



FOR QUEEN, FOR COUNTRY,
FOR STAYING ALIVE...



LILITH SAINTCROW
**THE RED PLAGUE
AFFAIR**

A BANNON AND CLARE CASE

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THE 
RED PLAGUE
AFFAIR

 Bannon & Clare: Book Two 

 LILITH SAINTCROW



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Historical Note

I regret to inform the Reader that I have, as they say, played fast and loose with History. Being subjective wench in several regards, History did not seem to mind, but some who peruse these books may. I can only say that whatever errors and inaccuracies are contained herein, they are for the most part lovingly and carefully chosen; any that are not, are the regrettable result of cracks and defaults that occur even in the best Research For The Purposes Of Almost-Historical Fiction, and the fault is Yours. Your Ob't Servant, namely, the Humble Author.

And now, my best and most faithful darlings, my Readers, let me welcome you once again in Londinium, where the smoke rises, the sorcery glitters, and the clockworks thrum...

Not How Things Are Done

I am too bloody old for this.

Archibald Clare spat blood and surged upward. He gave the struggling fellow opposite him two quick jabs to the head, hoping to calm the situation somewhat. Foul knee-deep semiliquid splashed dark as sin and smelly as the third circle of Hell. Clare gained his footing, unwilling to deduce what deep organic sludge his boots were slipping in, and retched painlessly. Blood from his broken nose trickling down the back of his throat, was making his stomach *decidedly* unhappy.

Where is that blasted Italian?

He had no worry to spare for Valentinelli. For Clare strongly suspected he had other problems, especially if what his faculties – sharpened by coja and burning like a many-sided star of logic and deduction inside his skull – were telling him was truly so. If, indeed, the man in the long academician's gown struggling in Clare's fists, spluttering wildly and half-drowned, was not Dr Francis Vance...

... Clare would not only perhaps have quite a bit of explaining to do, but would also have been bested *again* by the sodding criminal bastard.

The man in Clare's grasp ceased thrashing quite so frantically. Since he was being held under some of the foulest sewage drained nightly into the Themis, it was not so amazing. However, Clare judged that his opponent was about to drown, and further judged his own faculties were *not* stunned by the knock on the skull he'd taken earlier that night. Which made his opponent a potentially valuable source of information from whence to deduce Dr Vance's whereabouts and further plans.

Besides, drowning a man in shite was not, as Emma Bannon would say archly, how things were *done*.

Now why should I think of her? Clare freed the obstruction from his throat with a thick venomous cough, wished he hadn't because the reek was thick enough to chew, and dragged the false Vance up from a watery grave.

Choking, spluttering words more fit for a drover or a struggling hevvymancer than the man of quality Dr Vance purported to be, Clare's bespattered opponent hung in his narrow fists like water washing. Clare's chest was uncomfortably tight, a rock lodged behind his ribs, and he wheezed more unbecomingly as his trapped opponent tried gamely to sink a knee into the most tender spot of Clare's anatomy.

Bad form, sir. So Clare took the man's feet out from under him and dunked him again, boots slipping in the sludge coating whatever passed as a floor to this foul tunnel. The echoes held a peculiar quality that made Clare think this part of Londinium's sewers were built of slowly crumbling brickwork which made them not quite as ancient as those built by the Pax Latium. *Newer* often meant *sturdier* but not always. The Latiums had believed in solid stone even for a cloaca on the benighted edge of their empire.

An encouraging observation. Or not. He hawked and spat again, grateful he could not see the colour of whatever bodily fluid he had just thrown into the dark. His face would be a mask of bruising upon the morrow.

He hauled the man forth from the sewerage again, and wished his sensitive nose would cease its operation for a few moments. "Be reasonable!" he barked, and the echoes gave him more of the dimensions of the tunnel. Quite large, really, and quite a volume of almost-fluid moving through it.

throat. His busy faculties calculated the rate of flow and returned the answer that Clare was lucky was a slurry; he would have been swept off his feet and drowned had it been any thinner. "Vance Where is he?"

The besmeared visage before him contorted; there was a sharp tooth-shattering crack. Another odd sound rose under the plashing and plinking. What little unhealthy gleaming there was showed rather oddly coloured face under a stringy mass of black hair, a hooked nose decked with excrescence and rotting teeth as the man Clare had been chasing howled with laughter.

Dear God, what—

The laughter swelled obscenely, and the man in his grasp went into convulsions. More filth splashed, and Clare swore with a ferocity that would perhaps have shocked even Miss Bannon, who could – he had discovered – let loose torrents of language that would make even the ill-tempered draught of Whitchapel blush.

Poison tooth, broken open. Of course. And the reek blocked his olfactory capability, so he likely would not discover what variety of toxin in time to halt its progress.

Dr Vance was not above sacrificing a hireling or two. They were pawns, and life was cheap on Londinium's underside. For the promise of a shilling, much worse than this murderous diversion had been committed – probably several times over tonight, in the depths of the city. Or even in the past hour.

Clare swore again, dragging the suddenly stiff body towards the tunnel's entrance. He no longer remembered falling off the lip of the adjoining tunnel, splashing into this fetching summer garden of a place with a bone-rattling thump. The rock in his chest squeezed again, his left shoulder complaining as well. Perhaps he had strained it, in the excitement. He had chased the good Doctor from one end of Londinium to the other over the past two days, and at least denied the man his true prize – or so Clare hoped.

"Eh, *mentale*." A flat, queerly accented voice, falling against the thick water without so much as an echo. "You are *loud* tonight."

"Poisoned tooth!" Short of breath and patience, Clare was nevertheless gratified to find the Neapolitan assassin, as usual, did not ask useless questions. Instead, sleek dark Ludovico Valentini splashed into the muck a trifle more gracefully than his employer had, and relieved Clare of the burden of his erstwhile opponent. A different foul reek arose.

The man had voided his bowels. It was, Clare reflected, almost a cleaner stink. Certainly fresher though hardly *better*.

He took in tiny sips of the fœtidness and choked. "Damn the man," he managed. "*Damn* him!"

"Too late!" Ludo was, as usual, infuriatingly cheerful. "He has risen to Heaven, *signore*. Or Hell, who knows?"

