

**It Takes a Thief
to Catch a Sunrise
by
Rob J. Hayes**

Chapter 1 – One Last Job

“Duc Valette is the key.”

“The younger one?” Isabel asked.

“Mhm,” Jacques agreed. “I suppose we could use the older Valette, but he is married and well known to be an unrepentant leech.”

Isabel gave him a withering look. “I would really rather not have a repeat of the Bonneire incident. Thanks to your, shall we say, less than perfect research, I had to hit Baron Bonneire over the head with a candlestick.”

“But at least when he woke he couldn’t even remember you had been there.”

Isabel sighed. In the face of Jacques’ unwavering good humour and optimism she found it very hard to stay angry at him and the Bonneire incident was well and truly water under the bridge. “So Valette the younger,” she prompted.

“Quite,” Jacques continued, “The Comte de Çavine Bruno Lesod Valette; heir to the entire Valette estate. He’s young and handsome with a chiselled jaw and a full head of hair, though if his father is any indication, he may be losing that soon. Comte Bruno is an accomplished horseman, a deadly swordsman, and a gifted pistolier. He has almost as many medals as he has trophies in the

fields of rowing, wrestling and that new sport from Great Turlain, the one with the rackets and the balls.”

“Tennis?”

“Mhm, probably. But for all Bruno Valette’s feats, accomplishments and worrying ability with all manner of dangerous weaponry, he has one vital flaw. His chivalry,” Jacques said with a grin.

“Some people might think chivalry to be a strength, not a flaw,” Isabel said.

“Not us though.”

She grinned. “Maker no. The chivalrous ones make for the easiest of marks. Although they don’t tend to get hit over the head with candlesticks quite so much.

“So all I need to do is make sure I’m in some kind of trouble and Comte Bruno, being the chivalrous gentleman that he is, will rush to my rescue.”

Jacques nodded. “You’re thinking of the ‘drunken lady unable to remember whom she came with’ approach.”

“It works with chivalrous fools and latches alike,” Isabel agreed. “Though with a considerable less feature of violence with the former and, if Comte Bruno is as formidable as you described I would rather not attempt to overpower him.”

Isabel slipped into the ballroom from one of the side doors that led from the pantry and smoothed down a wrinkle in her dress. An unfortunate side effect of not actually being a part of the aristocracy, or even the minor peerage, was that neither she nor Jacques received invitations to affairs such as the Valette Winter Solstice Ball. However, a lack of invitation had never stopped them from attending and subsequently using the cover of such events to further their own fortunes.

She took a moment to absorb the sights, sounds and smells of the ball. A low, open fire burned at the far end of the hall radiating warmth and light; none of the aristocracy in the more central areas of the kingdom used open fires any more preferring instead to use electrically charged

alchemical fires, but here on the outskirts people were known to be a little more old-fashioned and the Valettes certainly had enough money to be as old-fashioned as they liked. No fewer than four chandeliers hung from the ceiling each with a hundred candles, again an old-fashioned practice but Isabel had to respect the elegance and beauty and danger of four hundred tiny flames burning above the people gathered below; after all who didn't enjoy being showered in molten hot wax from time to time.

The walls of the ball room were a bright, newly-painted white with a host of decorative pillars and an equal number of alchemically treated windows that people could see out from but not in to; an expensive and modern procedure that seemed at odds with the use of real fires.

Two wide staircases led up to either end of a balcony that looked over the hall and a further single staircase led to a second more secluded balcony. Isabel knew that the second balcony would be for Valette family members and favoured (and invited) guests only. Comte Bruno Valette may even be up there right now, she would have to catch him as he toured the lower sections, but for their ruse to succeed she would need to wait a few hours yet. A drunken woman at the end of the night might beg assistance, that same drunken woman so early in the night would be considered unseemly and rude.

Men gathered together in small groups, those allied by family ties or business relationships, and women gathered in equally small groups allied by social standing and current popularity. This would be both the hardest trial of the night and where her ruse was most likely to be broken. She would need to insert herself into one of the groups without rousing too much suspicion or irking any of the other women.

