



Trevor Harley is author of *The Psychology of Ingegnar*. This is his first novel.

Max is the chief chef in the Castle, a place where no mistake goes unpunished - in a fitting but most unpleasant way. He has two hundred days before he retires, but must create a new dish every night. The Ghost is seen and strange murders start happening. Max is drawn into trying to solve the crimes, if only because he is starting to look like the main suspect. Things aren't helped when he falls in love - with the one person he shouldn't. Will Max reach his time, or will he fall into the hands of the Royal Torturer and Extractor of Secrets?

Dirty Old Rascal is a fantasy, a murder mystery, a comedy, a thriller, a satire, a ghost story, a love story, and a moral fable. The Castle is a strange place, but so is the modern world.



ghosts.jpg (400)



Dirty old rascal

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To Siobhan

And with thanks to PD

Dirty old rascal

I cooked my King an exquisite dish of a little sparrow stuffed inside a blackbird, but he spat it out into my face. I shat myself. After much investigative probing, he had found a tiny bone in the sparrow's wing that we had overlooked. Fortunately, this error was not my fault: I could in all honesty say that an undercook, identified as number thirty-four, was responsible. He was taken away and the King's Torturer boned him; reportedly he had several big bones still left in him before he gratefully escaped into oblivion. At first I thought it to be a rather excessive reaction, but the King is a king and we can do what he likes. It put the wind up me, I can tell you, but at least everyone was a great deal more careful about bones from then on. So perhaps the King was right. Perhaps his great and benevolent wisdom had enabled him to see that the kitchen was getting sloppy, and that we needed an example, so that we would never forget about bones again.

Thinking of the boy's fate made me feel quite ill for a couple of days. I was glad that no one thought of blaming me for letting such a junior cook have the responsibility of boning the sparrow. I tried feeling my arms, imagining what they would be like without bones; they seemed soft enough as they were. I tried flapping them around; I came over all hot. I tried bending them just a little, to see what they would be like without bones, and they creaked and hurt at the slightest touch. I had to sit down on my bony bottom, and that got me thinking, too, and not in a nice way. Soon I was too ill to go into the kitchen, and so I put Hermann, my second, in charge, while I took to my bed. I told Hermann to avoid sparrows for a while, and try not to do anything too complicated involving bones. I'm pleased to say he took my advice.

I lay there and did nothing but sweat and dream about bones of all shapes and sizes. Although I had finally reached the top of my profession, there were still over two hundred days before I could retire. Two hundred days full of opportunities to leave bones in when I should have left them out, and to leave them out when I should have left them in. Every other cook in the country envied me, as indeed I used to envy the last King's Cook. I envied other cooks for their right to make mistakes: the right to scorch a caramel, the right to leave a stone in a peach, the right to leave a bone in a bird without getting turned into a jelly.

I am the King's Cook because five months ago my predecessor had made the piecrust rather too thin. I was then his number two. I told him that he shouldn't risk it, that he had a hundred and ninety-

nine cooks under him to make pies. But he just ignored me and went ahead. “I want to make pastry”, he said to me, with a glazed look in his eye that reflected the glaze on the pastry. It won’t happen to me. I’m very careful about measuring pastry; you learn from other’s mistakes. I don’t want to end up flatter than an old penny. But you can’t predict everything. Who would have thought that a tiny little sparrow would have so many bones? The closer you are to safety, the more you worry about what’s just around the corner.

The bones episode was eventually forgotten, and I went back to the kitchen. For a while all was well, and several days passed in the Castle without incident. The King was in truth a little distracted by a far away war, but our vigilance never let up - particularly about bones. But as time passed a new fear kept me awake. The King has to have a new dish every night. Not just a new plate to put his food upon, but also a new recipe that he hasn’t ever had before. And not only was I starting to run out of recipes, but sometimes I tried to think of food and my mind went blank. I no longer trusted my taste buds.

I had something novel prepared for today: my main dish was going to be a pâté of pickled partridge pancreases in pastry, with an exquisite light sauce delicately scented with ginger and tulip flowers. After that I looked forward to something of a rest as His Highness was off to the country for the weekend hunting. Idle rumour has it that the real purpose of these hunting trips is to visit one of his mistresses; but it’s best just to listen and not say too much, particularly about such delicate matters. He sees and hears all, and his spies are everywhere. But he would be back on Monday, and I had no idea what I was going to serve him then.

I finished positioning the last pancreas. I had left the task of making the pastry to Hermann, just in case.

“It looks all right”, I mused, squinting at it to ensure that it looked appealing from all angles, even upside down. I was tired. I wanted a beer and a nap.

“Shall I put them in the cold room, then?” Hermann had had enough for the morning too, I could tell. He was already picking the pastries up.

I was just about to announce that we all deserved a good rest when there was a squeak of disappointment from the cook in charge of the sauce. He had tasted it and declared it too bland. So without checking with a higher number he had taken it upon himself to add more ginger. So when Konstantin, my third chef, had finally got round to sampling it, he thought it over-gingered. This was when the sauce cook squeaked.

I was summoned. I stuck my little silver tasting spoon in the gelatinous sauce. The kitchen fell silent. I blew on the liquid to cool it down lest it burn my delicate little tongue, and sipped it.

It was completely unbalanced; it was too oily, too sharp, too strong – it was unspeakably awful. We would have to start all over again. I hurled the pot at the boy, who, presumably having studied my face during the tasting, was already running for the door. Globules of glistening liquid covered my beautifully gleaming surfaces. I would make him clean the mess up as his punishment; and that would just be the beginning.

Eventually we got the sauce right. By then I was in a black mood; there was no doubt about it. I stomped around the Castle for a while, muttering to myself, and raging against most things I could think of. I thumped a few saucepans in the kitchen. I kicked out at a rat on the stairs. After a while, I was as frenetic as a starved pig at a trough. There was no way I could nap now, so I started wandering around randomly, hoping for inspiration for future dishes. I glared at acquaintances as I passed them. I banged into a footman on the staircase. “Out of my way, you clumsy clot!” I shouted at the startled fellow. I immediately regretted my violence, but in all fairness, he doesn’t have as much to worry about as I do. Keeping a few old swords clean is hardly an onerous occupation, although even then a few manage to get it wrong, and end up cleaning them in another way.

I had to calm down or I would never think of anything. I decided to go for a stroll in the garden. Perhaps a winter flower or a leafless bush might inspire an exotic recipe. I wrapped up well in furs, and found the shady arbour I liked very much (when I could find it) and sat down. I took several deep breaths of the cold air; the shock of this made me more sensible. It felt like the air was turning into frost in my lungs. A little calmer, I rubbed my eyes; they were watering with the cold. Indeed, it was so cold that I feared that my tears might turn to ice. I broke an icicle off the tip of my nose, and took my glass eye out and polished it. I’d lost the real one in an accident with boiling fat many years before. Needless to say, it was excruciating at the time, but now I don’t think about it very much. It really doesn’t bother me a great deal; you don’t need two eyes to chop a carrot. In fact it’s quite a talking point, and the maids are fascinated by it. It doesn’t seem to like the cold much though, and the whole incident left me sensitive about pain. With my eye out I could see more clearly, so to speak; what was I thinking of, contemplating cooking an old shrub?

I met Jorgen, the Head Gardener, as he walked by my bower. In some ways his task was even more difficult than mine. Most days that he was in residence and that he felt well enough, the King liked to

stroll around the castle gardens. Fortunately he always took the same short path, but on each circumambulation he liked to see a different display of flowers and vegetation. That was how Diethard, the previous Head Gardener, had met his downfall. One day in winter the King had found a snowdrop in just the same place that he had seen it the previous day. At first Diethard tried to blame one of the garden boys, but they were nowhere to be seen. So he tried pointing the green finger at the journeymen, but they had melted into the shrubbery. He then tried to say that the King must have been wrong: if His Majesty just looked a bit closer he would see that the snowdrop had in fact been just a fraction over to the left. Of course it's a very big mistake to say that the King has made a little one, and Diethard just dug a hole for himself, and very soon found himself planted up to the neck underneath the old oak tree, just where the snowdrop shouldn't have been, and Jorgen went from Second Gardener to First. Selection. That's the way of nature: only the strong survive.

Because our tasks were so similar, and because I depended on him for the vegetables from the kitchen garden while he depended on me for the refuse for the compost, he was the closest to what passes as a friend in the Castle. It was best not to get too close to anyone in this place, as people have a habit of coming to abrupt ends.

"Hello Max", he sighed, "I'm rather pleased that his Majestic Majesty isn't going to walk around his garden today, if the truth must be known. There is always a fear that an aconite is aesthetically misplaced."

I got up, and we started to walk around the rose garden. Jorgen was particularly fond of his roses. He was trying to breed the perfect rose, although he'd been trying for years and, although I'm no expert, he still didn't seem to be anywhere close to succeeding.

"He never comes down into my kitchen. I don't think he knows where it is." I rubbed my good eye again. It was truly severely cold. I wondered whether I didn't really like the outside very much.

"Sometimes wish I could retire now, when I want to, rather than waiting for my Time." Fair's fair: the royal regime might be a strict one, but there was something for us all to hope for. If we could make it through a full year as number one without making a mistake, we could retire on a large pension to one of the country estates. I would never have to worry about partridge pancreases again. Half of the people made it and half of them didn't. The Royal Cook before the one before me had made his Time, and was probably at that moment far, far away, dining on some sumptuous dish lavishly prepared by someone else, with countless maids to look after all his whims. His last words when he left the castle (I was fourth in the chain of command

then, and got to see him off) were “I am never, ever, ever, going to cook again”. Unfortunately I still had two hundred days to go. Exactly. Jorgen only had a hundred and ninety.

The snow and sky were both the same shade of dirty grey. There seemed to be no difference between the two.

“It’s the challenge that keeps us going; that and the promise of a wonderful life. The alternative is too horrible to think about.”

“You know, I suspect that the King doesn’t really care about the garden at all.” Jorgen didn’t seem to care about the cold at all. His shirt was undone to the waist, his arms were bare, and even the hairs on them were flat. “Sometimes I don’t think he even likes flowers.”

“I wouldn’t say that too loudly if I were you. He thinks he does, and that’s all that matters.” I was feeling uncomfortable with this line of talk, out in the open. Even snowdrops might have ears.

“That snowdrop that got old Diethard. I remember it; it was a particularly perfect snowdrop.” Jorgen was scratching his straggly beard. He looked like a scarecrow.

“It was a particularly perfect sparrow we cooked him a few days ago, and a particularly perfect bone he found.”

“He didn’t look at the flower at all. He wasn’t interested in it as a snowdrop. I don’t really know how he knew it was the same one. All he was interested in was its position.”

“Maybe Diethard should have tried claiming it was a different snowdrop in the same place, rather than the same snowdrop in a different place.”

“It’s almost worth trying, isn’t it? Just to see if he sees. And if he sees, what he says.”

“You’re in trouble if he doesn’t see it your way, or if he doesn’t appreciate your humour. Best to say nothing.”

There was a commotion from the maze. It was Prince Johannes, chasing a girl around. She was laughing gaily - or at least pretending to laugh. Occasionally we saw her head bobbing above the snow-covered hedge of privet and box and yew, running, holding her skirts, looking around trying to avoid the groping hands of the Prince. I hoped the journeyman in charge of the Royal Maze had explained the new design to the Prince that morning. I’d hate to think what could happen to a man for not getting that right. There are so many ways in which a man could be lost.

We shrank back into the rose garden. Unfortunately, I’d forgotten it was the rose garden today, and I scratched my arm on a thorn. Yesterday the rose garden had been a shrubbery. I wondered where the shrubbery was today. The girl’s bobbing head suddenly disappeared beneath the top of the hedge, and the laughter was

replaced by squeals; or perhaps they were screams. Branches formed a cage around them. Snow slipped to the ground. We slowly, quietly shrank back further into the rose garden until we were as far away from the commotion as we could be. The sky reached down to shelter us, and we embraced the comfort of the gloom.

“What’s this?” Jorgen stopped down and bent over the ground. He pulled a rusty arrowhead out of the frozen soil. “These are everywhere”, he said. He brushed the snow and dirt off it, wrapped it in a piece of old cloth, and put it carefully into his pocket. “I think they must be quite old.”

“Why would anyone shoot an arrow when they could use a gun?” I pondered. The ways of the ancient ones were a deep mystery to me.

Jorgen shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps they didn’t have guns then”, he said.

It was quiet now; Prince Johannes presumably had had his way. We waited a little longer. I stared at the reflection of my good eye in a pond of ice.

“Oh well”, said Jorgen. “I’d better go and rest. It’s only a few hours until night.” Night was when the Royal Gardeners had to move the garden around. They preferred winter: longer nights meant more time to move things around, and as a bonus things didn’t grow so much. And there was less chance of the King going out for a walk when in the cold, dark days of midwinter.

“Take care, Jorgen”, I said, “take care”.

I left him, and a few flakes of snow floated like feathers down from the leaden sky. I wondered how Johannes would keep warm. Perhaps he would catch a cold.

The pickled partridge pancreases in ginger sauce were eventually a great success: a triumph, even. The King examined each pancreas individually on the tip of his fork, and peered them at with one eye. Then he roared with laughter at each one, before swallowing it whole. This success means that he might see us in a positive light for a little while. He might overlook the next slip-up, or at least just expedite one of the lower kitchen boys quickly and cleanly. Off with the head rather than out with the bones. I must say that I didn’t much care for the dish. I seemed to be allergic to something in it; I had to taste it, of course, and within a few moments was consumed by a fit of violent sneezing. Not my sort of food at all. But it’s not my tastes or opinions that matter, but his Majesty’s, and he

didn't sneeze once. And now he was off to the country and we could all breathe a sigh of relief.

I woke the next morning to a snowstorm. I peered out of the window of my turret, but all I could see were snowflakes whirling around like sugar shaken in a jar. As I looked out, a most curious thing happened. A blackbird appeared from nowhere and flew right into the glass. He flopped to the ledge outside my window and lay there panting and befuddled, staring up at me with one eye. I opened the window and tried to pick him up, but all that happened was that his fright overcame his discomfiture, and he roused himself and flew back into the storm, leaving me with a face full of snow and grabbing at air. The incident gave me an idea, however.