"B-bring the b-body." Why were his teeth chattering? And his chest was even tighter, iron bands seizing his ribs. "D-dissection."

Ludo found this funny. At least, he gave a gravelly chuckle. "You are certainly no *Inquisitore*. He hauled the corpse to the entrance, heaving it up with little grace but much efficiency. Then, the assassin splashed back to Clare, who was suddenly much occupied in keeping upright. "*Mentale?*"

How strange. I cannot breathe. Not that I wish to, down here, and yet... "V-v-val—"

He was still seeking to speak Valentini's name when the pain clove his chest and felled him. The thick darkness was full of things no gentleman would wish soiling his cloth, and Clare's busy faculties, starlike, winked out.

Chapter Two

A Duke to Chastise

Inside the stoic, well-bred walls of 34½ Brooke Street, Mayefair, Londinium, a quiet bustle of order and activity was shattered.

“*Strega!*” a familiar voice bellowed, and Emma Bannon, Sorceress Prime, arrived at the bottom of the fan-shaped stairs in a silk-skirted rush. Mikal was there in his tails and snow-white shirt, easing a dead man’s lanky frame to the floor, and the smell hit her.

Dear God, what is this? Her half-unbuttoned dress whispered as she flicked her fingers, cleansing charm rising with a Minor Word and scorching the air of her parquet-floored foyer. Her dark curls, almost-dressed in anticipation of Lady Winslet’s ball, tumbled about her face as she recognised the long, beaky-nosed corpse who, contrary to her expectations, drew in a rattling breath, clutching his left shoulder and jerking his limbs in a decidedly odd fashion.

Next to him, pock-faced and hollow-eyed Ludovico Valentinelli was spattered with effluvium and sweat, well, but she had little time to wrinkle her nose.

Her other Shield, tall dark Eli, arrived at a run. He was further along in the dressing process than Mikal, since both of them were to attend her tonight. Still, his starched shirt was unbuttoned, and his jacket knocked askew.

Clare’s breath rattled. *Angina. It is his heart*, she realised, the spark of life in Archibald Clare’s body guttering like a candleflame in a draughty hall. “Fetch me *crystali digitalia!*” she barked, and Eli leapt to obey, taking the stairs three at a time. Her workroom would admit him, and he knew enough to take care with any experiments in progress – especially the ætherical commisterum. “Ludo, what on earth?” She did not expect him to answer.

“*Strega—*” The Neapolitan was almost beyond words, but Emma was already on her knees. She was barefoot, too – the ball would not start for some while yet, and she had intended to be only *slightly* late. Only fashionably so, as it were.

Later than her night’s quarry. It was always advisable to surprise one’s prey.

Mikal, his yellow irises bright in the foyer’s dimness, spared the Italian a single glance, bracing himself against Clare’s shoulders.

A Major Word took shape on Emma’s lips, sliding free whole and bloody, red sparks of sorcery fountaining. The four plain silver rings on her left hand fluoresced as she pulled stored ætheric force from them, heavy garnet earrings swinging against her cheeks warming and sparking as well. She would, in all eventuality, need the force she was expending later tonight – but just at the moment, she did not care. Her right hand, a large bloody stone in its antique silver setting flashing on the second finger, clamped to Clare’s chest and her senses dilated. She located the source of the distress, feeling about inside his flesh with several nonphysical senses, and determination rose bitter-bright inside her.

Not your time yet, sir. Not while I am here to gainsay it.

The heart, determined muscle that it was, twitched under her ætheric pressure. She forced it into a rhythm that matched her own, exhaling sharply as her concentration narrowed. There was some damage, true, but all in all the organ had carried on gamely.

She was not surprised. He could be provokingly stubborn, her mentath. “The golden orb in the library,” she heard herself say, from very far away. “And three surdipped hawk feathers, Mikal. Bring.”

He did not protest at leaving her alone and distracted with Valentinelli, for once. Which was very

good, because Clare's tired heart began to resist the pressure of her will, and the sorceress was suddenly very occupied in keeping Archibald Clare's blood moving at its required pace. At least her Discipline, Black though it was, gave her sufficient knowledge of the body's processes to keep extinction from Clare's doorstep in *this* instance.

I do hope his faculties have not been damaged. The flow of ætheric energy through her hands intensified, scorch-hot. The mentath, a logic-machine trapped in frail, weary flesh, coughed and convulsed again.

Strange, he looks old now. Perhaps it was merely that his colour was very bad. Then again, he was not a young man. He had been a vigorous thirty-three when she met him, but the years since had kept up their steady wearing away at him, drop by drop.

And Clare was congenitally unable to cease pursuing trouble of the most exotic sort. He was now engaged in a life that would permit much rest, and the wear and tear on his physicality was marked.

A chant rose to her lips, the language of Mending forced to her will – for her Discipline was now of the White branch, and Mending obeyed her only reluctantly. Still, she was Prime, and such designation required a will that brooked very little bridle – and could force even the most reluctant branch of sorcery to its bidding.

A rolling sonorous roil, the entire house suddenly alive with rushing crackles, its population of indentured servants so used to the feel of tremendous sorcery running through its halls they hardly paused in their appointed duties.

Eli arrived, not breathless but with his dark hair disarranged. He measured out two tiny venomous purple crystals of the *digitalia*, dropped them into Clare's fishworking mouth, and clamped the mentath's jaw shut for a few seconds to make certain they would stay in. Then he settled back on his heels, watching the Sorceress Prime's face, alight with crawling golden charter charms screening her flesh as she half sang, her evening dress pulled askew and white shoulders rising from a silver and blue froth of gauze and lace. The charter symbols, ancient runic patterns of Wheel and Plough, Storm and Blossom and others less willing to be named or pronounced, invaded Clare's pasty skin as well, and finally Eli glanced up at the Neapolitan assassin. "Looks as if you've had rather a night of it."

Ludovico shrugged. For once, he did not sneer, perhaps a mark of his agitation. Or perhaps his lips were sealed by the filth coating him, smeared on his face as if he had bathed in a foul-ditch. Under that mask, his colour was very bad indeed – not that his sallow, ratlike features would ever win regard for blooming beauty, indeed. At least the dirt masked the pox scars on his cheeks.