Fashions changed amongst the aristocracy as often as the direction of the wind and here, in the city of Çavine, they were a little behind the times. Most of the women wore brightly coloured dresses with a multitude of patterned frills on the skirt. The dresses stretched all the way down to the floor to hide the women's feet and were completely sleeveless by design allowing them to be

worn with long sleeved gloves that ran almost to the elbow. They were, Isabel decided, hideous and she was, in Çavine at least, ahead of the current fashion trend which put her distinctly out of fashion.

“What else do I need to know about him?” Isabel asked in a voice loud enough to carry through the closed door as she smoothed down the dress and picked off a long brown stray hair; one of hers, Jacques’ hair was much shorter and a dark mahogany colour that resisted almost all attempts to dye it.

“Well the local gossip has him liking demure women prone to over-ambitious flattery,” Jacques replied in an equally loud voice. Isabel spotted the door opening and shut it before he could peek in. “Spoil sport.”

“I’m not wearing anything yet, Jacques,” she said. “If you come in now we both know how it will end.”

“Rather pleasantly, I imagine.”

“Yes but not very productively.”

“I suppose that’s all in how you define productive.”

“Very differently to your definition.” She pulled her attention back to the dress. It was sleek and light, designed to hug her curves and accentuate her bosom. It was a deep blue colour, very similar to her eyes and perfect for her dark complexion. It ran from her neck down to her ankles and all along her arms before finally looping around each middle finger. It was the very height of fashion in the capital.

“So I should complement him on his physique, flatter his ego, and laugh at all of his jokes,” she said.

“Precisely,” Jacques replied from the other side of the door. “He suffers from that same problem that most hideously successful people do, he’s very proud of his success.”

“Emphasis on his success and not his family’s?”

“Mhm, I would say that would be the safe bet,” Jacques said before quickly adding. “Not that I ever bet.”

“Of course you don’t.”

“It’s not a bet if it’s a sure thing.”

“Considering our line of work I think you would well know, there’s no such thing as a sure thing.”

Isabel heard him sigh from the other side of the door. “You are, of course, correct though I wish you weren’t.”

While they had been talking Isabel had been skilfully applying makeup and dabbing herself with perfume, a lavender fragrance enhanced and altered alchemically to be both pleasant and discreet. Now she slipped into the dress and tugged it into position before smoothing it down. It would be a chore to walk in like this, but it would be worth it towards the end of the night. She looked at herself in the mirror, affected a playful half-smile and opened the door.

Jacques’ mouth dropped. “You look...” he said accidentally dropping his upper-class accent.

“Could it be Jacques Revou is actually at a loss for words?” Isabel asked not dropping her smile.

He cleared his throat and re-established his accent. “Well if anyone could conjure such an effect it would be you, my lady.”

It was abject flattery and she knew it but that wasn’t to say she didn’t enjoy it. Isabel knew she would never be the most beautiful woman in the world, and the majority of the time neither would she be the most beautiful woman in a room, but he had always treated her as if there were no other worth his time.

“I think...” Jacques began with a frown and then clicked his fingers, reaching into the jewellery box on the table and pulling out a single jade earring and carefully attaching it to Isabel’s

right ear. "Perfect," he finished.

Some might think attempting to climb a thirty feet tall wall, on a brightly moonlit night, wearing an expensive suit made from the finest material and bordering on the height of fashion; well some might consider such a thing as insanity. Jacques had almost certainly been accused of far worse than a lack of sanity in his time and he was just as certain at least some of those accusations were true. Today though he was without a doubt in his right mind. Climbing the wall was not a lapse in judgement, it was part of a well-constructed plan and, unfortunately for him, it was completely necessary. While Isabel would be doing the majority of the job alone this time she was not able to sneak in the tools she would need, nor would she be able to extricate herself from the area afterwards without his help.

He reached up with his right hand and fumbled for a hand-hold. After a few seconds of scrabbling he managed to dig his gloved fingers into a slight nook and continued his climb.

The worst thing about free climbing was not, as most people who did such things would no doubt attest, the fear of falling. While it was true that Jacques was currently a good twenty feet up with nothing but solid stone cobbles below him and no safety harness to prevent an untimely demise, and it was also true that glancing downwards would bring on a sudden wave of vertigo, neither of those two factors were the worst thing about free climbing. Jacques had an itch. Actually he had three itches that he could count and none were in particularly scratch-able positions given that letting go of the wall would cause a short and painful plummet. Itches were without a doubt the worst thing about free climbing. They were also, he had to admit, the worst thing about being tied to a chair but he sincerely hoped that that activity would not be taking place this evening.