I was starting to worry that the weather would prevent His Majesty from going to the country. We'd be in trouble then, with no dinner planned and nothing underway in the kitchen. The kitchen boys were sitting around with their feet on the table, starting to get jumpy. But fortunately, the snowstorm cleared after just an hour or so. The king set merrily off and the boys went to the yard to throw snowballs at maids.

On Friday morning in the Castle there is always a meeting of the Council of the Royal Household. We all sit round the big round oak table at nine o'clock in the morning and discuss what has to be done in the next week, and how best to do it. We also take the opportunity to reflect on our losses, and commiserate with those that have lost, and secretly all give thanks that we are just there to be able to give thanks.

Charles, the old Royal Butler, always chaired the meeting. He was unique among us because he was in charge for his second year. After his Time had come, he had chosen – volunteered! – to stay as the King's Butler for a second year. The King was so pleased he offered to multiply his retirement sum tenfold. Charles seemed genuinely fond of the King; he had known him since a boy. Indeed, he was probably the only member of the Royal Household still to have survived from the King's childhood. Charles also seemed to love his job. "What else would I do?" he said. "Do I really want to retire and sit around being butlered upon when I could butler myself?" It must also be said the butler is one of the safer of the household jobs. The King rarely sees him. He doesn't produce anything, as such. All he has to do is answer the Castle door and announce the visitor; footmen take it from there. Footmen are in the firing line; sometimes, literally so. And even then, it must be said, we don't have many visitors. The King's ladies don't get announced; they don't even come in through the main gate. They cross the moat in a small boat and huddled in the back gate, well out of the eyes of the Queen. All we see are a few visiting lords and ladies,

and perhaps, once a year or so, a royal visitor from another country, or the occasional diplomat or emissary from an adversary. And as Charles is fond of the King, so is the King fond of Charles, and I am sure that he has overlooked the occasional slight slip that the butler must have made in his time.

“Order!” shouted Charles. He hit the tabletop with his little copper hammer. Everyone settled down in their designated and customary places. The gossiping died down.

“We have a rather pleasant week coming up”, said Charles. “but let’s start as normal with our reports. Eufemia?”

“A relatively good week”, said Eufemia, the Royal Housekeeper and Head of the Maids. “Only three maids needed remediation.”

“Ha”, said Charles, “maids”.

“The most careless one was a young slattern who foolishly left some wax on the table after dinner. It turned out that she’s pretty sturdy though and came through her subsequent waxing without too much difficulty. It might even all grow again.” She inclined her head towards Bruno. Bruno was the Royal Executioner and Extractor of Secrets for His Majesty, but everyone in the Castle just knew him as the Torturer. It was hard to tell whether she approved or disapproved of the girl’s survival. Eufemia was so small she had to sit on a large silk cushion just to be able to peer around the table at the rest of us. Rather ridiculously, she was wearing a grebe feather in her hair, which was the fashion of the day. She only had forty days left, and she protected these days like a priceless jewel. Her task was not an easy one, for the Castle was inclined to be a dusty, dirty place, what with the gardens and the muddy tracks and the fires and torches and all these people walking in and out through the its many entrances. What’s more, the King despises dust and dirt; he has a bit of a thing about it in fact, one could say. The King was rather in a rut about sorting their misdemeanours out. When he found dirt, he usually made a maid eat dirt. By comparison with what happened to many other people, it was quite a mild education. Admittedly it was sometimes rather a lot of dirt that he made them eat, but it often didn’t permanently harm the eater. Several maids, working their way up the hierarchy, had eaten several loads of dirt - and on occasion, worse. Doubtless Eufemia had eaten a garden’s worth of it in her time. Bruno got no pleasure from making people eat dirt; he thought it was unimaginative and a demeaning task for him.

“We do our best”, said Bruno, tugging at the hair protruding from his nose. He hadn’t been in the job long. Hedwig, the previous Royal Executioner. Extractor of Secrets, Punisher of Mistakes, and Corrector of Errors for His Majesty (to give him his proper title), one day made a

terrible error in remediating a clumsy clod who had spilt a drop of wine on the Royal Tablecloth. Hedwig despatched the guilty footman far too quickly for the King's liking, spilling the wine down the footman's throat with almost indecent haste. It was quite a stroke of bad luck really, because the King doesn't usually watch these things. People just disappear to the Dungeon or whatever and that's that, unless the Correction is decreed to take place outside. But this time the King was so enraged by this spillage that he went to watch the judgement being implemented. This made Hedwig very nervous; he wasn't used to having his work closely examined. He started to sweat; his hands shook. He wanted one of the assistant torturers to do the pouring, but the assistants, very wisely, had all disappeared into the shadows. The spout slipped after only ten minutes and that was that. When he came out of the dark, Bruno was promoted on the spot and gave Hedwig a demonstration of how pouring should be done. Bruno was quite a friend of Hedwig's, so it wasn't a pleasant job, but it had to be done, particularly with the King there. Nothing personal. We're all professionals after all. I liked Bruno.

"Anything else to report?" Charles asked him.

"The Royal Dungeon has had a fine very week," said Bruno, "given the appalling state of our tools. We really do need some major investment if we are to keep up our work." Everyone ignored this remark, as we were all incessantly demanding more from the Royal coffers for our respective departments. Of course this investment never materialised; for the King, provision for mistresses always came before provision for the Castle infrastructure, even that as vital to our good functioning as the Dungeon.

Agatha, the First Chambermaid, was the only person here who was responsible to someone other than the King. That meant that she was also unique among those here in that she didn't have a Time. She would take over from Eufemia in forty days time, unless something dreadful happened to either of them first. Eufemia didn't like Agatha; she feared that she was after her job - and of course she was. Some years ago we'd had a bit of fun together; she was a lively girl - very lively. We'd been fond of each other ever since. I could now rely on her to point me in the direction of a lively new maid. Agatha rarely had anything to add to what Eufemia said. It was obviously not in her interest to interrupt or correct; after all, a superior spurned could easily put the blame on you for something or other. She just nodded in agreement with both Eufemia and Bruno.

"I am afraid new instruments will have to wait for all of us", Viktor said. Viktor was the Chief Steward. "The Coffers are a little - shall we say, afflicted at present? His Majesty has temporarily cut the

household grant to pay for his far away adventures. The war has turned out to be much more prolonged and expensive than even I originally feared. In addition, the income from his estates has not brought in what we expected.” I didn’t like Viktor. He didn’t look trustworthy, but I assume you don’t get to manage the Royal Estate and Games without the King trusting you with money, so I suppose he must be honest. God forbid what would happen to him should the King find Viktor with his fingers in the Royal Coffers. The fingers would probably be the first to go. Or parts of fingers. And there was a lot of him to go, fat lump that he was. Viktor was the first of us due to reach his Time, in just twenty days.

“We are planning some Games in a few months to bring in some cash”, Viktor continued. We expect volunteers to provide the fullest possible co-operation.”

There was a general murmur of discontent. No one liked the occasional fund-raising games; they were just another burden, something else that could go wrong.

“Just so”, said Charles. “Florian?”

Florian was the First Page. His was not an easy job. I wouldn’t want to be in Florian’s shoes. He was good looking in a nervous kind of way, but this job was ageing him. He had longer to go than me. “No better, no worse than normal” he said. He was always fidgeting with his cloak, twisting it round and round his fingers. He was always immaculately turned out; I really liked his taste in cloaks. He rambled on for some time about clothes and shoes.

I stopped listening after a while. Something seemed to be stuck between my teeth, on the left hand side, at the top. I couldn’t work out what it was. I probed it with my tongue. Florian flapped on a bit and Jorgen talked about what was happening in the garden. Winter was one of his more quiet times, so he didn’t really have a lot to talk about, just the regular movement of the plants and clearing of leaves. I picked up my ears when Bruno started talking about the latest development in the dungeons. There was always the dreadful fear that you might be the first to try out his latest instrument. It all made me feel most queasy. Bruno was surprisingly animated today. It appeared that he had got together with Jakob, the Royal Engineer, to construct some new, semi-automatic instruments of remediation and improvement. He didn’t specify exactly what he meant by “semi-automatic” but I didn’t like the sound of it. I could see Agatha shuddering as well. Jakob was clearly enthusiastic about it, too. He was ever looking for some extra way to justify his existence and curry favour with his Majesty. The Royal jalopy was notoriously unreliable, and Jakob liked to build up a reservoir of good will, so that his Ever Kind Majesty

might overlook the occasional breakdown, or be inclined to attribute the error to somebody lower down the chain of command.

“There’s no need to sound quite so jolly about it”, I said.

“You mind your business.”

“Now let us not argue among ourselves”, said Charles. “How has the week been in the kitchen, Max?”

“We lost two kitchen boys this week. One of them after a rather unpleasant incident with a bone.”

“It’s just my job.” Bruno sounded aggrieved, as though I held him personally responsible. Of course, I knew this. I said so.

“But I’m hopeful that next week will be a better one.”

“And so do we”, said Charles.

Franz, the First Footman, didn’t have much to say either. I could see that this meeting could be finished nice and early, and what with the King away for the weekend, I could envisage a pleasant few days stretching out lazily in front of me. My life was going to be more about maid than minestrone. Franz was spending an excessive amount of time saying not very much. Of course Franz thought that Charles should be shouldering more of the blame about some of the incidents, but Charles was very adroit at putting responsibilities on some one else’s shoulders. You couldn’t be Butler in the Castle for two years running without this talent.

“Now if you’ve finished”. Charles turned away from Franz without waiting for a reply.

And then the lights went out; apparently the generator had broken down again. I hoped for the sake of the engineers that it didn’t affect the whole Castle. There was a pause while someone lit the torches. We always had torches nearby, as the lights were always going out, and engineers were always being slowly extinguished for it.

Any little misdemeanour, any little incident in the Castle, could potentially be laid at the feet of Ludwig, the Castellan, so, like all of us, he had to be adept at passing on responsibility. He had apprehended the thief who had been causing a few disturbances in the Wednesday market. The thief had been passed on to Bruno, who duly removed him of his most precious valuables. Ludwig had had a good week, but it didn’t show on his face.

“These criminals”, he sighed, although you could tell that he thought he had had a good week. He pulled at this long grey beard. “These criminals”, he repeated, sighing even more deeply. He jangled his keys. Wherever he went he was preceded by the sound of those keys hanging from a chain around his waist. A large bronze skull adorned the chain. I always meant to ask him about why he wore it, but it seemed too personal.

Martha, the Royal Seamstress, had had a bad week. The King's new underwear was not capacious enough for the royal digit. It was a hard task, one all the seamstresses dread, for the line between being not capacious enough, and so capacious as to dwarf the digit, was so fine as to be invisible. For a while this week it looked like curtains for Martha, but at the last moment she had persuaded the Chamberlain that the responsibility lay with her right-hand woman, whose right hand was in turn dedigitized. Martha took to her bed for a day after that, and still wasn't looking well. Fifty-nine days to go! I admired her stamina at sticking at the task of persuading the Chamberlain that the blame lay elsewhere, but I didn't like her. His eyes always looked like they were staring at a pile of gold. You can tell a lot from people's eyes; eyes are important to me. I always feel slightly envious of people with more than one.

Ludwig was drumming his fingers on the table to a monotonous rhythm. We had all had enough.

Heinrich started to bring the meeting to a close. He was the Royal Chamberlain. He exhorted us all to try harder next week, and see if we could manage a clean sheet for a change. This, of course, had never happened in living memory. It was the dream we strove towards, and Heinrich going on about it didn't make it any more likely to happen. We all knew the score. He always peered at me like a shortsighted lizard. He was a man to be feared; the King relied upon his judgement when assigning responsibility in unclear cases. Finally, he asked us, as ever, "what is going to happen next week then?" And then we speculated on possible mishaps and disasters. I suggested that the King's consommé would be cold. It made me shiver just to think about it. Speculating made sure that these things didn't happen; but curiously, however much we speculated, something unexpected always turned up. Eventually, when we had run out of speculations, Charles drew the meeting to its formal close.

After the meeting, Heinrich caught me just as I was hurrying out of the room to catch up with Agatha. "Close shave about the bone, wasn't it, my boy", he said. I shivered again, and felt cold to my own bones, glad at least that I still had them.

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Agatha set me up with Maria, a delightful little flirt from somewhere in the south. I don't know what it is about the south, but there seems to be a never-ending supply of maids from there. Perhaps it's the more clement weather. We'd spent

the night frolicking in my chambers above the kitchen, and now we sat near the window exchanging tales. She was already thirty-one in the chambermaid listings, and climbing fast. She was one to watch, said Agatha. Sharp, careful, not too responsible. I wondered what Eufemia thought of her. I didn't know how Agatha managed to get these girls to be so pliable. She seemed to have a real talent for setting me up with them. Perhaps it was something to do with the south again.

"Do you like the things you cook?" she asked.

"Do you like the beds you make?"

"Some of the dishes we hear about don't sound appealing. Things stuffed into other things. Bits of the animal's body that only the poor back home ate and minced up into tiny pieces. Hardly fit for a king, is it now?"

I didn't like the sound of that at all and told her so, in the clearest possible words. That was a dangerous notion to let loose around here; there were too many notions as it was. Any more talk like that and I'd have to speak to Agatha about her. Here indeed was one to watch.

197

I'm trying to build a clock. It helps me take my mind off my troubles. You have to be very careful when building a clock; the pieces are small and delicate, and they all have to hang to hang together just so. It strains my eye, and makes me feel tired. But last night I couldn't sleep, what with the worry of deciding this week's menus. I couldn't find Maria, so I had a brandy and set about sanding some pieces of wood. Eventually, just before dawn, I felt my lids go heavy. Just as it was time to get up.