Mikal reappeared, yellow eyes alight as he shouldered his fellow Shield aside. In one hand he held an apricotsized globe of mellow gold; the three feathers, coated with a black tarry substance, shivered in his other. The sorceress, dark gaze full of a terrible blank *presence*, swayed slightly as she chanted. The charter symbols glowed crimson as they ran down her left side, clustering high under the ribs, crawling over the pale slope of one breast like a cupped hand.

A shudder ran through her swelling song, the mentath's filth-caked bootheels drumming the parquet as his body thrashed, and Mikal leaned forward, offering the globe and the feathers.

Who knew what objects would be required for any act of sorcery? It was, by its very definition, an irrational art. Many sorcerers were magpies, since one could not tell what physical item – if any – would be required for a Work. Some Primes sniffed disdainfully and said the best sorcery was unanchored in the physical... but those of a practical bent understood that the ease of a Work moored in an object of reasonable permanence was in most cases a desirable thing.

Sorcery flashed, ætheric energy coalescing into the visible for a brief moment, and Ludovico Valentinelli crossed himself, breathing a foul wondering curse in his native tongue. His pox-pocked face, under its splattering of black matter, was flour-pale.

The globe and feathers were gone, their physical matrices picked apart to provide fuel for the

impossible. The chant relaxed, swimming bloodwarm through air suddenly prickling and vibrating. Clare, his eyelids fluttering, was no longer ashen. A trace of healthy colour crept back into his leaden, lax face.

Easily, softly, the brass syllables wound down from Emma Bannon's lips. She leaned over the mentath, cradling him, and breathed in his face. His body jerked again and the sorceress relaxed slightly, uncurling her mental grip from the repaired clot of fibrous muscle in his chest. One final stanza, her nose wrinkling slightly as the acidity of some drug burned her sensitive palate, and the language of Mending fled her.

She sagged, and the almost-bruising grip on her shoulders was Mikal's hands, fever-hot and hard with callouses. Emma blinked, shutterclicks of dim light stinging her suddenly sensitive eyes, storing away the taste of whatever substance had been running through Clare's blood. *Hmmm. No wonder it has looked rather ragged of late. It tastes dreadful, whatever it is.*

Mikal's face was tense and set.

"He will live." It was a relief to hear her usual brisk tone. For a moment, she had almost been afraid. Had she?

Afraid. And that could not be borne, or shown.

"He will live," she repeated, more firmly. "Now, let us be about clearing up this mess. I have a ball to attend and a duke to chastise."

Lady Winslet's dowry had restored the fortunes of her husband's family, and though she was not taken into quite the highest echelons of Society, her taste and judgement were considered quite reasonable. She had redone a fashionable Portland Place address – one of Naish's, of course – in a manner more befitting her husband's title. Of late she had taken to inviting an astounding mix to her Salon, patronising certain promising members of the Royal Society, and had garnered much praise for her dinners. In a few generations, the Winslets would be very proud indeed to have invited such a petty bourgeois into their hallowed family tree.

If, that is, she managed to produce an heir. Barry St John Duplessis-Archton, Lord Winslet, was a dissipated scoundrel, but he had ceased gambling and now only drank to a religious degree that might preclude fathering said heir. He had a nephew who showed some signs of not being an empty-headed waste of a few fine suit jackets, but, all in all, Emma privately thought the Winslets' chances rather dim.

And no breath of scandal attached itself to Lady Winslet; she did not seem the sort to have a groom provide the necessary materials to make a bastard either. Very sad; had she been just a trifling less extraordinary she would have more chances of success against the ravaging beasts of Society and Expectation.

All of that was academic, however, for Emma had known the Duke of Cailesborough would be at the Winslet ball. One of his current mistresses was attending, and furthermore, Emma herself had carefully planted a breath of rumour that would interest him.

And he had taken the bait whole. Which led to her presence in this forgotten, cramped second-floor storeroom full of discarded bits of off-season furniture and rolled-up, unfashionable carpets. A single candle, stuck in a dusty candelabra probably dating from the time of the Mad King Georget, gave wavering illumination to the scene.

Eli straightened, exhaling sharply. He was not ruffled in the slightest, though there was a slight flush to his cheeks. Perhaps embarrassment, for the quality of Cailesborough's struggle had been quite unexpected.

Said Cailesborough, on the floor, trussed hand and foot and gagged with commendable efficacy with his own sock, glared at Emma with the one blue eye that was not swelling closed.

For a man of the aristocracy, he had put up a rather remarkable tussle.

~~That was immaterial. "Now," she said, softly, "what do we do with you?"~~

She had the dubious honour of addressing a Spaniard, moustachioed and of a small stature inspire a touch of ridicule or pity, his right arm twisted behind him in an exceedingly brutal fashion by a silent and immaculate Mikal, who twisted his lean dark face and spat at her.

There was a creaking sound, and Mikal's other hand clamped at the small Spaniard's nape. "Prima?" The one word was freighted with terrible menace, and had Emma been feeling insulted instead of simply weary, she might have let her Shield do what he wished with the man. Mikal's eyes burned in the dimness, a flame of their own.

Outside the locked door, a hall and the cigar room away, the music swelled. Her absence would not be remarked during the waltz, but perhaps the Duke's would.

They will be missing him a very long time. A greater worry returned, sharp diamond teeth gnawing at the calm she needed to deal with this situation in its proper fashion. *Is Clare well? Resting comfortably, I should hope.*

She put the thought aside. He was as easy as she could make him, and she had other matters to attend to at this moment. Her regard for a mentath was one thing. Her service to Queen and Empire was quite another.

"On the one hand," she continued, suppressing a slightly acid burp – for Lady Winslet's cold supper tonight left a trifle to be desired – and clasping her hands prettily as she sank onto a small, handy-even-if-covered-with-a-dustcloth chair, "you are a diplomatic personage, sir, and Her Majesty's government does believe in observing proper forms. It would be a trifle awkward if a member of the august consulate of that pigeon Isobelias disappeared."