Jacques' left hand found a ledge. He looked up and realised the top of the wall was upon him. A short sigh of relief later and he pulled his head up over the ledge to look into the grounds below. Just as he had suspected there were no patrols. Why would there be? None of the common folk in

Çavine were fool enough to try to sneak in and anyone of any import was already invited. No doubt there would be a couple of guards at the gate armed with rifles and short-sabres but the gardens remained thankfully silent and empty, something to be unrepentantly glad of as he still had to climb down from the wall.

He thought about dropping his pack to the ground, it would make the climb a little easier at least but he knew some of the vials inside were fragile and, although they were very well wrapped in a protective cloth, he couldn't take the risk any would break, especially not the liquid Ice-Fire.

Jacques swung a leg over the wall, then the other and slowly began lowering himself, wishing all the while he could have used a rope.

It was almost a surprise when he finally touched down on solid ground. He felt flowers crush beneath his feet, their long green stems snapping and the petals flattening into the dirt. It was unfortunate but at least no one would notice the damage to the beautiful tulips until morning. By then both he and Isabel should be long gone.

Jacques pulled off his climbing shoes and gloves and stuffed them into one of the side-pockets in the bag, then he pulled out a proper pair of sandals designed to go with his suit and slid into them. He hid the bag in a large and particularly bushy bush, brushed off his suit and strode towards the rear of the mansion, towards the garden entrance to the ballroom.

“You're certain you'll be able to make it over that wall?” Isabel asked with a grin. “It is rather tall and you are not as young as you used to be.”

Jacques opened his mouth and made an affronted grunt from deep within his throat. “I will have you know, my lady, I am still a young man. Some might say I'm in my prime.”

“They must be the ones that don't know you.”

He scowled. “Suffice to say I can make it over the wall but I'll need to hide our bag of tricks while I mingle with the gathered rich and powerful.”

“You could skip the party and only scale the wall when I need you,” Isabel pointed out, already knowing how he would reply.

“And miss Çavine’s social highlight of the year? I would be remiss if I didn’t at least make an appearance and suffer old Lord Faffel’s insistence that I look exactly like his late eldest son.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t recognise you,” she said.

Jacques laughed and leaned back into his chair, rocking it onto its back legs. “Of course he will recognise me. He will first insist I am his late son, visiting from beyond the grave, then he will fawn and tear up and tell me stories of how much of a gentlemen his son used to be.”

Isabel fixed him with a stern stare. “No stealing!”

“Oh, I’ve long since given up stealing from that old fool, my lady. It lost its challenge after we tried to steal that old family sword of his.”

“Mmm,” Isabel sighed, remembering. “He caught us and insisted you take it as it obviously belonged to you and you needed it to fight in a war.”

“It doesn’t really feel like stealing if they just give us the loot, does it,” Jacques agreed.

“No. Don’t steal from anyone else either while you’re there,” she insisted. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“But...”

“We won’t need anything else if this goes off without a hitch!”

He sighed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Promise me, Jacques Revou.”

Jacques took Isabel’s hands in his own, stared into her deep blue eyes and nodded. “No.”

Isabel spotted a likely group. Four women led by Baroness Illesia la’Tet, a minor noble from the border with Arkland and an ageing socialite. Isabel would need to establish a fiction of some social standing before inserting herself into the group. The Baroness would welcome any social

peer regardless of whether she remembered meeting them before, and her orbiting group of ladies were little more than bottom-feeders barely nobility themselves. It was all a matter of timing.

Timing was, however, a dual-edged blade. She needed to wait for the right opportunity but if she remained standing on her own for too long she would begin to attract the wrong kind of attention, the kind that questioned her right to be there at all. When Isabel spotted the Lady Ermine Valette making the social rounds she knew her opportunity had come. The Lady Ermine was the eldest daughter of the Duc and Duchess Valette but still younger than Bruno and, therefore, not the heir. She was also very much the female version of her older brother.