196

On Monday the King returned from hunting in the country, and he was not a happy sausage. It was soon apparent that the royal rod had failed to perform. This happened from time to time, and an air of despondency lay around the Castle whenever it did. It was always a very public thing. He came back blaming it all on the intense cold; the bolder wits whispered that it was the only thing that wasn't frozen stiff around here. The fate of someone was invariably bound up with the regal rigidity; things would not be resolved until the royal spleen had been purged. This time the expurgation came mercifully quickly. The King spotted a fox crapping

on the Castle lawn. The fox had to be hunted down and fed to the hounds. The King always enjoyed this; it made him feel young and like a man again. I didn't much have the stomach for it myself, but we all had to join in. We ran around the Castle garden hunting the fox. Some of us were on horses, and some of us on foot (I don't have a head for heights myself), and with some of the bolder maids riding fit young footmen if they were game enough. We were all dressed in jolly clothes and wearing whatever hats we could put our hands on at short notice, with swords and muskets and blunderbusses, and each of us with a merry instrument, a bugle or whistle or a drum. A band set up beside the lawn and laid down a hunting tune. I found it all quite exhausting, being for one reason or another rather short of sleep in recent days. We jumped around, poking in bushes and down rabbit holes, screeching and screaming, until eventually the poor fox was flushed, and chased down by the King with his dogs. It all took a bit of time because it had to be the King who eventually caught it, so the rest of us had to let it slip from our grasp if we came close, or make sure our dogs didn't tear it apart before them King's did.

But that was just the first part of the adventure. Someone was responsible for letting a fox with loose bowels onto the lawn when the King was looking out of his window. That was the difficult part. I felt pretty safe in this particular regard, but Jorgen was understandably nervous; it was his lawn that the fox dumped on. Viktor looked pale too; as steward, this could also be conceived of as his domain. The Royal Hunt was his responsibility, so if the King couldn't find the fox, someone had to be blamed. But it might be said that the very presence of a fox in the garden was a testament to the general failure of the Hunt to keep them down. On the other hand, it was important to keep at least some foxes around, for when the King wanted to go hunting in his garden. This situation was definitely a tricky one for Viktor.

The final outcome surprised and delighted almost everyone; the Chamberlain declared that the trouble was all the responsibility of the Castle gatekeeper for leaving the drawbridge up too long after the King's return. I've no idea how he reached this decision, but it was a very popular one. Strictly speaking of course this error was ultimately Ludwig's responsibility, but it was clear that the gatekeeper was immediately in charge here. It was his responsibility, no doubt about it, on reflection. So we all trudged off to the gate and dragged the surprised gatekeeper out by the scruff of his neck. He said that it was the assistant keeper who had let up the drawbridge, and what's more, he thought at the time that he could smell beer on the man's breath. So with great relief all around we found and grabbed hold of the assistant and chased this poor drunkard around the grounds, banging

our drums and piping our whistles, until the King's hounds got him too. The Jester pranced around us, turning cartwheels and prodding people with a sharp stick.

"Do you know something?" said Jorgen quietly into my ear, after all the hullabaloo had died down, "it wasn't the same fox, you know. Its tail was much shorter. The one they killed hardly had a tail at all." Who cares? The King felt much better after this. He withdrew to his chambers with the Queen, and then decided to set off to the country again for some more hunting. This surprising turn of events meant there would be another evening I wouldn't have to worry about cooking, and another safe day notched up towards my Time. I decided to go and find my Maria.

195

Maria is quite delightful! A pleasing little flirt, although one could soon tire of her sharpness and her ambition. Forward in every way. Quite a shock between the sheets, and I am not an easily shocked chef.

The King returned late in the afternoon. Dinner went very well tonight, except the King thought that the hams perhaps hadn't been hung for quite long enough, so he had the cooks responsible hamstrung. I wonder whether I should have checked it more thoroughly before it was sent out, but if I had, perhaps I would have been more responsible. The Family seemed particularly happy today. Even the Queen was laughing, even if she did look like a constipated pig, and Johannes was managing to look noble, and the Princess Sophia looked beautiful, while her elder sister Princess Katharina looked – well, thoughtful. The little Princess Anna was running round being a little delight, kicking the shins of old ladies and kissing pretty young footmen. It moved me to see them together like this. It was odd, though; at one point I thought that Princess Sophia was staring at me, but she must have been glancing idly at the wall behind me. I must be invisible to her.

194

I met the Duchess of the North on the stairs today, sneaking away from the King's chambers. It is best to keep very quiet about some things.

Wednesday is market day in the Castle, and I went to see whether there was anything of interest to the kitchens. I chose a nifty blue cloak to keep out the cold. Blue was the latest rage around the Castle. I thought it would cheer me up on such a miserable day, and it was indeed such a cloak as to turn even Florian's eyes. The snow and ice crunched underfoot, and above the sky was again a deep grey, with the clouds so low that the tops of the turrets were lost in them. Normally I could pick up some fruit or vegetable or herb or spice in the market that wasn't grown in the kitchen gardens, and that could be used to form the basis of something exotic for His Majesty, something that would surprise and titillate the royal tastebuds. His good humour was unlikely to last for long; something always happens, for we are all weak and ultimately fail him in some way. I strolled around the stalls, squeezing the pumpkins that weren't obviously rotten, and prodding the fragrant lemons. Not much new here. It was all vaguely depressing. As if to give credence to my mournful mood, a horrid, piercing sleet started to fall from the clouds. All the flakes seemed to be driven into my face by the wind.

I walked by the market stalls, tunelessly humming a snatch of popular ditty. The place stank, even in this cold; of horse manure shoved to the side of the road, of rotting food, of mould and the cold damp of winter. A couple of blind beggars sat against a wall, with buttons in their hats in front of them. A naked man in joughs was being walked around like a dog by a Lady; no one paid him much attention. You get used to all these things.

"Ho!" called out a new voice from a stall draped with herbs and bottles of medicine. It was a fellow I hadn't seen before, a traveller dressed in bright garish clothes and a floppy hat. He didn't look like an honest chap, so I tried to ignore him and walk on. "Ho!" he said again. On reflection, I was getting desperate, and there was just a chance that he'd have a tasty new herb with which I could liven up a pheasant.

"Want a cure for a headache?" he said.

"I don't have a headache."

"Cough, dropsy, ague, palsy, plague, pox, spots, or gout?"

"Do I look so old and infirm? Have I got on any spots?" The chap himself looked most unwell, and not at all a good advertisement for his goods. "Tell me about your herbs. I see parsley and marjoram and bay, and I can get all of those from my garden."

"Ah! A cultivating cook on the look out for something different! In that case, I have just the thing for you." He reached up and untied a bundle of little long thin red things I'd never before.

"What are these?"

"They're called chillies, oh great gourmand. Try them."

“Chilly? Isn’t it cold enough?”

“Try one.”

“What do I do with them? What are they like?”

“Their flavour is indescribable. You will have tasted absolutely nothing like this, I guarantee you. If you have, you can come back here next week and I will refund you your money twice over.” He scratched a large carbuncle on the side of his nose.

“How much?”

“Two hundred.”

“Two hundred! For what? A little vegetable? I must look like more of a buffoon than you.”

“I have risked much for these chillies. I had to go to the deep south for them. I have lost a finger bringing these to you.” He showed me a bandaged stump on his right hand. It was, of course, probably just the punishment for some minor theft.

“What do you do with them?” I asked. They looked different, anyway. I sniffed them; they didn’t smell of much at all.

“You cut them up nice and small and add them to anything. They impart, shall we say, a unique flavour.”

“Of what?”

“Try a little.” He produced a dirty looking knife and the tip off the end of one of the long red pods. “Go on. Try it. On me.” His eyes came to life with mischief.

I was reluctant, partly because of the malevolent look in his eye but mainly because of the filthy state of his knife. “Go on!” he repeated. “It’s free.”

Gingerly, I raised the little red morsel to my lips. As I did so I took the opportunity to wipe the obvious dirt off it. I sniffed it. I couldn’t smell anything. I put it in my mouth, and took a large bit out of one –

“No!” the traveller screamed, waving his arms around and suddenly looking most alarmed, “not that big!”

- but it was too late, and instantly my mouth was full of fire. I spat and retched and gasped and tears flooded from my eyes. “Water!” I pleaded, gasping so that the words barely came out. The flavour was indeed indescribable. My mouth was burning. I had been poisoned! When I had recovered a little, I found I had started to throttle the traveller.

“It’s meant to be like that!” he gasped. “Let it mellow on your tongue!” The chap was starting to go blue, and as indeed the burning sensation was decaying somewhat, I reluctantly let him go. People were looking, and it wasn’t a good idea to be the centre of attention in the Castle for too long. In fact, as the heat subsided, the flavour

developed through the heat, and it was, I had to admit, not at all unpleasant.

The traveller adjusted his cap and many scarves. “Imagine that, carefully prepared, in a dish. A small amount could with skill transform any ordinary dish into a dish fit for a king!”

“Fit for the King”, I mimicked. It reminded me of something Maria had said. Well, it was worth a try. “How much did you say again?”

“Two hundred for this bunch.”

“Two hundred is too much.”

“They keep for ever.”

“One hundred.”

“One hundred and fifty.”

“They are most valuable and precious. I risked my life for them.”

“One hundred and twenty-five.”

“One hundred and twenty-five.”

We agreed on that and I took my little bunch of chillies away with me. With skill and with caution these could indeed liven up a few dishes fit for a king.

“Anything else?” I heard him call after me. “A cure for impotence maybe?” A cure for impudence is what that coarse churl needed.

So that night I prepared a stew of boar, with just enough of the little red fingers to liven up the dish and make it distinctive. “You can always add but you can never take away in cooking”, I told Konstantin. I added a little more of the chillies, carefully tasting the stew each time. It had to be distinctive, but it wouldn’t do to add too many. It made me feel quite ill to think of what might happen to me should I get it wrong and make it too hot for his Majesty. I added onions and potato and paprika for colour, and a large bunch of parsley, together with several cloves of garlic. At the last moment I squeezed in some lemons. The whole thing had a pungent smell. Indeed, it made my good eye water. It looked ordinary, but one mouthful! My eye streamed and my mouth burned a tad – but not too much. I added a little soured cream, just in case. I thought I had it just right.

The waiters put the stew in front of the King and Queen. Peeking from behind a curtain, I thought I saw the King’s jaw fall a little as he looked at the rather plain looking stew. He took a large mouthful. This was always the moment of fear and truth. Each night my heart skipped a beat at this moment. He took the stew into his mouth – and he exploded. He coughed and spluttered. Had I overdone it? I edged away from the door, slipping behind Konstantin, but as far as I could tell, all seemed well. He swallowed again, looked at the Queen – and

smiled. The rest of the Court started eating gustily now that the King had delivered a favourable a verdict. I moved forwards again, and as I did so I saw the Queen take a very large mouthful and immediately turn bright red. She tried to swallow but nothing happened. The King laughed, thumped her on the back and told her to eat some more. The Queen took out her mirror and powdered her forehead. I knew then that it was a great success. How I love my King; his wisdom and wit are infinite.

193

The Ghost was seen on the battlements last night! A sighting of the Ghost is supposed to presage death, but that's not saying much around here. Indeed, if this was really the case, I'm surprised the Ghost isn't out every night. I'm surprised there aren't two or more of them; heaven knows there'd be enough work to keep them both busy all night long, every night spare Christmas. If such things really existed, there should be legions of them, expiating sins and reliving (so to speak) past miseries, wandering up and down our endless battlements and corridors. So I take this story like my rice, with a generous pinch of salt. Doubtless it was just a swirl of cloud that the nightwatch had seen.

The story told by the footmen to the maids is that the Ghost is supposed to be that of the King's great, great grandfather. According to rumour, he was murdered - poisoned by his wife indeed. For a while the King's great grandfather employed a royal taster, and avoided anything his mother offered him, but eventually the scandal and the paranoia died down, and the Royal great grandfather realised that fear in the kitchen was the best way to guarantee culinary purity. The Ghost is said to be a pale spectre of an old bearded man, who strolls around the Castle walls groaning and clutching his stomach and pulling at his ghostly white hair, which comes out in great spectral tufts into his ethereal hands. A death invariably follows in a few days.

Tonight the King and Queen were clearly prepared for their dinner. They took smaller mouthfuls of the stew. It looked like a plain stew of grouse in port, but I'd livened it up with plenty of my new spice, and quite a bit of garlic too, just to make it really distinctive. The Queen in particular took dainty little mouthfuls, and smiled at the King after each one. They didn't go as bright a red and didn't sweat as profusely as the night before. Each time the Queen swallowed without coughing the King looked a little more disappointed. I must be careful;

perhaps they're getting used to it. Maybe a little drop more next time? Or a special dish for My Queen?

After they'd finished eating I munched away on some of the leftovers. That's how I usually eat; I snatch a few morsels after dinner. Very soon my eyes started watering and my nose was streaming. I sneezed quietly into my cloak. I nervously checked the King and Queen, but they were happy enough, laughing away, amused by a snake swallower choking. No sneezing to be heard anywhere. I was clearly allergic to something. It wasn't the chillies, for I'd had plenty of them before while I was testing my stews. Oh well. I decided to leave the rest of the meal, and have it thrown to the pigs. I wondered what they would make of the little spikes of fire. I hurried to the inn, knowing that a good beer or two would clear my nose. The Jester laughed at me as I walked by, and made me trip over my cloak. The King roared with joy, and all around him carefully burst into spontaneous laughter.

192

Friday and the King is off again to the Country. "I'm off a-hunting my dear", he told the Queen, but as everyone else seems to know what this really means, I assume that she does too. I saw the Duchess of the North peering out from a curtain at the departing party; I assume she must know as well. The complexities of royal life are not suited to a simple chef such as me. That is I suppose why God made the King the king and me a cook, and not the other way round.

It had been an unusually quiet few days, with nobody making any noticeable mistakes, and we all thought as we saw the king's jalopy disappear out of the castle over the drawbridge that we had got away rather lightly this week. We had all just finished waving the King off, and had turned away to go to our meeting, when there was a commotion, and it was at once obvious that some poor fellow had somehow slipped up after all. There was a bit of banging and the sound of breaking glass, then there were voices and screaming and then the jalopy roared into life again, and the King's party set off once more, trailing dust behind them. We quickly learned that what had happened was that as the King came roaring over the drawbridge, some unfortunate peasant laden with baskets failed to get out of the way. One of the baskets had caught the mirror on the side of the jalopy and smashed it. So the poor peasant was tied to the ground to be ridden over and trodden on by whatever came into or out of the

Castle. He was going to stay in the way now. You could still hear the occasional low moan if you listened carefully, so I made a note not to go out of the main Castle gate for a while. So it seems that he Ghost was right again; you can't catch out a ghost, it seems.