Don Ignacio de la Hoya went almost purple and cursed her in a whisper. He was emphatically not a Carlist, which was interesting indeed. The Spanish embassy had been rather a hotbed of anti-Isobelian sentiments for a long while, the round, benighted, silly Queen of the Spains had never had much of a chance against those who wished her a catspaw. Still, she was nominally in power, and Emma supposed the idea of royalty and majesty might have held a certain attraction for some of her subjects. Especially if they were as ill-favoured and ratlike as this specimen.

His throat had been almost crushed by Mikal's iron fingers, and now, the sharp stink of feathers poured from him in waves.

The dustcloth would perhaps taint this dress. She should not have sat, and she was taking far too long over this part of the matter. Still, Emma tilted her head slightly and regarded the man. Don Ignacio writhed in Mikal's grip, and it would be merely a matter of time before he collected himself enough to raise a cry, bruised throat or no.

There was little chance of him being heard over the merriment and music, but why take the risk?

He stared at her, and the sudden spreading wetness at his crotch – it was a shame, his trouseaux were of fine cloth – sent a spike of useless revulsion through her. Champagne and terror were a bad mixture, and this man was no ambassador. He was a low-level consulate official, despite his *Don*; but she supposed, even a petty bureaucrat could dream of treason.

"Did you truly think you could plan to murder a queen and go unnoticed?" She sounded amused even to herself. Reflective, and terribly calm. "Especially in such lackadaisical fashion? The weapons you brought for the planned insurrection will be most useful elsewhere, I suppose, so we may thank you for that. And *that* baggage..." She indicated the prostrate, struggling Duke with a tiny motion of her head, and Eli, well used by now to this manner of situation, sank a kick into Cailesborough's middle. He had not yet gone to fat, the Duke, but he was still softer than Eli's boot. "... well, he has some small value for us now. But you? I do not think you have much to offer."

Don Ignacio de la Hoya began to babble in a throaty whisper, but he told Emma nothing she did

not already know of the plot. He had very little else to give, and fear would only make him too stupid for proper use. ~~His replacement in the consulate was likely to be just as idiotic, but vastly less troublesome.~~

His heart, she found herself thinking. *What manner of substance was he using? The damage was much more than it should have been; thirty-five does not make a man old. Merely lucky, and somewhat better-fed than the rest.*

She brought herself back to the present with an invisible effort. Mikal read the change in her expression, and the greenstick crack of a neck breaking was very loud in the hushed room. The candle on the table guttered, but the charm in its wax kept the flame alive.

On the floor, the Duke moaned, his eyes rolling. He was to be delivered to the Tower whole and reasonably undamaged. For a bare moment Emma Bannon, Sorceress Prime in service to Queen and Empire, contemplated crushing the life out of him by sorcery alone. It would be messy, true, but also satisfying, and Queen Victrix would never have to fear this caged beast's resurgence. He had chosen ill in the manner of accomplices, but he was capable of learning from such a mistake.

The decision is not yours, sorceress, she told herself again. Cailesborough had been one of the few allowed near Alexandrina Victrix when she had been merely heir presumptive under the stifling close control of the Duchess of Kent; of course he had not been a marriage prospect but he had no doubt been amenable to extending the Duchess's sway over her soon-to-be-crowned daughter. The old King's living until Victrix's majority had cheated the Duchess of a regency, and no doubt Victrix had cheated Cailesborough of some prize of position or ambition. Still, the Queen appeared to wish him dealt with leniently.

If the Tower could be called *lenient*.

De la Hoya's body hit a rolled up, unfashionable carpet with a thump, raising a small cloud of dust. Mikal glanced at her. "Prima?" Did he look concerned?

It had taken far more sorcerous force than she liked to lure them both to this room and to spring her trap. And the worry returned, sharper than ever. Clare was not a young man, and he seemed inclined, if not flatly determined, to do himself an injury.

"Bring the body, and the Duke." Londinium's fog was thick tonight, and it would cover a manner of actions. "The window is behind those dreadful curtains – and *do* make certain the Duke lands gently. Lady Winslet's gardens need no damage." She stood, a slight crackling as her fingers flicked and a cleansing charm shook dust free of her skirts. The silver shoes with their high arches and spangled laces were lovely, but they pinched abominably, and her corset squeezed as well. *I would much rather have been at home tonight. How boring I've grown.*

"I'll fetch the carriage." Mikal paused, if she wished to tell him where they were bound. It was Shield's courtesy, and a welcome one.

"We shall take both unfortunates to the Tower." *Though the body will go no further than the moat. The Dweller should be pleased with that.*

Eli bent and made a slight sound as he managed the Duke's bulky, fear-stiffened form. Mikal simply stood for a moment, watching her closely. She took back the mask of her usual expression, straightened her shoulders and promised herself a dash of rum once she returned to her humble abode.

And still, the worry taunted her.

Something must be done about Clare.

Chapter Three

Grief Is Unavoidable

Dark wainscoting, large graceful shelves crammed with books and periodicals, including an entire set of the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – Miss Bannon’s servants were, as even the most discerning could tell, extraordinarily *thorough* – and the heavy oak armoire full of linens charm-measured exactly to Clare’s frame. The rest of the room was comfortably shabby, rich red velvet rubbed down to the nub and the tables scattered with papers left precisely where he had placed them the last time he had availed himself of Miss Bannon’s hospitality.

The oddity was the chair set by his bedside, and the sorceress within it, her slightness cupped in heavy ebony arms and her curling dark hair slightly mussed as she leaned against the high hard back, sound asleep, dressed in silver and blue finery fit to attend a Court presentation. Her childlike face, without her waking character to lend authority to the soft features, was slack with utter exhaustion.

Of no more than middle height, and slight as well, it was always a surprise to see just how small she truly was. One tended to forget as the force of her presence filled a room to bursting.

The other oddity stood at his chamber door, a tall man with tidy dark hair, an olive-green velvet jacket and curious boots, his irises glowing yellow in the dimness. The smell of paper, clean sheets, faint ghost of tabac smoke, and the persistent creeping breath of Londinium’s yellow fog alone would have told Clare he was in the room Miss Bannon kept for his visits.

