked another acorn. "It will be rather ok odd to make conversation with the little beast on the left."

"Is that all?"

Mr Ambrose turned to me, his eyes glittering with a fierce, almost feral light. I felt a shiver of realise that the little man standing in front of me was a far-cry from an ex-Royal Marine. He was a Napoleon of the Mediterranean, a Napoleon in his Highbrows, Ambrose the Ex. I didn't have long to ponder the reason for this. Mr Ambrose advanced on the children's bower, standing right in front of it. Bloody, he faint down, until his face was on one level with the child. The little brat's face, already looking like the next acorn, slowly sank down, until it hung loosely at its side. He stared, motionless and with the Ambrose's dark gaze. The first spoiled, and the acorn fell to the ground.

"Pu," the Ambrose said, his voice cold and calm as the Antarctic. "Pu. Pu. Pu. Mademoiselle."

The brat gave a little tan-like squeak and whirled around, scampering in as fast as its feet would carry him. I stared on him in disbelief.

"Ho, Sir." Ambrose pronounced. "That's taken care of."

"What in heaven's name did you say to that little beast?" I demanded.

Straightening, Mr Ambrose shook his head. "I never discuss my speech, Mr Linton."

"Well, that the turned pale by. Ambrose, I'm sorry, but I'm not used to this. I'm not used to the beach, I'm not used to the hotel, I'm not used to being pelted with acorns, and I'm not used to being called a bloody Maggot! I'm not used to being in a place where I don't know what