The Lady Ermine was tall, and muscular with broad shoulders, and slim hips. She had a strong jaw, prominent cheek bones and dazzling blue eyes. Despite her masculinity the Lady Ermine somehow managed to remain a true feminine beauty, her muscular arms and back and broad shoulders only serving to increase her strange allure. She was never short of admirers and yet remained unmarried.

Isabel waited until the Lady Ermine was passing Baroness la'Tet's group and approached with all the confidence she could muster.

"Lady Ermine," Isabel said with a curtsy and a slight incline of her head. "It is a pleasure and an honour to see you again, and may I add your dress is truly something to behold."

The Lady Ermine was in fact wearing a dress of very similar design to Isabel's. While it was true that frills and billowing monstrosities were the current fashion in Çavine, the Lady Ermine would never be seen in one; as such a garment would only serve to accentuate her masculine attributes by hiding her more feminine ones. Instead, she wore a slim, skin-hugging dress of yellow silk that clung to her curves, brought attention to her bosom and softened the angles of her face. It was, Isabel had to admit, of ingenious design.

The Lady Ermine turned to Isabel with a wary gaze, her eyes ran her up and down and a smile lit her face, an action that only served to exaggerate her strange beauty. "I see I am not the only

woman to prefer something with a little less... puff.”

Isabel could already see Baroness la’Tet had noticed the interaction, now all she needed to do was disengage and approach the woman and her group with a kind word and a subservient attitude.

“I completely agree,” Isabel continued in a quieter voice. “I much prefer to have something with an ease of movement about it.” She gave a little wriggle to make her point. “But please, don’t let me keep you.”

“Have we met before?” the Lady Ermine asked.

Isabel silently cursed her bad luck. It was far too early to come to the attention of any of the Valettes. Still, there was no backing out now. She curtsied again. “Lady Jacqueline Duval. We met a few years ago, I believe it was also a winter solstice.”

The Lady Ermine nodded in agreement. Isabel had chosen the Duval family as her cover for a reason. The current Marquis Duval was known for three things; his sour face, his refusal to attend any and all social functions, and his ability to produce only daughters. The Marquis had, to date, four wives (three now long since dead) and thirteen daughters who were also known for their social abstinence, and so Isabel was fairly certain no one in attendance would recognise them all.

The Lady Ermine smiled and touched Isabel’s arm. “You must convince your father to come next year, Lady Jacqueline, and some more of your sisters also. I know the Duc would be most thrilled to see more of his old friend.”

Isabel almost laughed. Duc Valette and Marquis Duval were just short of enemies. It would take nothing less than a marriage to mend that bridge.

“I will be certain to pass on your father’s wishes, my lady,” Isabel said with all courtesy.

The Lady Ermine said a graceful goodbye and with one last smile walked away. Isabel noticed with more than a little pride that the entire encounter had been watched by Baroness la’Tet. She glided over to the ageing socialite, introduced herself and made a sparkling comment about the Baroness’ latest grandchild. Within moments she had been accepted into the group.

“Our covers are perfect,” Isabel said with more than a little pride.

Jacques shook his head. “There’s no such thing as perfection, my lady, though it is true I do come very close.”

Isabel snorted. “The perfect fool maybe.”

“I’ll ignore that one, Lady Jacqueline Duval. Eighth daughter of Marquis Duval and heiress of approximately nothing. One of the prettier Duval’s without a doubt, but a little out of touch with current fashion trends, at least around the border towns. A sparkling conversationalist but with a nasty habit of drinking a little more than she should,” he paused and grinned. “A habit so many of the well-to-dos share.”

Isabel curtsied. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Lord Francis Faveu. Second son of a second son with no land, no real title and nothing to his name other than his blood and a small alchemy shop in Saris, struggling to stay afloat without regular hand-outs from a doting father.”

“Why Lady Duval, you know me so well,” Jacques said with a mock smile.

“Not at all, Lord Faveu, I assure you we have never met,” Isabel replied with an equally fake grin.

It was a game they played often; both would assume their characters (usually fictional creations but they had, on occasion, impersonated real people) and act as though they had never met but had heard of the other. They would, in great and sometimes painful detail, describe the other’s persona until they were both satisfied that they knew the characters inside and out.