Which had been rather less often than he liked, of late. The sorceress’s company could not be called restful, precisely, but all the same Clare found it rather relaxing to have at least one person with whom he could feel a certain... informality?

Was *comfort* the more precise term?

The Shield, Mikal, did not stir. His yellow gaze rested upon Clare with distressing penetration.

Lucid. But very weak. He tested his body’s responses, gingerly. They obeyed, grudging him as if he were an invalid. Fingers like sausages, toes swollen but movable, his chest sore as if a giant clawed hand had rummaged through the inside of his ribcage and left a jumbled mess behind.

Now for the important part. His eyes half-lidded, and he performed the curious mental doubling of a mentath. A set of mental chalkboards rose before his consciousness, and he began with the simplest exercises he had learned at Yton when his talent had truly begun to manifest itself. Mental ability came to the fore during late childhood, scholarships were quite generous for any who showed considerable promise.

Said scholarships, however, were contingent upon that promise being fulfilled.

A quarter of an hour later, loose with relief but sweating from the mental effort, Clare let out a long, shaky sigh. His faculties were unharmed.

Miss Bannon, perhaps disturbed by the slight sound, shifted in the chair and fell back into slumber. Clare now had the opportunity to study her while she was deeply asleep, and it was so novel an experience he rather wished he had not been forced to forgo a portion of that time to making certain whatever had happened to him had not destroyed his capacities.

You are avoiding, Clare. It was angina pectoris. Rather severe, too.

Mikal’s eyes had half-closed as well. The Shield leaned against the door, and he was perhaps almost asleep. Did he think Clare a threat to the sorceress?

She did rather manage to accomplish a fair amount of vexation. Especially to Britannia.

enemies. And she did so with a disregard for her own safety likely to give the Shield, tasked with maintaining said safety, a bit of nervousness.

However, it was far more likely that Mikal was unwilling to let Miss Bannon out of his sight for... *other* reasons. Quite personal considerations, one could say.

The question of Mikal had occupied Clare most handsomely at one time or another. Since the affair that had brought the mentath into the sorceress's circle – not that Miss Bannon had anything so social as a *circle*, it was rather the circle of her regard, which frankly interested Clare more – he had added tiny nuggets of information to the deductive chain Mikal represented.

Your heart, Clare. Do not become distracted.

He was clean, and in a bed which linens smelled of fresh laundering. The last event he remembered was the darkness of the sewers swallowing him whole. Slightly irritated, he shifted in the mattress's familiar embrace. How had he arrived here, of all places?

The answer was stupidly simple. Valentinelli, of course. Where else would the Neapolitan bring him? The man was as fascinated by Miss Bannon as Mikal was.

Or as you are. You are seeking to distract yourself from a very important chain of deduction. Angina pectoris. A severe attack. You could have died.

Yet here he lay, clean and safe. At least, it would take a great deal of unpleasantness before the house became unsafe.

Miss Bannon no doubt performed some illogical miracle, and is sleeping at your bedside. In the dress, she was no doubt a-hunting in Society for a traitor, turncoat, criminal, or merely one who intrigued too openly against Queen Victrix. Yet here she sleeps, and you are... comforted? Troubled?

The problem, he reflected, was that Emotion was insidious, and an enemy of Logic.

Item one: he had lost Dr Vance. Again.

Item two: the more-than-mild chest pains during the hunt for the blasted art professor were unequivocally symptoms of a much larger quandary.

Item three: Miss Bannon, breathing softly as she slumped in an uncomfortable-looking chair. She took very little care with her person, and it was not quite right for Clare to put her to such worry. She was not worthy of the regard he held for her, as well.

He had no family; his parents were safe in churchyard beds, and his siblings had not survived childhood. But had he been one of those blessed with surviving kin, Clare supposed he would have felt for them much the same way he felt for Miss Bannon. A rather brotherly affection, tinged with a great deal of... what was it? Worry?

He might as well worry about a typhoon, or hourricane. Miss Bannon was eminently capable... but she was also strangely fragile, being female, and Clare was not behaving as a gentleman by putting her to such bother.

You are being maudlin. Emotion is the enemy of Reason, and you are still distracting yourself. Had he not been a mentath, Clare might have been tempted to stifle a groan. As it was, he merely swallowed the offending noise and set himself to exercise his reason, since his faculties appeared undamaged.

"Clare."

He almost started, but it was only Mikal, breathing the single word from his place at the door. The gleam of his irises was absent; the foreign man – for Clare had deduced he was, in fact, of the blood of the Indus, even if he had been born on Englene's shores – had closed his eyes.

"Yes?" Clare whispered.

"You could have died."

I am not an idiot, sir. "Yes."

"My Prima greatly weakened herself to avert such an event."

Obviously. “I am most grateful.”

~~Emma Bannon stirred again, and both Shield and mentath held their peace for a short while.~~

When she subsided, sliding sideways to end propped against one side of the chair like a sleepy child during a Churchtide evening, Mikal let out another soft breath. His words took shape inside the exhalation.

“She is... fond of you.”

Oh? “Only a little, I’m sure.” Clare shifted uncomfortably. Such swimming weakness wore on him; stillness was remarkably painful after a while. “Sir—”

“She is fond of very few.”

“That I can believe.”

Mikal arrived at the warning Clare had already inferred was his intention. “Do not cause her grief, mentath.”

I am a fleshly being in a dangerous world. Grief is unavoidable. His answering whisper was as stiff as his protesting back. “I shall do my best, sir.” Had he not just been reminded of his own perishability, in the most alarming way possible? And further reminded that he was not being quite correct in his treatment of his... friend?

Yes, Miss Bannon was a friend. It was rather like forming an acquaintance with a large, not quite-tamed carnivore. Sorcery made for powerful irrationality, no matter how practical Emma Bannon was as a matter of course.

The Shield fell silent again, even the glimmers of his yellow irises quenched, and Clare lay in the dimness, studying one of Emma Bannon’s small soft slumber-loosened hands, until fresh unconsciousness claimed him.