After the relatively uneventful weekly council meeting, I went for a walk in the garden. Relieved of the necessity of moving everything around for a few days, the gardeners were nowhere to be seen, probably smoking their pipes in the inn. Snowdrops wilted in the cold. I walked into the maze. In no time at all I was lost. I hadn't realised that this maze was as difficult as it was. I was starting to get annoyed; it was cold and I was getting hungry and thirsty. I wanted a beer; I wish I'd never had this stupid idea. Then I caught sight of someone else who was also clearly lost. At first, all I knew was that it was a girl, as all I could see was a dress flying around a corner. Then I saw a mass of golden hair, like a sun floating above the snow. I realised that it must be Princess Sophia.

My heart sank. I didn't want to be lost in the maze with Princess Sophia. It was nothing personal; I liked the look of Princess Sophia, liked it very much indeed in fact. I just didn't want to be lost in the maze with any princess. It was far too risky. She might take offence at my being there. She might expect me to lead her out and I was as lost as one could be. Or maybe my sporty black and white jacket might offend her. On the other hand, I couldn't see that I had many options. It's hard to lose someone when you're lost yourself. I really wished I'd never entered the damned maze. How come she was lost anyway? Had they neglected to explain the design to her? That might augur badly for Jorgen. I saw her turn left ahead, so I turned right and right again – and there she was ahead of me again. She turned right and I turned left and left again and now she was in front of me. I turned around and retraced my steps and turned a corner and to my utter mortification walked right into her.

There was no running away now, so I bowed as deeply as I could. "I am sorry, your Royal Highness, but I am most afraid that I am utterly lost."

"It's a maze", she laughed, tossing her golden curls. "You're supposed to be lost in here. Otherwise it wouldn't be very good maze, would it?"

I wondered whether this was meant rhetorically all not. I decided that it was probably safe to assume that it wasn't.

"I suppose not, Highness", I said, trying not to look up.

"You're the Cook aren't you? You can look up. You haven't done anything wrong."

I don't know whether she heard me sigh, but I was embarrassed by the palpability of my relief.

"It is a good maze", she said. "I am lost, too. It's very exciting, isn't it? Shall we escape together?"

I didn't really want to, but I could hardly say no.

"Surely, Highness, you have had the design explained to you?"

She laughed again. "They tried, but I didn't want to hear. What is the point of a puzzle to which you know the answer?" Extraordinary. "So how shall we get out?"

"It is rumoured", I offered, "that if you head straight to the middle of the maze, you come out. You must try and get as lost as possible, and then you will be free."

"I've heard that if you take the first turning on the left each time, you get out." That didn't sound at all plausible to me, but you don't want to disagree with a Princess, so we tried her idea first. Soon it was obvious that we were nowhere. "Perhaps it was that you have to turn right each time you have a choice." We followed that plan and stayed lost. So we tried heading to the centre, and that didn't help either. Of course, I thought, if it really were as simple as just following one of these idiotic rules, it wouldn't really be all that sophisticated a problem, would it?

As she led the way, I looked at her. She was beautiful. A golden mane of hair to a thin waist, and a little turned up nose, with big blue eyes. She was clothed in a voluminous white dress. How could someone as coarse and ugly (even if divinely correct) as the King produce such an angel? She didn't look at all like the Queen either. The Queen looked like a large pig; perhaps she hadn't always looked so porcine, but I couldn't remember her looking any other way, although she appeared to think that she was very slim and the most beautiful of them all. She was always looking in mirrors, and always wearing dresses that were far too small for her, with the obvious consequences. Of course, these sad events were always blamed on an unfortunate seamstress, who was invariably tightened up or popped out. Martha had always managed to avoid the blame so far. It was rumoured that all the Queen's dresses were now treble or even quadruple stitched, just to be on the safe side. Presumably it was a marriage of alliance for the King, rather than one of love. Someone had once explained all the details to me, but I forgot them almost straightaway. The life of diplomacy is not for a simple chef.

I tried not to stare at the girl. I remembered that I was cold and hungry, but I found myself admitting that this was fun. I was rather enjoying being lost with this Princess. She didn't seem to mind at all.

It suddenly started to snow; huge wet flakes drifting down out of a low yellow sky.

“Here, your Highness”, I said, inspired, “take this.” I gave her my jacket to put over her head.

“Your kindness touches me greatly. May I call you Max?”

I was pleased and somewhat surprised that she already knew my name. But then I am the First Cook, I suppose. I cook all her dinners. Whatever I thought, I could hardly say no to her; nor did I really want to.

“Of course, Majesty.”

She laughed. We turned a corner, and then all of a sudden we were out of the maze and she was going, running across the snow on the lawn. But I swear she turned back once and smiled.

190

The King returned from the country this evening, constipated. You can imagine what would happen if he were to become constipated in the Castle, so it is a relief that it is clearly a consequence of the strange food he has been eating over the last few days. The responsibility of curing the costive King, however, is shared between the Doctor and, unfortunately, the Cook. We have two days to make all well. So while Rudolf, the Royal Doctor, fills him with potions and pills, I feed him cabbages and plums and prunes and beans and lentils and strong black tea mixed with porter, and we all hope it all will come out again very, very soon.

189

The Royal bowels have moved! I am naturally very pleased about the outcome, but relieved that I was nowhere near them at the time. So no more prunes for a while; you don't want to go from one extreme to another.

After His great relief, he demanded at a late moment to have one of His favourite meals instead of the elaborate concoction I had planned. He had a nice big juicy steak of beef, oozing blood. Fortunately this sort of interference rarely happens; the King's Royal Prerogative enables him to express dislike after the fact, rather than like beforehand. But it doesn't make my life any easier, because even a simple steak is fraught with danger. It has to be just the right size and thickness. But most importantly, it has to be cooked for exactly the

right time. Two minutes and three seconds on a high heat on each side, so it's firm on the outside and bloody in the centre. And as one of my predecessors found out to his cost, the King can tell. So I am very careful with my trusty little stopwatch, and so far, all has worked out well.

188

An absolutely extraordinary thing has happened: a body has been found floating in the moat. What is more, it is apparent that it is there as a result of foul play, rather than as a consequence of some freak of nature. This sort of event is unheard of. People in the Castle have had their fill of death enough without having to murder their neighbours. How absolutely thrilling; we can talk of nothing else.

The Watchman of the hour spotted something bobbing along in the moat in the early hours. He brought a torch over, and to his surprise found that it was a body. "Five o'clock and all is not well!" This caused the few heads that were awake at the time to jerk up in surprise. But because of the snow and ice, it wasn't really possible to fish the thing out until the sun was up. It turned out to be a footman (number thirty-nine in line), and his throat had been cut from ear to ear. There was a look of horror (understandable in the circumstances, I thought) mixed with surprise frozen on his pretty – if now a trifle bloated – little face. His hands were clamped rigid to his neck as though he had died in a futile effort to staunch the flow of blood. There was something troublingly familiar about this grim visage, but I couldn't drag why out from the depths of my memory.

Franz was shaking. He was fond of the boy; very fond. The etiquette in this situation was most unclear, and there was some discussion as to who – if anyone – should take responsibility for the murder. Heinrich was on the scene before the body was fished out of the water, guided by his eerily accurate sense for finding trouble. He was talking very quickly; this had never happened before. He would have to consult the Royal Records. His initial intuition was that maybe Ludwig, the Castellan, was at fault for letting the murder happen; maybe Franz was at fault too, as the victim was a footman; maybe footman number thirty-eight (a spotty lad named Petrus) was at fault, as he was thirty-nine's immediate superior; maybe Lick, Franz's Second Footman was to blame; maybe the Watchman who saw the body was at fault; and possibly even the murderer was too. The list of possibilities that he ran through sounded endless, but I couldn't see

how my name was going to be on this one, so I just watched and enjoyed the proceedings. After some heated discussion, the consensus was that, in all likelihood, the murderer was most to blame, as without him this body wouldn't be there at all. There was just one problem with this equitable solution, which was stated with admirable clarity by Franz:

“But who's the murderer?” he asked, having recovered a little, particularly now it was established that he was well down on the list of possible responsables. He seemed surprised that we didn't know. It was as though he thought that really we did know, but were keeping it a secret from him out of spite.

Heinrich declared that it was Ludwig's responsibility to track down the murderer. Ludwig formed a group of guards and watchman, with his assistant, Sigismund, the First Watch, in charge. The group of investigators immediately rushed off and started peering into nearby doorways as if the murderer might still be hidden there, and asking questions of everyone they met. What hopeless buffoons. Very soon it was clear that they were having the time of their lives, and the group around the body dissipated. It was left to a few guards and Petrus, the superior spotty footman, to lift the body up and take it away to the Royal Chapel, where the deceased are laid out to be respected by the few who might care. In the end, all in all, it seemed that no very great harm had come out of the affair.

187

Thick ice covered the dirty cobbles of the market, making even walking treacherous. My heart sank when at first I couldn't find the traveller, but eventually I discovered him with his stall tucked away beneath an archway, with his cart half hidden by the stone pillars. He was shivering, blowing his stinking breath at his hands, trying to keep them warm, or at least stopping them freezing. He appeared to have lost another finger in the last week. What a vulgar serf: I dreaded to think what he might have done. This time I took no chances and bought two large bunches of the chillies. I wasn't at all surprised to find that their price had doubled. I bought some limes and garlic too. How did he obtain such exotica? He couldn't really travel to the South and back again every week. In spite of my bold and persistent questioning his lips remained annoyingly sealed on the matter. Bruno could loosen them, I thought.

I saw the Princess Sophia and her sister, Katharina, on the stairs. The little Princess Anna hurried along behind them like a tiny

dishevelled angel. Sophia glided down the stairs, as if suspended a few inches above the stone. I could have sworn that she winked at me. It was, however, on reflection, most unlikely. I studied them when they were past; while Sophia looked like a real princess, her elder sister did not. She looked like a version of her mother; slightly porcine. Indeed, she was distinctly plump; too much of my food can be a bad thing. She peered at me from behind thick spectacles. For reasons that weren't entirely clear to me she trailed a tape measure behind her. She crossed herself when she saw me and muttered something under her breath. Sophia on the other hand was such a seraphic vision that it burned my eyes merely to look at her. She didn't look at one little bit like the King or Queen.

That evening I cooked the King a lovely dish of a pear poached in melted ice and chillies, and sitting in the mouth of a suckling pig. He was pleased enough. The Queen didn't seem best pleased – I don't think she likes these chillies – but then what do I care about that?

186

I sat in the inn with Jorgen, sharing a flagon of ale, after having served a meal of lamb cutlets garnished with mashed potato arranged so that the cutlets looked like real little lambs. The whole thing had gone off pretty well, except for a footman who knocked the footman who was serving, so that a piece of potato fell off one of the King's chops, thereby spoiling the effect a little. The unfortunate chap was taken away to be completely dehaired, which didn't sound as if it was going to be as bad as it might have been for him. The King was clearly in a good mood that evening.

The haze of smoke in the inn was so dense that I could barely see Jorgen's face across the table. The place was packed; I recognised quite a few of the people there. From somewhere nearby I could hear Jakob in animated discussion about something with Ludwig.

"I really can't remember the last time there was a murder, you know", said Jorgen. "It's a rum do all right."

"Who would ever want to hurt a lowly footman? They have a hard enough job as it is."

"Franz seemed pretty upset about it."

Hermann joined us. I felt completely happy in this place, with my friends, in my home. We drained our glasses.

"Well", I said, "another flagon I suppose?" I stood up, and smash, a glass broke upon my head, and red wine trickled down my neck.

“You clumsy fool”, said Viktor. He had been standing behind me. If anyone was a fool it was he for suspending a glass above my head, and I told him so. He was clearly the worse for his drink, and he didn’t take at all well to being told the truth. The inn suddenly went silent in joyful anticipation of a fight, but my heart wasn’t in it, and we grudgingly shook hands. I even bought him another glass of wine when I collected our next flagon, only for him to point out that the vintage was inferior to the one he’d originally had. There’s just no pleasing some people; they’ve clearly been around the King too long.

185

Friday morning dawned just like any other Friday morning of late; cold and grey, with a little snow in the air, but full of anticipation of a respite as the King heads to the country to do a spot of “shooting”. Just before our Council meeting, we gather around the drawbridge to wave the King off. A pageboy lifts the King’s train over the edge of the jalopy, His Majesty settles his majestic frame into the car, Rochus the chauffeur lowers his goggles and cranks the engine up, and after several turns of the handle, the motor eventually starts, the engineers breathe an audible sigh of relief, and off they go. We are in the process of turning away, the waves dying on our arms, when bang! Bang! Clatter and more bangs! The motor stops, and we turn round to see the jalopy grind to a halt. It had only gone a couple of yards when one of its rubber tyres received a puncture. The tyre exploded, the car collapsed, its axle scraping the cobbles, the motor stopped, and the King was thrown a few inches forward, banging his delicate forehead on the back of Rochus’s head. The world fell silent.

Now who was responsible for this mess? Heinrich was already on the scene. The King was rubbing his head, which Doctor Rudolf rushed forward to inspect. He only had seventy days left, and he didn’t want to mess this up. The King was laid out on a stretcher, and two young nurses rubbed his forehead while Rudolf made up a poultice.

Soon it was apparent that the Royal bonce had not been badly banged, and after the King had received sufficient sympathy and admiration for his bravery, he was soon up and hopping mad. Rochus was the obvious culprit. After all, he had driven the jalopy a few yards, and might not his careless driving have caused the puncture? Furthermore, the back of his head was in the way of the front of the King’s head as the royal skull was propelled forward. Yes, perhaps it

was obvious that Rochus was to blame, and something very bad would happen to the back of his skull.

“But sire!” protested Rochus with a stroke of genius that all of us who get to be close to our Time must surely possess in part, “surely I saved your life! If it had not been for the back of my head, who knows what would have happened! You could have been thrown yards forward, and landed on the hard gravel, and without my head to break your fall, you might have been horribly hurt, or you might even have ... died!” This obvious exaggeration made the King stop and think, if only for a moment.

“Where is the engineer who prepared the jalopy?” asked Heinrich. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Why should he have been? Was there just one engineer who was solely responsible? Why should he watch the jalopy’s every journey in case there was a puncture?