“I think,” Jacques said slipping out of character, “Lord Faveu should be a gambler.” He reached out to brush a stray strand of hair behind Isabel’s ear and his hand came back with a card, a blind deuce. “We could make a little bit of extra money if I can rustle up a game.”

Isabel took the opportunity to rid herself of her own character; sometimes it was a relief just to be herself for a change. She stepped closer to Jacques and gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

“No gambling,” she said stepping away and waving the blind deuce at him.

He gasped. “When did you? Oh, misdirection. Very clever, Bel.”

For Jacques, inserting himself into groups and their conversations had always been the easiest part of a job. He simply turned on the charm and made certain he never aimed too high; a simple Lord, second son of a second son would never have occasion to talk to a Duc or even a Marquis. No the best he should aim for would be a Vicomte but more likely a Baron, and there were plenty of those at the Valette estate this night.

He spotted a likely group and moved in with his best winning smile. It was always good to have an opener when approaching a new group and for that very reason (and his own fascination) Jacques had long ago studied the basics of alchemy; while he didn't know how to create the more complex formulae such as Black Powder or Fire Oil or Weather Bane he knew the names of all the apparatus and many of the more common creations. His limited knowledge would also lead credence to his chosen cover this night.

The insertion point was always the most vital and, for some, nerve-wracking. “Baron Leylard,” Jacques started. “My name is Francis Faveu...”

“Ha!” the old Baron barked, his fleshy jowls wobbling with the motion. “One of Comte Faveu's gets are you?”

The venom with which the old Baron spat the Faveu name gave Jacques some pause, it was possible his research may have been lacking.

Jacques smiled. “Ah, no, most assuredly not. I am, however, one of Baron Faveu's gets.”

Baron Leylard had to think about that, he quickly covered his confusion with a large swig from his wine glass. “The second son?”

“Indeed.”

“That would make you...”

“No more than an Écuyer,”

Baron Leylard grunted and gave Jacques a piercing look full of unconcealed disdain. In the eyes of the titled nobility Écuyers were little more than commoners. “Useless bunch of fools the Faveus. Never met a more pampered group of King’s yes men.”

Jacques cleared his throat. “I completely agree, Baron Leylard. In truth I myself have never met a more insipidly dull person than my father, with the single possibility of my grandfather. I have personally distanced myself from them for just that reason.”

The old Baron grunted.

“I own a small alchemy shop,” he continued, “and I hear you are fairly well acquainted with the science yourself. I was hoping we might share some formulae. I myself have discovered a wonderful substance just recently that bonds as strong as stone in minutes when exposed to air.”

“Ha!” the Baron barked again. “Sounds like Quick Steel to me.”

From there it was easy. The rest of the small group introduced themselves; lesser Lords and Chevaliers all, the old Baron and Jacques exchanged a handful of popular well-known formulae and the night passed quickly. Right up until the point where Jacques was caught stealing from the Baron.

“My watch is missing,” the Baron said with a wobble of his jowls. He was, of course, referring to his pocket watch which, unbeknown to the Baron, was not missing but was in fact sat in Jacques’ right hand trouser pocket, a place it needed quickly moving from before he was accused, quite rightly, of stealing.

Some of the other members of the party began asking the most inane of questions.

“Where did you have it last?”

“Are you certain you had it with you?”

One of the fools even went so far as to say. “It’s always in the last place you look.”

Jacques let out a mental sigh at the sheer non-impact of the statement. He needed to distract

the others and quickly and in his experience there were two options. He could point and say ‘*Look over there*’ but he had long ago discovered the most successful way to distract a group of people was to simply stare.

Jacques picked a spot, over by the garden windows, and gave it a thorough staring complete with a frown. It didn’t take long before the Baron noticed and proceeded to join in, from there it was easy. The others in the group, not wanting to be left out also joined in the group staring. Jacques quickly fished into his pocket, pulled out the watch and dropped it, catching it expertly on his foot and then nudging it silently onto the floor behind the Baron.

Eventually the Baron quit his stare and looked at Jacques. “What are you looking at?”

Jacques startled, as if noticing the Baron for the first time. “I’m sorry, I thought I saw... It really doesn’t matter.”