Chapter Four

Breakfast and Loneliness

The Delft-and-cream breakfast room was flooded with pearly, rainy Londinium morning light, translucent charm spheres over the ferns singing their soft crystalline lullabies. White wicker furniture glowed, and the entire house purred like a cat, content to have its mistress at home and the servants quietly busy at their various tasks.

“You could have sent me a penny-post,” Emma remarked mildly enough, her hand steady as she poured a fresh cup of tea. “Or worn the Bocannon I gave you.” Her back protested – sleeping corset and slumped in one of the most uncomfortable chairs her house possessed was *not* likely to give her a happy mood upon awakening. She had chosen the chair deliberately, thinking its discomforts might stave off the resultant exhaustion of a night of hunting through the glittering whirl of a ball, waiting for her quarry to slip.

There was one duke fewer in Londinium this morning, and one more traitor in the Tower to be judged and beheaded as befitted a nobleman. The evidence was damning, and Emma knew even a particle of it. Should Cailesborough somehow bribe his way free...

... well, there was a reason the Queen called on one such as herself to tidy loose ends, was there not?

Tidiness was one of Emma Bannon’s specialities. It was, she often reflected, one of the few assets a childhood spent in a slum could grant one.

“I suspected you were rather busy yourself, Miss Bannon.” Archibald Clare’s lean mournful face was alarmingly pale. He accepted the cup, and there was no tremor in his capable, large-knuckled hands. “It seemed a trifle.”

Oh, yes, Dr Vance, a “trifle”. Very well. “No doubt it was.” She poured her own cup, keeping her gaze on the amber liquid. “Did you discover what the trifle was after?”

“A certain artefact of Ægyptian provenance.” Clare shifted, fretting at the rug over his bony knees. He was alarmingly gaunt.

Of course, he had not been a guest at her table as frequently as had been his wont, these last few months. She would have half suspected his friendship had cooled, had she not known of his obsession with Vance. “Hm.” She decided the noncommittal noise was not enough of an answer. “Clare, if you do not wish to tell me, that is all very well. But do not oblige me to drag the admission from you by force. Simply note it is not my affair, and we shall turn to other subjects.”

“Such is not the case at all.” He shifted again. “I thought it would bore you. Your feelings on Dr Vance are known to me.”

“My feelings, as you so delicately put it, are simply that you spend altogether too much time brooding over the man. Rather as a swain moons over his beloved.” She set her cup down, delicately speared another banger with a dainty silver fork. Fortunately, her physical reserves were a fairly simple matter to replenish, and Tideturn’s golden flood of ætheric energy had flushed her – and her jewellery – with usable sorcerous force. Any remaining exhaustion could be pushed aside, for the moment.

Clare’s silence informed her she had hit a nerve. For a mentath driven by logic, he certainly was tender-skinned sometimes. A misting of fine rain beaded the windows, the droplets murmuring in their own peculiar Language as they steamed against golden charter charms.

“This artefact would not happen to be the Eye of Bhestet, would it?” She cut with a decided

motion, her spine absolutely straight. *Tiny bites, as a lady should.* The ghost of a wasp-waisted Magistra Prima at the Collegia walked decorously through her memory: a familiar song of black watered-silk skirts.

Prima Grinaud had been a harsh teacher, but a consistent and ruthlessly judicious one. There was much to emulate in the woman, even if her cruelty was legendary among the Collegia's children. Primes were notoriously long-lived, but Grinaud seemed to be kept on this side of the great curtain. Being by sheer wormwood and gall.

Clare's silence deepened. He did look rather ill, she decided, glancing in his direction just briefly enough to ascertain this. *Perhaps I should not tell him.* Perhaps, instead, she could enquire as to the odd substance he had been dosing himself with? It had not tasted healthful at all.

He finally spoke. "Stolen. Of course. He must have given me the slip in Thrushneedle. Blood hell."

"It was in the broadsheets this morning." And yes, she definitely regretted telling him. "The Museum is most embarrassed. Speculation is rampant as to the culprit. I am... sorry, Clare. If you like—"

"He is a *mentath*, Miss Bannon." Frosty, and polite, a tone he rarely used. He was pale, his eyes glittering harshly. The rug over his knees creased itself as he fidgeted precisely once. "Illogic and sorcery are not applicable tools to catch him."

Well, you've been doing a fine job of it with your vaunted deductions. She occupied herself with another nibble of banger. Greasy, satisfying, hot, delicious. Just what it should be. When she was certain she had a firm hold on her temper, she spoke. "Perhaps not. More toast? Cook remembers your fondness for kippers as well."

But Clare was staring morosely into his teacup. "So close," he mumbled. "And... ah, yes. Definitely in Thrushneedle. He was only out of sight for a moment, damn him. Even Ludo—"

"Yes, Ludovico." Irritation made her own manner sharper than she liked. "I told him to take great care with you, and *this* is what happens. You could have died, sir, and that would distress me most profoundly."

There. It was said. The entire breakfast room rang with uncomfortable silence. She speared another tiny piece of sausage with quite unaccustomed viciousness.

"I do not mean to be the source of distress." He still stared into his teacup as if he would find Vance's whereabouts in its depths. "I simply—"

"The man is not a danger to the Crown." She did her best to utter it as a simple statement of fact. "He is a thief. A passing-good one, a *mentath* who uses his talents for vice, but in the end, merely a thief. He is *not* worth such attention, Clare. Her Majesty would prefer your consideration turned elsewhere. You are, after all, one of the Queen's Own." She eyed the glittering ring on her second left finger, a delicate confection of marcasite and silver, ætheric force thrumming in its depths visible to Sight. "There are other matters to be attended to."

"I should simply let him go, after he has thumbed his nose at—"

"Clare."

"He stole from the Museum—"

"Clare."

"Damn it, the man is a menace to—"

"*Archibald.*"

He subsided. Emma found her appetite gone. She set her implements down and fixed him with a glare he might have found quelling had he not still been staring into his teacup. *Oh, for God's sake.*

"I would take it as a kindness," she informed him, stiffly, "if you would convalesce here. Ludovico was sent this morning to gather such of your effects – and such things pertaining to the case."

you have been neglecting while you chase your art professor – as are necessary for your comfort during such an extended stay.” She restrained herself from further lecture with a marked effort of will.