“I don’t know”, muttered Jakob. Why should he know? Yet as soon as he said it you could see that he wished he hadn’t put it quite as starkly.

“You don’t know?” said the King and Heinrich in surprised unison, turning round to stare at him.

“Who is responsible for maintaining this road?” asked Jakob, blustering, hoping to deflect blame on to Viktor. “The road should have been cleared of dangerous objects that might have caused the puncture.”

“The road is outside of the Castle”, said Viktor. “We are not responsible for it.”

Then who was? Some one must look after the roads, but after extensive discussion, it was clear that no one knew who it was. Or if they did, no one was saying.

Heinrich continued this train of thought. “You, however, as Royal Engineer, are clearly responsible for the performance of his Majesty’s motors.” He leant over and polished the buckles on his shoes.

Things were starting to look bad for Jakob. It was clear now that he was in a great deal of trouble. Some people who might have been deemed responsible were drifting away, not wishing to become too involved. I hung around, because I wanted to see what happened, and I couldn’t see anyway how this could be blamed on me. No one was going to say that it was all a consequence of what the tyre ate last night.

Jakob looked quite pale. “Look!” he said, dropping to his knees and scrambling around on the ground by the remnants of the exploded tyre, “there must be something here ...” It was distressing to see a good man losing his dignity. His nose was muddy from peering so closely at the ground, and his spectacles were covered in little flicks

of mud and ice. "Ah! There's a nail!" He held it up triumphantly. "There's another one ..." So what? It had already been established that whoever was responsible for the road couldn't be found, whoever it was. Jakob had the misfortune of being here.

"Why are your tyres not stronger?" asked the King.

Jakob crumpled into the mud. "Sire, that's not fair!" he said.

There was a pause. "Fair?" roared the King. "Fair? Fair?" Clearly this word had offended him greatly. "Take ... him ... away!" He was so apoplectic with rage that he could barely spit these last words out. "Puncture ... him!" Pause, splutter, splutter. "Slowly! Very slowly!"

Then Jakob started grovelling. Some of them do. You can't predict who's going to do it and who's not. You think of some people as being strong and dignified, yet when they hear their Judgement, they weep and grovel and beg, whereas others - sometimes those you had formerly considered weaklings - take it with stoic dignity. Some even thank His Majesty. Jakob though turned out to be a real groveller, and the final loss of a man's dignity is an ugly site. What's worse, it's hopeless, and everyone knows that: the King has never changed his mind after passing a Judgement, even if later information subsequently proves that his initial perspective was incorrect. Sometimes he then makes The Judgement still extreme just to make the point that he is King and we are responsible, whether we know it or not. Our King is infallible, even when he's wrong.

Once, many cooks before me, His Majesty had a troubled stomach. The Cook took the blame, suspicion falling on a rather rare omelette of rather rare auk eggs. The Judgement was that the Cook was to have his stomach removed, slowly, and shown to him as an example of what a healthy stomach should look like, so that he might better know how to keep them that way. The next day it was observed that no one else who had eaten the omelette was ill, whereas everyone who had eaten snacks of sausage sold by a stall in the Market was. The King had just ridden by, speared the sausage on his sword, and consumed it. When this was widely known, did the King reverse the Judgement? It was unfortunate, he said, but it would set a precedent. And anyway, there was still a lesson there for everyone. And by the way, the Cook had better have his tongue out first, to teach him not to protest. Later that day both the innocent Cook and the guilty street trader met their middles.

So Jakob's pathetic display of emotion wasn't going to get him anywhere. Bruno gently lifted him up by the armpits; he was sobbing and imploring now, and his glasses fell off, and he trod them into the ground as he struggled. Bruno quickly led him sadly away to the dungeon; he looked a sorry sight, like some depressed bat caught in

the sunlight. By this time Cuthbert, the new Royal Engineer (only three hundred and sixty five days to go!), beaming all over his cadaverous face, had a new tyre on the car, and off the Royal Jalopy went once more, this time disappearing without incident into the misty distance.

But there was something slightly puzzling about the whole affair. Where had those nails come from, we wondered? Someone observed that there were five of them, equally spaced, in a straight line, but Cuthbert said it was just a freak of nature. We sometimes look for patterns where there are none.

It was a sober Council Meeting when we eventually settled down later that morning, well behind schedule. Cuthbert had recovered his decorum, and was now managing to look suitably glum. I wondered about those nails, though. People never create responsibility; heaven knows there's enough of it already. Bruno arrived late, out of breath. His hands smelled of medicinal soap. "Sorry", he said, "busy". We didn't like to enquire too closely about the current status of poor old Jakob. I felt sorry for Bruno; I think he got on tolerably well with Jakob. It is just a job though, is it not?

"First", said Charles, bringing us to order, "perhaps we can spare a few moments to reflect upon the sad loss of our good friend Jakob," We did. We sat silently for a few minutes thanking God that it wasn't us. I stared at my hands on the table. I don't like these moments of quiet reflection. I worry that my good eye is doing something very different from my bad one. "Next, I'd like to take this opportunity of welcoming Mr. Cuthbert to our group, as the new First Engineer." Hear hears and applause all around. Cuthbert started beaming again. Then we settled into the routine of going round with our weekly reports. This week there wasn't a lot to talk about, and what there was had been rather put into the shade by the events of the last few hours.

"Finally", said Charles, "perhaps Mister Ludwig can tell us if there has been any progress in finding a solution to the murder of that footman?"

"In the confidence of this table", said the First Castellan, "I must admit that we have not made much progress. Indeed, to be strictly accurate, we have made no progress at all. A drunken sot in the street told the Nightwatch that he thought he had seen two boys out that night, but he was so much in his cups I doubt if we can be sure that it was the same night. We have checked all the page boys down to number sixty, and they all appear to be accounted for that night. We will check the others, but it is all rather baffling."

"So what are you going to do?" asked Heinrich.

“I am open to suggestions” said Ludwig. No one had any. I stared at my thumbs again, and tried to count the number of small cuts inflicted by decades of sharp cooking knives. It was a long silence before Heinrich finally broke it, wishing us well on our ways.

183

Our refrigerating machine broke last night. It appears that the gas supply had somehow been cut off. When we came down to the kitchen this morning there was a large pool of water on the floor, and the early morning cooks were busily trying to clean the mess up. When we opened the door, it was clear that much of the frozen food would have to be thrown away. I sighed at the waste, but better safe than sorry. I was most attached to my stomach.

182

The Ghost has been busy lately. He’s been spotted on the battlements quite a few times the last couple of nights. But for me, tonight, there was to be an evening of pleasure.

It was a free night, with the King busy. As usual of late, I enjoyed it with my maid.

“But Max”, Maria said, resting on her cute little arms after a particularly exhausting and rather weird spell of passion, “what are you going to do if you reach your Time?”

“Every night I dream about this. I love cooking, really. I like cooking simple food, well. This complex dishes I prepare for his Majesty’s royal intestines leave my tongue cold. I want to devote my life to doing properly what I’m currently doing just to please. I’m going to head for the south, and spend my days reclining in the sun, and evenings running a little inn. People will come for miles because of the acclaimed simplicity of my food. There will be no food more simple than what I cook. A hundred and eighty two days to go! And what about you, my little cherub?” I squeezed her breast.

“I’ve worked out that at the current rate of progress I’ve got another seventeen years eight months and twenty one days before I get to be the new Eufemia, let alone worry about the three hundred and sixty five days after that. What I need”, she giggled, “is for maids to be found as flotsam in the moat, not footmen”. And then she was busy again. Where do the young find such energy? It perplexes me.

It was very curious that Maria should have said what she did, because two days later, that's exactly what happened.

The pattern of the second murder was much the same as the first. Everything was very hush hush, because the King had returned from the Country, and no one was quite sure how things had gone with the Royal Rod, so who wanted to confuse things yet further? Early in the morning there was a small commotion in the courtyard as Sigismund and his merry band of investigators gathered around. In spite of their sad efforts at acting normally (how you should you act when you're staring at a bloated corpse?), they of course drew attention to themselves, and a small crowd soon gathered. The gathering made more noise, and then a bigger crowd gathered, until very soon we were all out there, peering around. We learned that what had happened had been that the Night Watch (number sixteen), walking along the battlements in the first glow of the dismal winter dawn, had thought that he had seen the ghost. The shock made him feel faint, and he put his hand against the wall to steady himself. He leant over, and in the faint light saw something bobbing around in the muddy water. A rescue party was launched, but it was too late. It was a maid; I didn't recognise her, but both Agatha and Eufemia were soon on the scene, and they identified her as number twenty-eight. She had been stabbed in the back, but this time some effort had been made to hide the corpse, as a large stone had apparently been tied around its waist; however, the stone had evidently fallen off as the body was pushed into the water, or at least soon afterwards, declared Sigismund, and the corpse had risen to the surface. How he worked all this out I could not say, although it was true that there was a rope around the corpse's waist. People don't usually wear rope. Needless to say, no one had heard any big splashes. Doctor Rudolf arrived on the scene, but there's little you can do for someone who's been floating around in dank icy water for a few hours with a big hole in her back.

Once again there were so many people who might have potentially taken responsibility that no one offered themselves. I ruminated that if I were a member of the little band of detectives I'd be starting to wish with fervour that the King never got to hear of this – at least until the murderer was apprehended. Then I would make a big fuss about my success. But we were all shocked; we weren't used to this sort of random brutality. Who could hurt a pretty slip of a girl like that? What a waste it seemed; wanton loss where loss comes so easily.

Today, Viktor, the Chief Steward makes his time. As ever there is a great ceremony of passage. I never liked the man, but he never did me any great harm, so I can't hold that against him. I find that I feel pleased, pleased on his behalf. He said that he was off to the country where he was going to spend the rest of his life being served by the most sycophantic servants he could find. You could see his point of view.

Traditionally the Time ends with sunset on the designated day, but by tradition the incumbent is allowed the day as a free day. He or she has the day from sunrise in post, and if anything should go wrong – well, it is overlooked, unless it is really bad, in which case number two will take the fall (unless they can pass the blame down the line); except, that is, if it is really, really bad - and that has been known to happen! One must be for ever alert. Only the incumbent has this privilege though! So although it is a day of rejoicing, we all have to be on our toes. Indeed the celebration of The Time can lead to its own difficulties. Several years ago the party for the seamstress who was stepping down got out of hand: many of us got out a little too merry, and made a little too much noise. The King was woken from his afternoon nap, and someone had to pay. Someone tried remonstrating with His Highness that generosity should be showed at a Time, and someone lost their tongue. So although we celebrate, we now do so in a circumspect fashion.

First, we all dress up in brilliant red, except for the incumbent, who wears a white shroud. Then we all join hands. The departing incumbent stands in the middle of the circle. They then make a speech and suggest a toast. They are free to toast whomsoever they like, but it would be unprecedented to toast anyone other than the King. No one has ever tried it; it's one of the few things that could go very wrong on the last day. Word always seems to get around. I don't quite know how, but it's just one of those things. Our great King is omniscient.

"My friends and colleagues!" said Viktor, "I'm sure you can imagine how I feel today. We all dream of this day, when we leave our post, full of satisfaction of having served our King well, and having performed to the best of our ability, knowing that our best has indeed been good enough. Up to this point in my life there has been nothing but uncertainty and promise; now there is certainty and achievement". I thought it to be rather a good speech, so far, if already a little too long. "For the last thirty years I dared hardly hope that I might attain

my Time. Now I wish you all the luck in future that I have had in the past. Obviously we have not always agreed. Obviously there are occasions of conflict when it is not always clear where the responsibility has lain. Please, let's forget about those times. I give you ... His Majesty and good luck!" At this point we all down our glasses of wine. The tradition used to be that the glasses were then tossed high in the air and allowed to fall to the ground and smash, but ever since the episode with the noise, more caution has been employed in this part of the tradition. Now they are caught again (largely), and we don't throw them up very high. Eufemia missed hers, but one breaking glass wouldn't bother the King. Probably. Eufemia went red and moved her head from side to side.

Then we all hold our arms aloft over the incumbent's head. A little band strikes up a dignified (but quiet) little march in a corner of the courtyard. The lucky person bows three times, turns around twice anticlockwise, and walks out of our circle in a gap that opens up facing south. "Time!" shouts the Chamberlain as loudly as he feels able at the stroke of the midday bell, and bangs a brass gong. At that point the formal duties of the previous incumbent end. Now we spend a few seconds in limbo, as the new incumbent walks into the centre of our circle. "Let the cycle begin again!" shouts the Chamberlain, quietly. Then he has to bang his gong three times. He turns around twice clockwise, and then the formal duties of the new incumbent begin. The old number two is the new number one.

(Then over the rest of the day other little traditions are enacted, as number threes become number twos, and number fours become number threes, and so on, all the way down to number a hundred. As we go lower down the scale, the tradition becomes of less and less significance. In most cases, barely a grunt and a passing of a certificate, and a stroke of a pen in the records. And of course these lower ranks do not share the primary incumbent's leeway in making an error.)

We all cheer the new Royal Steward. His name is Eberhard. Then we toast the King again. Eberhard is smiling, but he knows that the next year will be the longest of his life. His feelings at this time will be a curious and ever-shifting mixture of joy, pleasure, anticipation, and fear.

We turn away and watch Viktor get into his open-top carriage. Not for him, the expense and fuss of a jalopy, but it is a fine carriage nevertheless. His wife joins him. (Did I know he had a wife? And I thought I knew everything that happens in the Castle. Truly is each day sent to humble us.)

"Goodbye, my friends!" he says. He can barely contain his ecstasy. "Good luck, my dear friends!" He waves, he turns around, the horse

begins to trot off, they pass out of the gate, we turn away, both a little sadder and a little happier, when there is a bang - or rather, a loud thud - and a scream and a horrible squelching sound, and another scream, a different scream, this one of distressed, stunned, misery. We turn back and run to the carriage; a loose stone has fallen from the battlement, tearing away the icicles that adorned it, tumbling to the ground, and smashing Viktor's head as though it were a duck's egg.