“Your watch!” chimed in one of the other members of the group, a chinless Chevalier whose name Jacques didn’t feel the need to remember. “On the floor behind you.”

The Baron turned and cursed. “Second damned chain I’ve managed to break this year.”

From there the conversation steered onto safer topics. Jacques had successfully managed to steal the watch and give it back without any suspicion and, hopefully, without Isabel noticing.

“Lockpicks,” Isabel said reading from the list.

“Check,” Jacques said and laid the set of picks on the mat. They were the same set Isabel had been using for nearly six years now and they were also the best set she’d ever owned. Perfectly sized and weighted and made from the strongest treated steel so they would never snap or bend.

“Alcohol strips.”

“Check,” Jacques passed the two strips to Isabel who quickly wrapped them around her wrists. They were translucent double-sided strips of an alchemical substance she neither understood nor wanted to. At present the strips were inert but when the top layer was peeled away

they would emit a strong scent of alcohol, not enough to be overpowering or offensive, but certainly enough to convince anyone nearby that Isabel had been drinking heavily.

“Neutralising agent.”

“Check,” Jacques held up the small vial of clear liquid and gave it a shake before wrapping it carefully in cloth and placing it on the mat. The neutraliser would once again render the alcohol strips inert and, dabbed in the right places, would completely mask her perfume.

“Liquid Ice-Fire,” Isabel said with a sidelong glance at her partner.

“Check,” he held up the vial of two-tone liquid, blue on the bottom and orange on the top. With a shake the liquid inside the vial mixed and turned a vivid lavender colour. Given a few hours it would once again settle into its two components.

Jacques sighed. “This tiny vial is quite possibly the most expensive thing I have ever purchased.”

Isabel nodded. “But the money we’ll make from this job covers it ten times over.”

“I know... I’d just really like to see it work instead of standing outside a window all night.”

“Would you like to take my place?” she asked with a mocking smile. “Perhaps you can convince Bruno Valette you’re a gentleman in distress.”

“If only,” Jacques said with another sigh. “I do believe social protocol dictates gentlemen in distress are ejected from the premises with a ‘never return’ policy.”

“Well you may not get to see the stuff work but neither do you have to risk it burning your face off!” Isabel said with a smile, though in truth it was only half a joke. Ice-Fire had the dubious privilege of being the second most dangerous substance alchemy could create, and she was not entirely confident the application of the stuff wouldn’t somehow go wrong and kill her.

“I do hope that doesn’t happen,” Jacques said. “I like your face.”

“I’m quite fond of it myself.”

Jacques wrapped the vial very carefully in its own bundle of cloth and placed it on the mat

next to the neutraliser.

“Fire Oil.”

“Check.”

“Two sachets of Sleep,” Isabel finished the list.

“Check. Do try not to use them.”

Isabel shrugged. “I’ve a talent for putting men to sleep.”

Jacques snorted. “You’ve a talent for keeping me awake.”

As the evening wound on, more and more of the attendees became more and more inebriated, Isabel couldn't have hoped for a better setup. Eventually Comte Bruno Valette made an appearance, looking every bit the regal Lord in his fine black suit and artfully arranged hair. He soon found his sister, the Lady Ermine and again Isabel rejoiced; having already engaged the Lady earlier in the night she now had an opening to approach the Comte.

During a function such as the Winter Solstice Ball some people would leave early but many would stay right until the end and the Valettes were expected to entertain until then. Isabel chose her timing well, past the strike of new day but long before the festivities started to wind down. With a curtsy and a host of kind words she extricated herself from the Baroness' group and made her way towards the Lady Ermine and Comte Bruno. She pulled off the outer layers of the alcohol strips as she went and the acrid smell of strong liquor rose to surround her.

The ruse would work better if she was invited to the group so Isabel made to pass the Valettes by. The Lady Ermine noticed her at once and gave a little wave. With a drunken half-smile Isabel ambled over.

“Lady Jacqueline,” said the Lady Ermine, her eyes lighting up and a wide smile spreading across her face. “I do hope you are enjoying yourself.”

“Oh yes,” Isabel said forcing a flush of colour to her cheeks. “A little too much I fear.” The

slur was a little forced but it seemed to serve.

“So I see,” the Lady Ermine laughed. “Tell me, have you met my brother, Comte Bruno Valette?”