“I suppose the servants have been informed of my tender condition.” He even managed to wheedle a little.

And furthermore informed that you are not to stir one step outside this house unless it is under my care and my express orders. “You suppose correctly. You have been fretting yourself absolutely dreadfully over this Vance character, Archibald. Pray do not force me to immure you in your room like Lady Chandevault.”

He finally looked directly at her, blinking owlishly, looking more mournful and basset-hounded than ever. “Who? Oh, that. Miss Bannon – *Emma*. There is no need for concern. It was merely angina, which is common enough. I am not so young, and certain—”

Was she the only one to notice the lines at the corners of his mouth, the bleariness of his blue gaze? And the terrible fragility of him, hunched in a chair with the laprobe tucked carefully about him? Emma opened her mouth to take him to task and turn the conversation to what manner of substance he had been dosing himself with, but was interrupted by the door opening without so much as a polite knock to warn the room’s occupants.

It was Mikal, his dark hair slightly disarranged and his coat somewhat askew. He must have been at a Shield’s morning practice, for Eli was hard on his heels. “An envelope, Prima.” Mikal’s mouth was a thin line. “From the Palace.”

“Ah.” *So soon?* But treachery did not wait for mannerly visiting hours, she reminded herself. “Some fresh crisis, no doubt. Archibald, finish your breakfast. It seems there are other matters for me to attend to.”

He looked strangely stricken, and sought to rise as she did. She waved him back down. “No, no. Please, do not. Concentrate on your recovery, or I shall be not only vexed but downright peeved with you. A fate worse than death, I’m sure.” Her sally only received the faintest of smiles, but she had no time to remark upon his sudden high colour and the steely glint in his tired, bloodshot blue eyes.

For the envelope Mikal deposited in her hands bore a familiar hand on its front, and the seal was heavy and waxen – was Victrix’s personal device.

The Queen called, and her faithful servant hurried to obey, leaving the mentath to breakfast and her loneliness.

Chapter Five

With No One to Scold

Shut me up like a child, will you? Clare's pipe puffed fragrant tabac-smoke, furiously. He glowered at the grate, unable to enjoy the comforts of a charming, familiar Mayefair room. *There are other matters for you to attend to. More important ones, surely.*

He was, perhaps, being ridiculous.

Perhaps? No. You are definitely being ridiculous.

It did not sting so much that Miss Bannon had taken him to task. What pinched was that she was *correct* in doing so. He had been rather lax when it came to his duty to the Queen.

But Vance was such a damn nuisance. And it was *twice* now that Clare had been outplayed rather badly by the man. It most certainly did not help that there was no earthly reason why the sodding brute would want the statue of Bhestet, carved from a single priceless blue gem. It was more of a gauntlet, a game, than an actual theft.

A game Clare had lost; a gauntlet he had not returned.

His pipe-puffing slowed, turned meditative. Tabac smoke rose in a grey veil, and near the ceiling it crackled, a charm activating to shape it into a globe of compressed mist, whisking it towards the fireplace and up the chimney. That was new, and he could almost see Miss Bannon's pleased expression when he mentioned that such a thing was dashed illogical but useful enough.

What was Vance, to him? Clare was one of the Queen's Own mentaths, his registration secure and his retirement assured by pension, since he had rendered such signal services during a few affairs of interest to the Crown. The first had, of course, been the most strenuous. And no few of the following affairs had involved Miss Bannon as well. They were rather an effective pair of operatives, Clare had to admit. Miss Bannon was very... logical, for a sorceress. Her capacity was admirable, her ruthlessness and loyalty both quite extraordinary, especially for a woman. Clare had his career, and Miss Bannon's regard, and his own not-inconsiderable list of achievements. What did Vance have? A chair at a university he had been hounded from, a dead wife and a respectable career gone...

... a criminal empire, and the Eye of Bhestet, now. And the satisfaction of winning.

Clare puffed even more slowly. Perhaps he should take a fraction of coja while he meditated upon the question of Dr Vance and his own response to the man?

At that precise moment, however, there was a token knock at the door, and Valentinelli slunk in with his pox-scarred face a thundercloud. He carried two Gladstones, and behind him trooped the cadaverous Finch supervising two footmen and a charm-cart carrying a brace of trunks.

Horace, and Gilburn. Clare found their names and the mental drawers holding their particulars with no difficulty. Like all Miss Bannon's servants, they had their peculiarities. Horace was missing half the smallest finger on his left hand, and Gilburn's slow, stately pace was less the result of decorum than of his Altered left leg – everything below the knee was gone, due to an accident Clare had not quite gained the details of yet, replaced with a tibia and fibula of slender dark metal chased with pain-suppressant and oiling charms; the limb terminated in a clockwork foot that was a marvel of delicate architecture. Miss Bannon had remarked once that she had contracted especially for the Alteration, since Gilburn had received great injury in her service, and the man had blushed, ducking his head like a schoolboy. For all that, he was quiet and well-oiled, and Horace often tucked his mutilated finger away or wore a glove with padding to hide it.

The more Clare saw of Miss Bannon's servants, the more he suspected quite a tender heart behind

the sorceress's fearsome ruthlessness. Or perhaps Miss Bannon knew that there was no gratitude quite like that of a disfigured servant given back his or her pride and held to high expectations performance.

And no loyalty like that of an outcast given a home.

It was a testament to the complexity of the sorceress's character that Clare could not quite decide which or what combination of considerations led to her policy.

"Eh, *mentale*." Ludovico dropped both heavy leather bags near the fireplace. "Where you want the trunks?"

"I am certain wherever those excellent fellows choose to set them will be *quite* proper." Clare made a small movement with his still fuming pipe. "Did you bring my alembics?"

"Am I your *donna di servizio*? Pah!" The Neapolitan made as if to spit, but visibly considered it better of it. "Baerbarth will bring *those*. He is still packing."

Dear God. "I do not intend to abuse Miss Bannon's hospitality to such a degree—"

"Oh, what *you* intend and what *la strega* intend, they are not the same." Ludo waved one dusky calloused hand. "I have letters, too." He toed one of the Gladstones and crouched to unbuckle it, keeping a wary eye on the two footmen. "Many, many letters."