178

I didn't like Viktor much, but I found his death upsetting - more upsetting than I would have thought. It seems so unfair. He kept the vicissitudes of a difficult job at bay, and then an icy rock falls on his head. It is a reminder to me that however hard we try, there are things that we cannot control. I feel humbled again; will I ever learn my place in the great scheme of things?

The King went down to the stables this morning, and learnt that his prize mare was with foal. He was overjoyed by this discovery. Apparently Florian sighed audibly with exasperation, as this was likely to cause him nothing but tribulation, but His Majesty, if he heard it, took it for a sigh of pleasure. The mare is indeed a beautiful animal. She towers over me, and her skin is the deepest shade of chestnut.

After my afternoon nap, I saw the Princess Katharina on my way. I bowed deeply and lingered for a moment, hoping that Princess Sophia might also be around, but there was no sign of her. Katharina ignored me. She seemed to be intent on measuring the length of the corridor and scribbling the results down in a little notebook. A footman was holding the other end of the tape measure. Then she started measuring the height of the ceiling. Princess Anna stood by with her thumb in her mouth, staring intently at her older sister. I stepped cautiously over the tape, bowed deeply again, and hurried to the kitchen.

Dinner tonight was a roast heron, with a cooked mackerel in its bill. It was remarkably difficult to get the mackerel to stay put. I was glad that I had ditched the idea of a live mackerel at an early stage. The difficulty of our task was not eased by an interruption from a very junior but precocious cook, number seventy-two, who started twittering on about making a glue with flour and boiled fish bones. I stared at him with incredulity. I left it to Hermann to explain to him that junior chefs don't speak until they're spoken to, and got back to my task of balancing the heron's bill along the length of the mackerel's spine.

I worried that the dinner might have been a little bony. After all, no one could say that I hadn't been warned about bones. Fortunately, tonight the King came to the table very drunk, and proceeded to drink another three bottles of wine, so the great epicure didn't really notice the details of the culinary tableau in front of him.

I must ensure that – if I get that far - my final creation is my greatest, but I have as yet no idea what it might be.

177

A slightly curious thing has happened: a guard has been found dead at his post. He appeared to have died while on duty in the middle of the night. His relief found him staring out at the horizon, his eyes blank. He was a young man, and Doctor Rudolf admitted to being baffled by the cause of death. Perhaps the cold had got to him. There was some discussion about whether being dead on watch without permission was a dereliction of duty. Eventually Heinrich stated that while he clearly was both derelict and responsible for it, nothing of any worth could now be done about it, and the dungeon was far too busy with remediating live people to be bothered with remediating frozen corpses. This sounded eminently sensible, and after a while the fuss died down, and we all got on with the business of the day. In my case this was filleting a pike, the main attraction of which was that it had rather a lot of teeth. I thought I could make those into a feature. A fleeting worry about odd fishes two days in a row passed through my mind, but I thought the dishes were sufficiently different for it not to be a problem.

The King woke in the early afternoon with a dreadful headache. More work for Rudolf, who made His Majesty a concoction of herbs and raw eggs. For a moment I worried that my pike might become involved, but very quickly one of the footmen was taken away to be given a few drinks too many himself, as he was deemed responsible for letting His Majesty have a glass too many.

176

Today I took my weekly exercise and walked the battlements. It takes a surprisingly long time to do, and I always feel quite exhausted by the end of it. Not only is it a fair distance, but there innumerable places where you have to go up and down stairs and ramps, and travel along straight staircases and

twisting ones. There are some taller turrets that you have to walk round. You get the impression that the Castle must have been built in several attempts, and doesn't always follow an obvious plan. In some places you can get a good view down into the many parts of the Castle, into the great courtyard, the market, the shops, the different quarters, and in some places private quarters. Those are the places I like best. You can look down over the shanty town on the far side of the wall, and pick out emaciated people digging in the ground or searching through the piles of rubbish for a rotten apple. Sometimes I even look out across the countryside, although the great distances involved usually make me feel dizzy and nauseous.

You meet people, too. You meet people doing their jobs; the guards who watch over us, and others on errands or important little missions. Sometimes you meet others, like me, just up there for the fun of it, enjoying our home. Today I saw a one-eyed raven perched on a spire, looking at me longingly. I've never met any ghosts, though, but I prefer to amble in the daylight, just in case.

And then you can look down on life, people going about their tasks, everyone in their place, each with their purpose, and you thank the King, for making things so natural and so right.

175

I met Jorgen in his rose garden. He was trying to produce a new type of rose that was to be named after the Queen. It had therefore to be perfect: the perfect colour, the perfect size, the perfect scent, the perfect shape, and with the perfect petals. What's more, she had demanded, it mustn't have any thorns. This was causing him a great deal of difficulty. He had no idea how to breed a rose without thorns.

"I've made this beautiful rose", he said, showing me a bloom, "that is so close to being perfect. It is the best that I have ever created." It was indeed exquisite; a stunning shade of dark red, and with the sweetest, heaviest scent I had ever smelt.

"It does, of course", he said, "have the most terrible flaw."

It was obvious: the stalks had numerous, enormous, preternaturally sharp thorns. "Ouch", I said, pricking my finger on one without even trying. It stung quite badly; there was blood. I felt faint.

"The better I make the flower", he said sadly, "the larger the thorns become. The more beautiful the scent, the sharper they become. I fear Her Majesty might be starting to lose patience."

"Have you managed to breed any without thorns?" I asked.

He led me on a lengthy walk through the nursery. Right at the back was a small, deformed looking rose bush that had smooth, straight stalks. Unfortunately they carried tiny, misshapen flowers of a rather unpleasant, sickly shade of pink. Even from a distance I could smell the disgusting stench of carrion. Hundreds of flies buzzed in a smoke-like swarm around the bush.

“Oh dear”, I said, “oh dear.”

“The question is, can I put her Majesty off for a hundred and sixty-five days?” Then it will be Arthur’s problem.” Arthur was his current trusty number two; he had followed him for years. “Or can I get rid of the thorns first? And summer is a busy time. His Majesty does enjoy his summer walks around the garden. And the grass has to be just so. He found a mole hole the other day. We eventually caught the mole, and the King sent him to Bruno for education and remediation. But also we had to send number twenty-four, whose responsibility the lawn was that day, to be remediated as well. He is still buried in his mole hole. You can hear him whimpering occasionally if you put your ear to the ground.”

“Poor lad. But he knew the rules.”

“I don’t think”, said Jorgen, “that even His Majesty can realistically expect to control nature.” He sounded very wise sometimes, even if his talk was occasionally dangerous.

We walked on, wondering whether the King really believed that his powers were truly limitless.

We walked down the path beside the old yew tree. This venerable tree was one of the few things in the garden that it was accepted couldn’t be moved. A few journeymen were moving piles of rotten leaves around the lawn. I could smell winter’s decay in the air.

“Look what I found”, said Jorgen, taking something from his pocket. It was a lump of black rock, but in it was an indentation that formed a perfect picture of a seashell.

“This is a fossil”, he said. “I keep finding them in the garden.”

“What does His Majesty think of them?”

“I doubt if he’s noticed.”

“It is rather small, I agree.”

I wondered if the chap in the mole hole had found a fossil too, and if so, what he made of it all.

The price of the “chillies” has gone up greatly today. This is a particular shame, as the King seems to be adapting to their great heat. Even the Queen doesn’t seem as taken aback by them as she was at first. I have to put more and more of the little things in to get any effect. The royal couple are becoming inured to their burn. I curse the traveller, but pay him nevertheless. I resolve that I must find something else new.

“You are nothing better than a common thief”, I say.

“You insult me sir. We all have to make a living. In the market, market forces rule.” What an impudent oaf this rogue is. I swear that his carbuncle is bigger today. I’ll wager that this time next week it will be bigger than his nose. Perhaps it feeds upon his greed. I pray that it will explode, and that will teach the cur.

“Pah”, I try and say, as scornfully as possible, but in my heart of hearts, who can blame him? “Fiddlesticks”, I say, handing over the money. He belches in my face; his foetid breath hits my delicate nose and offends my sensitive nostrils. Although I appreciate his business acumen, I really can’t abide his insolence and his damnable vulgarity. “You really are uncommonly common, sir”, I say, mustering as much condescension as I can muster. Turning away, I trip over one of the reclining mendicants, and curse him with all my vigour. What an unpleasant place this market has become.

This morning I spend with Hermann filling our two vacancies. We interview young chaps from all around the country, each aspiring to be a future Royal Cook. In spite of the dangers of the job, the rewards are great, and the young are brave and foolhardy. Nothing can happen to me, they think. They feel that they are invulnerable. They probably do not realise that it is much easier to get in than it is to get out - with all their digits attached. Most of them don’t get past number fifty. I take great pride in choosing the right people; I have all of their interests at heart. Not to mention, my reputation and bones depend upon their skill.

So we take great care with these interviews. There are many things to ponder, and the process takes all morning. I am pleased that Hermann takes as much care as I do. Of course, one day soon (I hope – but not too soon), he will be in my place, and he will depend on them too. We stare into the soul and stomach of each lad.

After a light lunch of leftover chillies, I went for a walk in the maze. It took me some time to find it; today it was hidden behind the rose garden. I had some dim memory that it had been there a few

weeks ago, which might have been an error on the part of the journeyman responsible for positioning it today. I found the centre easily enough today, and sat in the little chair, shivering, but pleased with the quiet. I reflected that it hadn't been an easy time recently. It was as though we were entering a new age of uncertainty.

In spite of the cold, the great confusion had addled my brains, and I slipped into a fitful doze. I started to dream; nasty dreams, where I made the most simple of errors, like forgetting to put salt in the soup, and the King took me to task for it. Unimaginable horrors faced me, and I awoke from the nightmare with a start. In my dream the King had been attempting to remove all the salt from my body. Perhaps I even screamed.

“Shhhh”, said a comforting voice beside me. I jumped again. It was Princess Sophia. Never had she looked more lovely than today. How had she crept up on me in my slumbers?

“Highness”, I said, trying to stand and curtsy and wake up at the same time. She was alone.

“How are things with you, Max? You seem troubled.” A simple gold torc hung around her neck.

“These are not comfortable times.”

“My father is not an easy man. But he tries his best. We must all attempt to walk a path of justice. To help those we love when we can.”

“I am sure your father – His Majesty – loves us all with the utmost benevolence and –“

“Ah”, she said, almost sadly, “you think so?” She looked down, and she looked so sad, so beautiful, so vulnerable, that I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her. Fortunately I was strong enough to resist the temptation. A chef needs his lips.

“Max, will you be my friend, as I am your friend?”

“Of course, your Highness, whatever you command.”

She sighed again, even more deeply. “I do not command it, I merely ask it.” She was playing with a lock of her hair in a most charming and somewhat provocative fashion.

“Who could refuse such a favour? Not me.”

“You mean it?”

“Of course.”

“What are you cooking us tonight, Max?” she asked.

“I'm not sure yet”, I replied. “Something hot and spicy I suppose.”

“Make it nice”, she said, “for me”. And then a wondrous thing happened: she kissed me on the cheek. And then she was gone, leaving me hot and most bemused, and not a little worried.

I am at a loss, and there is now an emptiness at the heart of my soul. I frolic with my slut, but I no longer see her face when we couple. Why oh why are we all so fickle?

172

The kitchen is as hot as I imagine hell to be, even in the depths of winter. You come down in the morning, and any frost that might have formed on those tiny windows up near the roof will have already been melted by the searing heat of the ovens. I remember when I was young, and just one of the lowly cooks, how I hated having to get up very early in the morning, to help clean the kitchen and light the ovens. Fortunately it's some years since I've had to do menial things like that.

The kitchen is a busy place to be, except in the depths of the night, in that small window between the final washing, scrubbing, and clearing away, and the lighting of the fires. There are a hundred and ninety-nine cooks under me, although of course not all of them will be on duty at any one time. But usually there are at least fifty people in the kitchen, rushing around, each preoccupied with their own task, as they strive to complete the evening's comestibles on time and to perfection. As dinner approaches, the kitchen fills with footmen and maids and sometimes Charles and Heinrich, just to check that everything is as it should be.

With so many people behaving so hectically, from time to time accidents will happen. It's how you recover from them that's important. Life in the kitchen is not so harsh as before the King; I don't send a cook off for remediation just because he makes a mistake. No, it's the final product that counts.

Tonight I saw a cook treating his knife with disrespect. He seemed to be playing a game with his colleague; "be careful with that knife", I said. Our knives are sharp. He smirked, but did as he was told. Then a few minutes later there was a bang and a scream. Somehow the clumsy oaf had managed to collide with another lowly chef, who was carrying a saucepan full of hot stock. In spite of my exhortations, he'd still been fiddling with his knife, and had managed to nick the other person - quite deeply if the amount of blood was anything to go by. The other unfortunate clod dropped the pan, and hot stock went everywhere - but mostly over the fool with the knife. So someone was screaming from being covered in boiling water, and someone was screaming from having been stabbed in the arm. Now if this had happened in front of the King - well, no doubt there'd be a double remediation

tonight for Bruno to attend to, no doubt involving all manner of very sharp, very hot things. But I make them stop screaming and clear up their mess. Let's hope they learn from the incident. If they don't, they won't be here long. As it is, there is always the nagging thought that this incident might have consequences. Suppose the King finds his sauce a little dry tonight? Not quite enough stock in it? Who will be held responsible for that? Certainly not me. I scold them with this thought, describing what could happen as graphically as possible, and they look suitably stricken and ashen-faced. I then send them to tend to their wounds, hoping their apparent fear is genuine.

171

I spent some time in the evening applying various lotions and ointments to my face. I had bought them from a bright-faced maiden in the market this week. She said that they were guaranteed to remove wrinkles and keep the purchaser looking young. They stank a little, and after a while started to sting, so I decided to err on the side of caution, and washed them away. I immediately wondered whether this might have been a mistake, as I was sure that my wrinkles looked even deeper and firmer set than before. And then I started sneezing.