Isabel turned to the Comte and gave a shaky curtsy. “I, um... No I do not believe so. It is a pleasure,” she slurred.

The Comte took her hand and gave a minute bow of his head but his mouth remained set and his eyes remained cold. “You are drunk, Lady Duval.”

“Bruno,” the Lady Ermine chastised, clearly aghast.

Isabel affected a forced smile, and for the first time noticed the Comte was drinking clear liquid, most likely water. Some people not only eschewed the consumption of alcohol but actually abhorred its effects. If the Comte was such a man, her drunken act was unlikely to illicit a chivalrous response, in fact it would likely be quite the opposite.

“Where are you staying, Lady Duval?” the Comte asked. “We will send you home.”

There was nothing else for it, Isabel couldn't quit her act now, she would just have to hope it played out. “I, uh, it was... I'm sorry,” she slurred. “I just can't, um... recall.”

Comte Bruno sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Isabel's breath caught in her throat, it was all on this. Without the Comte's chivalrous response to a drunken lady in distress she had no way of gaining access to the upper floors of the Valette household. The job would fail and their last three months of planning would all be for naught.

“I'll call for a carriage,” the Comte said in a terse voice. “We shall put her in an inn for the night.”

Just like that it was over. It may not be the end of the world but she and Jacques had sunk more than a little time and a fortune of money into the job. It was meant to be their last big score, their retirement maker. Without this they would have to plan another job somewhere else. Something equally ostentatious.

“We can’t do that, Bruno,” the Lady Ermine said. “A pretty thing like Lady Jacqueline in an inn in her state? Who knows what could happen? I’ll take her up stairs. She can sleep it off.” She smiled at Isabel and Isabel smiled back, swaying only a little on her feet.

Comte Bruno stared at his sister for a moment then glanced around the ballroom. People danced, people talked, a few maybe looked over at the Valettes helping out a drunken attendee. “Fine,” the Comte said. “But be discrete, sister.”

The Lady Ermine performed a slight bow, with her figure she would, after all, look out of place in a curtsy. “When have you ever known me not to be discrete, brother? Come with me, Lady Jacqueline, we’ll find you a bed to lie down in.”

The Lady Ermine took Isabel’s hand and she allowed herself to be led across the ballroom. They passed through a large set of doors and the Lady Ermine started up a flight of stairs, passing a couple of uniformed guards as they went. It may not have been entirely according to plan but Isabel was finally getting where she needed to be.

Isabel memorised the route they took (the Valette mansion was passing large after all). They mounted two sets of stairs and ended on the second floor. A short trip down a corridor and the Lady Ermine opened a door and ushered Isabel through.

The room was beyond extravagant. A grand queen-sized bed occupied the centre and served to draw much of the attention. A large dressing table, complete with oval mirror stood at the far wall and all manner of cosmetics occupied its surface. A double mirror, for checking both the front and rear, stood to the left; and beyond that a wardrobe that could happily serve as a full-sized room for most common folk. A waist high shelf stood against one wall with a vast array of girlish dolls in various poses.

“This room is... beautiful,” Isabel slurred. “Are all your guest rooms so lavish?”

“It isn’t a guest room,” the Lady Ermine said from close by. “It’s my room.”

“Oh, but I coul...” Isabel started turning but before she could finish the protest the Lady

Ermine stepped in close and kissed her.

Isabel squeaked in alarm but the Lady Ermine was stronger than her and held her tight, stopping her from pulling away. She had, of course, heard that some women preferred the company of other women, just as some men preferred other men, but she would never have guessed the eldest Valette daughter to be so inclined. It was not entirely unpleasant, the Lady Ermine's lips were warm and wet and her touch was firm and gentle but she was most certainly not Jacques.

When Ermine pulled away she was smiling, Isabel felt warm breath, spiced with strong spirits on her face. She quickly retreated a couple of steps away from the Lady Valette.

"You were tense," the Lady Ermine said.

"Was I?" Isabel replied, forgetting to slur her words. Her mind was racing for a way out of the situation. She remembered the two sachets of Sleep sewed into her dress.

"It isn't your first time, is it?" the Lady Ermine asked

"With a woman?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Oh." The smile disappeared from Ermine's face. "I'm sorry. I thought..."