Clare suppressed a groan.

"Will you be needing these unpacked, sir?" Gilburn said, laboriously seeking to disguise his heavy Dorset accent.

"Yes *indeed*." Valentinelli snorted. "I am not unpacking, and he is weak as kitten."

"For God's sake, I'm not an invalid!" Clare prepared himself to take issue with this treatment.

"Do you rise from that chair, sir, I shall make certain you reoccupy it just as swiftly." It was Clare's least favourite of Valentinelli's voices, the crisp consonants and upper-crust drawl of a bore Exfall student. The Neapolitan often employed such an accent when he felt Clare to be behaving ridiculously in some manner. "For the time being, we are abusing Miss Bannon's hospitality roundly. His tone changed a fraction as he dove into one of the Gladstones. "I thought we lost you last night *mentale*."

"It was merely a trifle, my good man. Merely a bit of chest pain—"

"You make a bad liar, sir." Valentinelli nodded as the footmen began unbuckling the trunks. "Here, I bring your post to your chair, as good valet should."

I do not need any damn letters or a thrice-damned Neapolitan valet. What I need is to catch Vance and put him in the bloody dock, and for you and Miss Bannon to cease this ridiculousness. Still duty called, and Clare's legs were decidedly unsteady. It was, he had to admit, a relief to have some of his effects brought to him. Except for the galling fact of Dr Vance's escape, a stay at 34½ Brook Street did sound quite pleasant. Tonic, even.

But being treated like a child was insufferable. He sank into silence, even the soothing tobacco smoke overpowered by quite reasonable irritation.

"Here." Valentinelli brought the lapdesk, a cunningly constructed item of wood inlaid with hammered brass. A fat sheaf of paper – envelopes, with varying handwriting, all addressed to Mr Archibald Clare, Esq. – landed atop it, and Valentinelli busied himself with exchanging the bowl of pipe ash at Clare's elbow with a fresh cut-crystal tray, then scooping up a pen, ivory letter opener, and a silver-chased ink bottle from the massive table in the centre of the apartment. "You are like *suocera* with none to scold."

Clare could have cheerfully cursed at him, and perhaps would have, had they been at his own address. His landlady, the redoubtable Mrs Ginn, did not like Valentinelli, and Clare wondered what she thought of this turn of events.

With a sigh, he turned himself to the first envelope. It was addressed from Lancashire, the

handwriting female and gently bred, even if the ink was cheap. Impoverished gentry, probably seeking to
~~some guess as to the whereabouts of a missing husband.~~

There were precious few surprises in any piece of mail he opened, and his faculties rebelled at the
slow rot triggered by want of proper use. That was half the trouble – Vance and his exploits were, at the
least, *interesting*.

Another heavy sigh, and Clare opened the envelope. *Duty. Ever duty.*

Perhaps Miss Bannon's responsibilities weighed as onerously as his, but she certainly never
seemed *bored*.

Dear Sir, I am writing to you in great distress... my husband Thomas has disappeared and...

Another deep, tabac-scented, involuntary sigh, and Clare set to work.

Chapter Six

One of Our Own

It was an occasion of little pomp, but great publicity. “You may approach.” Alexandrina Victrix, Britannia’s chosen vessel, ruler of the Isles and Empress of Indus, sat straight-backed on her gem-laden throne, the Stone of Scorn underneath one leg glowing soft silver. The hexagonal Throne Room, with its vast glass ceiling full of rainy Londinium mornlight, was nevertheless full of shadowed corners behind and between marble columns, and in one such corner was a deeper shadow.

Emma held the glamour soft and still, though an alert observer would catch any movement she made, or perhaps a gleam from her jewellery. True invisibility was difficult and painfully draining, but simply blending into shadow was so easy as to be childishly entertaining. Mikal was a soft, breathing warmth at her back, and Eli would be in the gallery above, moving silent as a fish in deep water.

He hunted best while drifting.

The Queen’s dark hair frothed in ringlets near her ears, the back put up as a married woman should be, and her soft face blurred like clay under running water. Her eyes had turned infinitely dark, tiny speckles of starlight in their depths as the ruling spirit of the Isle woke slightly and peered out from its vessel. The Queen’s youthful figure had thickened, pregnancy swelling the outline of the gown Emma Bannon had sworn service to.

That oath was private and unspoken, and Emma was of the secret opinion that Britannia, ageless and wise as She was, did not quite comprehend the nature of the sorceress’s commitment.

Perhaps it was for the best. What queen would wish to know of the depths of service one born to the gutters could sink to?

Alberich, Prince and Consort, stood to the Queen’s right, instead of using the smaller chair he was wont to occupy during interminable receptions or state business. The Consort, an aristocrat of Saxon-Kolbe, was a fine figure of a man with a lovely moustache and a dashing mien in the uniform he affected, but he took a dim view of sorcery in general and his influence upon Victrix, while of the moderating variety, was also... uncertain.

He, Emma thought, as she did every time she glimpsed him, bears watching.

There were few of the elect in the Throne Room for this event, but at least two of them were: Constance, Lady Ripley (christened “Constant, Lady Gossip” by the broad-sheets) and the red-jacketed, portly Earl of Dornant-Burgh – could be counted to carry tales. That was their function, and Emma’s shoulders were cable-tight under blue satin.

There, approaching the throne in a wide-sweeping formal dress of rose-coloured silk, was the reason for this concern: the Queen’s formidable mother, the Duchess of Kent.

She was still a handsome woman, though growing much stouter as the years passed. An examination of her aquiline but pleasing face with its open, frank expression would lead one to believe her of a light and frivolous disposition, if one was extraordinarily stupid. There were plenty who ascribed to the view that the Duchess had been easily led by her comptroller Conroy into keeping Victrix under a stifling System of rules and etiquette that not so incidentally never allowed her contact with those her mother deemed unsuitable; others thought the Duchess’s raising of the princess and her later heir-presumptive merely suffered from a mother’s natural but overly indulged desire to shield her child from all harm, real or imagined.

The truth perhaps lay somewhere between the two, on an island of ambition shrouded with syru

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