168

A day of three disasters. First, in the morning, a maid, number twenty-six, is found at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck. It is unclear whether or not she fell; she probably just tripped with her heavy tray of silver teapots, but perhaps she was pushed. A few days ago we would not have even thought that it could have been anything other than an accident, but with things as they have been lately ... The poor girl had such a look of surprise on her simple, pretty little face, it made me quite want to weep. These are truly troubled times. Ludwig and Sigismund and their band of detectives prodded the corpse in the hope that it might reveal something, but number twenty-six was keeping things close to her chest. Doctor Rudolf shook his head and said he could tell nothing from the body. After a while, everyone agreed that it was in all probability merely an unfortunate accident. In truth, we were all happier if this were the case, and it was clear that no real effort was going to be made to uncover the facts. Sometimes it is

better to believe an improbable possibility than a possible probability. We are in truth getting a little familiar with the sudden and inexplicable loss of maids. Nevertheless, it set an evil pall on the start of the day.

“Humph”, said Charles, “it is only a maid”. Whether he said this to jolly us all up, or whether it was just a reflection of his dislike of maids, I could not say.

Meanwhile, Cuthbert had been working on completing Jakob’s legacy, the wonderful and legendary engine of semi-automatic remediation. Seeking to curry early favour with His Majesty, he pronounced it finished. We all trudged off, with no great enthusiasm, to the courtyard, where there was to be a demonstration. I could tell Bruno was particularly perturbed, although he hid his emotions well, because it might at best restrict his creative instinct, and at worst could potentially put him out of a job. Who knows: one day semi-automatic remediation, the next day fully automatic remediation? And who could be in more immediate need of early remediation than a suddenly redundant remediator?

None of us was really sure what this engine looked like, or even exactly what it did. When we arrived in the courtyard, Cuthbert was adjusting knobs and dials on a large wooden box. The box was a yard square, and more than a couple of yards high, with a large metal dish on the top that was being carefully aimed at the sun (or where the sun should be, low down behind the thick winter clouds) by one of Cuthbert’s assistants. His Majesty was impatiently tapping the ground with a walking stick. Princess Katharina appeared from nowhere with her trusty little tape measure, and measured the precise size of the cabinet, inside and out. She wrote some numbers down in her notebook, frowned as if in puzzlement, and stepped back.

“Bring him on!” he boomed. Bruno led out footman number eighty-four, a lad called Helmut, whom I remember occasionally seeing skulking around the Castle. He had unfortunately tripped over his own feet while carrying the King’s night-time glass of milk to the Royal Bedchamber. Of course, no footman as lowly as eighty-four would ever get close to the King, but it delayed the chain further up. Not only was the milk spilt, but also it was spilt all over the front of Meinrad, the fifth footman, who was to take it to the King. So there were two sources of delay: one while more milk was fetched from my kitchen, and another while Meinrad hurriedly changed. As a result of this fiasco, the King received his night-time drink some seconds after the bell stopped chiming eleven. This horror had never happened before; His Majesty quite rightly exploded with rage. It was obvious whose responsibility this all was: clumsy-clot, bungling, idiotic, ham-legged Helmut’s. If he’d been a bit higher up the chain of command,

he might have been able to find a more lowly footman to whom to pass the responsibility, or he might have been able to motivate Franz to call Eberhard to account for maintaining such an uneven staircase, but eighty-four ... those poor at their job get weeded out an early stage. No, clearly eighty-four was going to take the blame and there was no way out of it for him. As soon as the incident happened, the only unanswered question was what would his Judgement be.

There was some deliberation. At first, the King and Heinrich wanted to teach the boy a lesson by boiling him in milk, taking him out a few seconds late, but Cuthbert, keen on catching the King's eye at an early stage of his Time, persuaded them that he needed a willing subject on whom to demonstrate the now completed semi-automatic extractor. Thus it was that we were all gathered around the courtyard, still slightly troubled by the premature death of the maid, to witness the machine's operation. Helmut was dragged to the box. His eyes opened with fear when it was opened; I'm ashamed to say that it was obvious that he immediately wet himself. The King cleared his throat, pointedly. Helmut was pushed rudely into the box, and held in place while he was strapped tightly into position. He let out an unearthly piercing wail that quite set my teeth on edge. Fortunately, Cuthbert's assistants quickly gagged the boy with a large metal knob that went into his mouth, and that was held in place by straps around the ears and chin. His eyes opened even wider – in as much as that was possible. He was shaking so much I swear the box started to judder.

“See!” said Cuthbert, pulling levers. Small metal spikes came out of the woodwork and pressed lightly against the terrified teenager's skin. I fear by the stench that at this point the boy soiled himself, but fortunately the door was then shut and locked tight.

“Now”, said Cuthbert, “if your Majesty were to please specify a duration for remediation...”

“Two minutes - no, ten - no, five! Make it five!” boomed His Highness, obviously trying to draw a balance between immediate gratification and ensuring that the Judgement was apt.

Cuthbert fiddled with a dial. “Now”, he said, “off it goes”, and he pulled a large red switch down to the ground. Princess Katharina stepped forward again and started her stopwatch. At first there was just a slight humming that quickly became quite loud, and then this became a buzzing, and then the whole cabinet started vibrating. The Engineer stood back, beaming all over his face. All went well for a few moments, but then, unfortunately, a little wisp of black smoke started appearing from the box; whether from the apparatus, or whether from the poor subject inside, we were pleased not to be able to determine. I saw the sweat start to glisten on Caruthers's forehead. Then the

buzzing became a roar, and the vibration became increasingly violent. In a few moments more the cabinet was shaking violently from side to side, and then up and down, all the time emitting a roaring that was for ever becoming louder and more dissonant. The wisp turned into a waterfall of smoke and fumes. Cuthbert and his team of assistants were running around by now, prodding the box and flipping dials, all to no obvious avail. Clearly something was wrong. I was quite intrigued to see what would happen.

Suddenly, the contraption exploded. There was a resounding thud of a bang and a flash and debris was flying everywhere. I ducked behind Jorgen. When the thick pall of smoke eventually cleared, two things were evident, and both were very bad for Cuthbert. First, the cabinet and Helmut had disappeared altogether. It was totally unclear what had happened to the boy; normally, when these sorts of devices go wrong, I have observed that we all get covered in nasty gobbets of flesh, rather like a coarse mincemeat, but on this occasion this was not the case. It was all very mysterious. I rather hoped that the unfortunate youth had somehow managed a miraculous escape in all the noise, smoke and confusion. Second, the King was lying on the ground, momentarily stunned, his head evidently hit by flying debris. It was immediately obvious that the whole thing was very bad news for Cuthbert. After trying to take the credit for the wondrous engine, he was obviously going to find it hard to avoid taking responsibility for its disastrous explosion. You could see the engineer evaluating his predicament, and then he obviously decided to do what was probably the best bet in the situation: he tried to edge away, and then make a run for it. Of course, Heinrich wasn't going to let him get away; with the monarch maimed, the chamberlain's head was on the line, too. With a nod of the head Heinrich's men were instantly all around Cuthbert. He was led away struggling to learn await his fate. He was protesting loudly that it was Jakob's design, but of course, Jakob was there no more, and had been there no more for some time now.

It was clear that the King was dazed rather than seriously hurt. His doctors tended to his wound as though his life depended on it, when in truth it was theirs that depended on it. The cut was nothing other than a graze. He was led a little confused away back to his bed, patting Wolfgang, the new engineer, on his head as he did so. Bruno shook his head from side to side, and sighed, before setting off to see to Cuthbert.

That evening the third bad thing of the day happened. His Majesty requested a little restorative soup, to be served in his bed. I left Konstantin in charge of this, after we established that what His Highness needed was a good hearty soup of bull heart. I tasted it;

“perhaps just a trifle more salt”, I said. I left the kitchen, believing all to be well, and the dreadful day at last concluded. I was woken a little later by Hermann, in a state of considerable distress. It appeared that Konstantin had added too much salt. The King hated it, and spat it out, calling it a vile concoction. He demanded to see the Chef. Konstantin went to him, and, being pleased with his soupy concoction, was expecting praise and possible financial advancement. I’ve noticed that pride in something is often not a good sign. After having owned up to making it in this way, he had a little room for manoeuvre. That was a mean trick of the King to play; if he were going to do this regularly, we’d all have to watch our step more closely. So Konstantin was led away to the dungeon to spend the night with Cuthbert in preparation for a little salty remediation. Salt! The stuff of life around here.

And then, when I thought things just couldn’t get any worse, there was a cry from the battlements; the Ghost was walking the walls. But there was so much death in the air that night that the spectre’s visit was superfluous. I had considerable trouble getting back to sleep, and when I did, it was troubled by vicious nightmares of flirtatious maids suddenly revealing that they bore the salt-encrusted heads of pikes, with mouths full of row upon row of little sharp teeth.

167

I prepared the King a lovely dish of hake rolled in eels and baked in apricot-flavoured brandy. I served it with the smallest little baby potatoes and tomatoes tossed in butter and finely chopped herbs. The potatoes were so small they were barely potatoes; more nodules attached to other baby potatoes. It was a minor miracle getting them at that time of year, too, I can tell you, given the frozen state of the ground. Fortunately, this meal was a great success, and it lightened the mood in the Castle somewhat. The King was using one footman as a chair and another couple as a table; this act of generosity always cheered him up. I watched him eat: he eats like a dainty lion. The whole family gorged themselves on this lovely dish, even the Princess Sophia, who I feared might have eaten so much that she could have burst. The jester came on after dinner, and juggled, and then we stood around together singing songs and drinking beer. Sophia rushed from the table. We were trying not to think of Cuthbert, currently having his head slowly flayed in the dungeon, or Konstantin, currently being fed so much salt that his urine had dried up and his blood was turning to white powder. I needed several

flagons of hearty ale before I could forget their remediations enough to show more than the semblance of being merry. The jester then played his mandolin, and sang a sad song of lost love by torchlight, and we all cried, mainly for ourselves.

165

After all the events of the recent past, just when it seemed that things could barely get worse, things went very quiet for a while. Perhaps it was because that we were all on our most careful behaviour, and maybe this calm in the Castle reflects the great wisdom of our Monarch. If ever we needed a prompt to exactitude in our service, we only had to think of Cuthbert and Konstantin, lingering on in the dungeon. But Konstantin found blessed relief late on the Tuesday, and Cuthbert did not see Wednesday out. The mood lightened a little after this. Spontaneity started to return. The ghost wasn't seen at all this week. Even the weather started to improve: a storm came from the west, and cleared all the snow. The ground was clear for the first time that winter. Perhaps this was the first sign of spring in the air?

On the Wednesday, I went to see my traveller, in the market. He was out of chillies, but had a small amount of a special type of coffee bean. Once again the scallywag refused to tell me how an ignorant, ugly chap like him came by these luxuries. All three of us – him, me, the King – came out of this very well. I wasn't too upset about the chillies; the King was starting to tire of seeing the Queen go red.

162

The King went away a-hunting for a long weekend. He obviously had a good hunt, because he came back laden with small gifts for us all. He brought me a small wooden pepper pot with a golden knob. Sometimes I just love the great humanity of the man.

I didn't see the Princess Sophia in all this time, and that was probably another good thing. But I did see Maria a few times. Although she was obviously sad that so many of the maids had recently met an unfortunate end, it had done her cause no harm at all. So she was full of generosity, too. I then suddenly remembered I'd forgotten all about my Time and my progress towards it! How events affect us in strange ways. I realised: I'm nearly well over half way

through all this! I can make my Time after all. Perhaps too much reflection is bad for a simple man, and what is needed is action and distraction. So I started making a new set of little notches on the legs of the chest of drawers beside my bed.

161

I watched a fly struggle in a cobweb; eventually it broke free, after what must have been a nasty scare from a surprisingly small spider, but it gave me an idea. I went around the Castle and gardens collecting all the cobwebs I could find. Then, when I had enough (and it took a good part of the morning as you might guess), and cleaned some of them up a bit, I served the King a dish of a thick, juicy steak wrapped up in a cocoon of cobwebs, and presented him with four pairs of knives and forks, so that he could imitate a spider. He loved it, although a great deal of the food was spilled over his shirt.

160

The King found a fingerprint on his plate. Heinrich was called over, and then Charles, and then me. There was a nervous silence in which nothing happened apart from us staring at the plate. There was no denying it. The King had almost finished his puree of peas when a mark on the surface glistened in the gaslight as he raised the plate to his lips to down the remnants.

“I feel sick”, he roared, clutching his belly. The fingerprint, all dirty dots and lines on shining sweat, was still there.

“We must discover to whom this belongs”, said Heinrich.

I felt confident that this wasn’t anything to do with me, so I could afford to be precise. “It is an easy matter to find out who committed this effrontery”, I said.

Heinrich raised a pencil-thin eyebrow.

I stuck my finger in the pea puree and pressed it on the white table cloth, being careful to place it some way from the King, who was now groaning like a puppy that’s eaten too much raw meat. Heinrich and Charles peered at the green mark. It was clearly nothing like the print on the plate.

Heinrich tried the experiment, followed by Charles. Charles seemed particularly relieved that the print didn’t match his fingers. Heinrich didn’t seem to have any lines on his fingers at all; they

appeared to be completely smooth. His fingers shone like small eggs in the sun.

Heinrich took the filthy plate away while Dr Rudolf attended to the tortured tummy of the King. Eventually a scullery maid was found whose fingers matched the affront. How someone lowly had been entrusted with such an important task was also a mystery that warranted investigation, but as a first step in remediation the maid was taken away to be taught how things should be washed properly, and to ensure that her fingers didn't cause anyone else any more trouble.

159

Eufemia made it to her Time! We all gave her a big send off. She dressed up in a ridiculous wig and dress, but who could blame her? After the little trouble with Viktor we were all a bit apprehensive, but she was driven off, without incident, but somewhat tipsy, into the morning sunshine. This time we carried on waving until she was well clear of the battlements, but today, no stone moved. We sighed with relief and went in from the cold. So Agatha is at last the new Royal Housekeeper.

I also went to see the traveller in the market square today. His filthy stall was set up beside an old woman who was selling nothing other than cabbages that were clearly past the their best. Hence the area around his stall was pervaded by a rather unpleasant smell. He is an exceedingly seedy fellow, of that there can be no doubt. His cap his filthy, his clothes disgusting rags, and I wouldn't like to guess when, or even if, he last washed his hands. To think I'm buying the King food off this seething mass of putrefaction and disease! I didn't much care to consider that either. I'd better ensure that I boiled everything he touched for a good couple of hours.