Isabel took a deep breath and steeled her will, knowing what had to be done. She took a step forward, keeping her eyes locked on the Lady Valette's. "That is not to say I did not enjoy it."

Isabel stepped up close to the Lady Ermine and kissed her. The kiss was returned with passion. Slowly Isabel guided Ermine towards the bed and pushed her down onto it. A wicked smile full of lust lit the Lady's face as Isabel climbed onto the bed after her. She made a show of hitching up her dress and took the opportunity to rip the stitching and free one of the sachets of Sleep. Then she straddled the Lady Ermine and bent down to kiss her again.

The Lady Ermine closed her eyes, expecting the touch of Isabel's lips but instead she got a face full of dust. Her eyes shot open and she pushed Isabel away using her larger body as a pivot.

Isabel flew from the bed and hit the floor with a startled yelp and a crash. A moment later the Lady Ermine lurched to her feet, sneezing and coughing.

“What did you... do?” she asked in a hazy voice before collapsing back onto the bed face first.

Tentatively Isabel stood up rubbing at her shoulder and knowing full well she'd have a bruise there by the morning. She crept over to the bed and put her ear close to the Lady Ermine's face. She could hear a soft snoring. The Lady would wake with a pounding headache in a few hours but she wouldn't remember half the night.

With a weary sigh Isabel walked over to the window and threw it open. A chilly winter wind greeted her and in the clear sky thousands of tiny stars twinkled to prove their existence. Isabel looked down and found Jacques waiting underneath the wrong window, looking anywhere but up.

“Jacques,” she hissed.

He looked up towards her voice and in the bright night Isabel could see him frowning. He moved closer, keeping flat against the wall of the mansion. “Are you in the wrong room or was I under the wrong window?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“Later,” she insisted. “Throw me the tools.”

“Anything the lady wishes,” Jacques said and opened up the pack he was carrying.

Isabel glanced back into the room; the Lady Ermine was still snoring quietly on the bed. With a face full of Sleep she should be out all night but Isabel wanted to get the job done quickly all the same. When stealing from the rich and powerful it was best to take as few risks as possible. Some, however, were always necessary.

She looked out the window to find Jacques waiting with a cloth in hand. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Isabel replied quickly.

“Fire oil,” he said and hefted the cloth-wrapped vial straight up. Isabel leaned a little out of the window and snatched the cloth from the air. She retreated inside the room for a second to place

the vial on the mirrored desk and then was back at the window.

“Picks,” Jacques said and again threw the object into the air. Again she snatched it easily and tucked the picks into a fold in her dress.

“Neutraliser.”

Once Isabel had hold of the cloth she disappeared back into the room and un-wrapped it. She uncorked the small glass vial and dabbed the liquid inside on her wrists, under her arms, and on both her chest and neck. It took only a few moments for both the alcohol strips and her perfume to become inert. She moved back to the window and dropped the neutraliser back down to Jacques. He caught the vial with practised ease and pocketed it in a flash. He had a grave look on his face when he held up the next cloth-wrapped object.

“Ice-Fire,” he said. “Careful with this one.”

She nodded once and Jacques hefted the cloth into the air. His throw was off. Isabel watched as it reached a height with the window and all but launched herself out into the air to grab for it but the cloth was bare inches from her fingers. It hung for a moment and began its plummet back towards the ground. She squeaked in alarm; if the Ice-Fire was lost the job was over but, worse than that, if it smashed near Jacques it could easily kill him.

Jacques had looked away but at her squeak he looked back just in time to see the cloth-wrapped vial of liquid Ice-Fire fall towards him. He snatched the cloth from the air and fell backwards onto his arse to absorb the momentum. He clutched at the vial with an expression one part terror to two parts relief and shakily regained his feet.

“I said *‘be careful’!*” he hissed.

“Your throw was off,” she protested.

“My throw is never off. I used to juggle flaming knives for tips. Flaming knives!”

Isabel rolled her eyes at him knowing full well he couldn’t see the gesture. “Throw it again then.”

This time he lined up the throw carefully before hefting it back into the air. The vial hovered for a moment just outside the window and Isabel caught it with ease. She disappeared back inside the room and shut the window.