"Well my rude fellow, what do you have for me today?" I asked, keeping my distance and trying not to breathe in too deeply.

"Oh, a precious, dear cook, just for you."

He paused, and then motioned me towards him. I took a reticent step forwards. I thought his carbuncle might explode at any moment. He remained silent.

"Well, come on man, what do you have, I don't have all day. I've got a dinner to prepare."

He crooked his finger at me. I took this as a sign to get even closer. Sadly, I felt obliged to do so. With furtive glances to either side, he produced a box from inside his coat.

“This”, he said, almost barely whispering, “is a great delicacy in the south”. Something unimaginably unpleasant was stuck between his few remaining, rotten teeth.

“The box?”

He lifted the lid. Inside was ... a dead monkey.

I screamed, just a little scream, but a scream nevertheless, and jumped back.

“Two thousand”, he said.

I was red with fury. “You offer me a dead monkey? And then you expect me to pay for it? You’re insane; you belong in the royal asylum.”

He seemed perplexed, as though my shock was incomprehensible. “In the south, it is a great delicacy”, he repeated, as though he could change my mind by the force of repetition alone. And then he added: “particularly the brains”. He paused. “Although it is true that the southerners prefer the brains of a live monkey, and this one is very clearly dead.” He looked wistful. He prodded it as though the activity might stir it back into life, but all that happened was that a few flies fluttered away from it. The corpse smelt a little; it was obvious to a trained eye like mine that the monkey hadn’t been alive for some time. I wonder how long brains kept.

I looked at it again, and felt sick. “Do you think that we are so desperate here? Take your rubbish away with you.”

“One thousand. I paid a great price in money and risk to bring this to you today. They kill each other for this sort of thing in the south.”

“Sir, you insult my intelligence. It’s a scrawny little thing, in any case; hardly any meat on it. I expect it’s off as well. And I doubt if it has much brains to talk of.”

The traveller looked crest-fallen, but I was still angry. “Have you nothing better?” I felt a little panicky; it looked like I was going to have to think up dinner tonight for myself.

“This is my pride and joy.” He looked crestfallen, and as though I had personally disappointed him.

The man’s nerve was simply awesome. “Pah”, I exclaimed, with as much disdain as I could manage, and stormed away with as much displeasure as I could muster. “Eight hundred ... “ I heard him calling in the distance. “Maybe next week I could bring you a live monkey?” he shouted in desperation. I could hear his voice following me as I walked away from him, although I could no longer make out the words. I really must try and avoid this curmudgeon next week, I thought. Eventually I found a man selling a rare breed of piglets, and thought that these would do well with cherries in their mouths, and would even make a good breakfast of sausages for the morning after.

When I got back to the kitchen, the fruit that we had set out that morning had already started to rot. It must have been even warmer in the kitchen than I thought. We had to throw it all away, and send a boy off to the market again. What an annoying and frustrating day this had turned out to be.

158

The Ghost was seen yet again last night. I don't understand how I missed seeing him myself; I was out pacing the ramparts, worrying about whether the piglets would go down well with his majesty. As it was, the King seemed distracted at dinner, and hardly paid the meal any attention. At one point he snorted loudly; at first I thought that the pork was underdone, and the piglets had come back to life and started running around the table, and then I thought he was trying to imitate his dinner, but His Highness was merely emptying the contents of the royal nostrils. Normally my artistic integrity would have been insulted, but as this was far from being one of my better creations, I was rather pleased at the lack of attention. So my traversing the frosty battlements was rather wasted, when instead I could have been tracking down Maria to arrange a little post-prandial partying. The place was very well lit by the brilliant light of the winter stars, but I saw no ghosts. As soon as I came down the steps by the gatehouse, I heard the watch shout "the Ghost!", but I couldn't see anything. The poor man was however quite petrified. We comforted him and I gave him a good swig out of my flask of brand, but it was sometime before he stopped shaking. In his defence, it was another bitterly cold night. After a while I started to worry that the brandy would freeze in my flask, so I left him to his shivering fear and went back inside.

After the debris of dinner had been satisfactorily cleared away, and it was clear that there would be no repercussions from the piglets, I decided I would go and find Maria. I headed off across the courtyard, and disturbed a group of rats. It was rather dark in this corner of the place, and I stumbled on something. I fell, and felt my hand go into something soft and sticky. Cursing, I stood up and found the light of a torch. I peered at my hand, expecting it to be smothered in dung, but instead it was covered in what looked to my remaining culinary eye like blood.

"Hey ho", I cried, "come over here, fellow!" I shouted for the watch. "Something's afoot! All is not well." It sounded rather lame. The Watch, still shaking from his recent ectoplasmic encounter,

accompanied by a guard, came down and peered into the gloom. There was definitely something there, so they fetched some torches and lit the place up properly. Someone was more than hurt; someone was very dead. That was quick work by the Ghost, I jested. When I looked more carefully, I immediately recognised the ugly face of the coarse fellow; it was the traveller. He had been stabbed, right where I guessed his vulgar heart to be. He had a look of surprise rather than horror on his face. His blood was everywhere. No more dead monkey brains for him.

After the fuss had died down, and the body had been carted away, I at last found Maria. She was of course a little startled to see me covered in blood, but she was in excellent humour that night. A maid had neglected to dust the portrait of the King's father, and her end had met its end from a duster in the dungeon. That meant that with all the recent troubles, and maids floating about in the moat, Maria had raced up to number twenty-three.; this progress was far quicker than she had ever dared hope for. I didn't like to dampen her spirits by pointing out that the higher you got, the slower and more difficult it was, the better were the people above you, and the more on your toes you had to be. On the other hand, I did agree with her that there were more people beneath you to order about and to take responsibility for you.

"This is wonderful", she said, "this is the life. If only a few more maids could have a little accident. Oh, I do quite like all this blood. Come here."

157

I prepared the King a lovely dish of whole pheasants baked in clay and stuffed with eggs, and it was a great success. After he had pronounced his satisfaction, I took leave of the enlarged epicure and helped myself to one or two glasses of the rather fine white wine that the King had left on the table. Feeling pleasantly light-headed, I decided to brave the cold and go for a nocturnal stroll around the gardens.

I sat underneath a tall oak, wrapped round with my favourite yellow tunic, wearing one of my dandiest wigs. Very large trees were rare in the garden, as they were so difficult to move, and this was one of those that the King gave a special dispensation to allow them to remain stationary. I admired these few noble trees as special islands of stability in these difficult, constantly changing times. I could hear a distant violin playing a plaintive melody; the pleasing sound soothed me, and helped me to relax. I regarded the stars, and, as I had

consumed perhaps more than just a couple of glasses of wine, in spite of the bitter cold, I fell into a drunken slumber, my back comfortable against the solid ancient oak, my legs stretched out in last year's frosted decaying leaves and shattered puffballs.

I had a dream: it was the day before the end of my Time, and I had to prepare the King something particularly special. I had exhausted everything I knew, I had no more dishes up my sleeve, and I was a broken man. The traveller and his exotic spices had gone, I had no friend left to whom I could turn, and I stormed around the kitchen, Hermann waiting, hardly able to contain his pleasure at contemplating my imminent downfall. (Although I know Hermann to be a good person, and certainly not one to wish me ill for the sake of one day. But dreams are not rational: sometimes they reveal a certain cancer in one's soul.) At last I struck upon a great idea: I would serve the King myself. His eyes opened wider and wider until I was being sucked into them, and then I saw a giant fork swing down from above, and it was just about to pierce my breast when I started screaming loudly.

And then I awoke from my dream, with screaming ringing in my ears. My heart was beating fast, but otherwise it was as quiet as the grave. I gibbered, distraught with the memory of my dream. "Hey ho Max", I said to myself, "you're letting this get to you." Then there was another scream; that's not me, I realised sleepily. It was a girl's scream: that's how I could be so sure.

I stood up quickly, banging my head against a branch of the great tree. I rubbed it; I was bleeding. I swore as a drop of my precious blood fell on to my beautiful tunic.

Another scream; indeed, this time not so much of a scream as a gasp. A horrible, gurgling gasp. Then hurrying footsteps. I couldn't really tell from which direction the disturbance had come, and it was pitch black under the stars, so I was a little at a loss what to do. I stumbled around for a while. Then I spotted a lump that looked even darker than the dark grass that formed its backdrop. I rushed over to it.

"Help!" I shouted, "Watchman! Help! Help help help!" I repeated, virtually squealing out the last help as I imagined yesterday's piglets had pleaded before the final cut. Eventually I caught the nightwatch's attention; he came scurrying down the stairs and across to me.

"What the devil ..." he began. He looked at the lump. It was a young girl; or rather, the body of a young girl. Clearly one of the maids. She had apparently been stabbed a few times, and had put up something of a fight, for she was badly cut around her hands and arms. But eventually the assailant must have got the upper hand, and slit her throat. Blood was still trickling out of the wound. It was

dreadful; she was such a pretty thing. I swear her eyes were still moving, fixating me as they finally glazed over. I wanted to weep.

“Help”, I shouted again, rather foolishly. People were getting their wits about them, and at last a small crowd of the appropriate people began to gather. The assistant watch was doing a good job of rousing the Castle; rather too good.

“You’d better tell him to quieten down a bit”, I told a guard.

“What has happened?” asked Ludwig, arriving on the scene, and drawing a cloak tight against him. “Max?” What a stupid question, I thought; isn’t it obvious?

“It looks like our murderous friend has struck again. Where is Agatha? I suspect this poor girl is one of the maids.” Ludwig despatched a guard to find Agatha.

“Why are you covered in blood?” asked Ludwig. It took me a moment to catch his intention. I didn’t like it at all.

“I cut my head on a branch. Then you try handling a body that’s had its throat slit without getting a little mucky. You can’t believe that I had anything to do with this.”

“Why were you out here? It’s dark. It’s cold.” Ludwig was fiddling with the chatelaine hanging from his waist.

I stared, fixated on the bronze skull glimmering in the torchlight. For some reason it cleared my mind; maybe it made me think about death. I suddenly didn’t feel drunk or drowsy any more - this man was serious in his line of insulting questioning. I felt angry, although if I’d reflected I would have supposed that it was his job to be serious. Everyone was staring at me with a most unfriendly look on their faces.

“You’re being absurd. I often come out at night. I was asleep.” It didn’t sound very good, did it? “If I’m the murderer”, I said brightly, “where’s the weapon? I couldn’t do this with my bare hands. I’d need a knife. I haven’t got a knife.” Rather to my surprise, two guards checked me over most thoroughly, while a third pointed a musket at the end of my nose. I wanted to tell him not to point it at the tip; I didn’t want to lose the end of my nose as well as an eye, but thought it best not to provoke a man with a musket on the latch. Sigismund arrived and stood peering at my nose from a distance of six inches. One of his eyes was slightly cloudy, but at least he had two of them.

“He hasn’t, sir”, one of the guards said, sounding a mite disappointed. I suddenly realised that I could see their point of view, and that my predicament did look very suspicious.

“He could have dropped it, or thrown it away”, piped up the other guard. I knew him slightly: number twenty-nine he was, according to his badge. We’d occasionally shared a few beers together. How your

friends can turn on you when it's too their advantage, eh? Bright lad though.

"Search around here. If he did it, the knife must be very close". A number of guards peeled away to search by torchlight. I hoped they didn't find it; it would make things much more simple. Of course, if they did, it didn't prove it was me; the murderer – the real murderer – might just of easily dropped it or cast it aside, but these people didn't seem to be happily disposed in their behaviour to me tonight.

"Max, I believe you are well known for having something of a fancy for maids?" Well, there are few among us who don't, I thought about remarking, but considered it prudent not to say this to Ludwig just then. Indeed as I reflected upon the consideration that Ludwig was not renowned for his partiality to maids. Perhaps he was one of the few.

"Look", I began, waving my arms around in what must have appeared a most futile way, "I'm cold", I ended, lamely, fearing most of all that I looked like a broken windmill.

The guards and the watch were busy rummaging around; after a little while, it was clear that they hadn't found anything. This failure was something of a relief.

"And another thing", I said as a helpful thought miraculously struggled to the surface of my limited consciousness, "why aren't I covered in blood? There's just a drop here." I was pleased with the exquisite eloquence of my argument, but I could tell by the vapid looks on their faces that my reasoning had been less persuasive than I had supposed.

Ludwig conferred with his assistant. "Well Max", he said, "there's no sign of the murder weapon, so I suppose you can go." Thanks for your generosity, prudence prevented me from snarling. "But I must ask you not to go anywhere, I suppose." His melancholy was getting me down. His beard appeared to be turning greyer by the minute.

"Where am I going to go? This is my home."

"Quite. Please stay in the Castle unless you get my permission. Even if you aren't involved in this – business – you still might know something. You might have seen or heard something important. Please tell us exactly what you were doing out here, and what happened."

Sigismund smiled and nodded. I found towards the end of this monologue that I wasn't really paying that much attention; my feet had somehow become tangled together, and I was trying to disentangle them without drawing too much attention to the fact.

Grebe feathers are definitely now right out of fashion among the ladies. Almost as one, they disappeared overnight, to be replaced by bright pink bows at the back of the bustles. And outside, fashion dictates that everyone who is anyone (and many of those that are not) must carry a pink parasol, whatever the weather. Even the jester has one. How do these things come to be? It is a mystery to me. I must say that I do feel a little sad about the grebe feathers; they had a certain something. But perhaps it is all for the best, particularly for the grebes.

I have reached the stage of having to execute a very delicate operation on my clock. I've been trying to fit some tiny springs. To my annoyance, they weren't quite the right size, and after spending what seemed eternity compressing one of the damned little things, my finger must have slipped a fraction and the coil sprung open and flew into my glass eye. I tried a few times, until I succeeded in compressing them, only to discover my error. It appears that I need an even smaller size, and I'll have to wait for the market this week to try to find the appropriate ones. Not that there is any guarantee that I will find them in the market; good springs can be harder to find than good food.

I heard the words I fear. "I'm in love", said Jorgen. He was playing with a little skull. It might have been that of a mouse or a vole, but Jorgen said that it was that of a shrew. It was, he said, quite ancient, and that he'd found it embedded deep within a rock, but I couldn't tell that from looking at it. All shrew skulls looked much the same to me, new, old, or very old, and indeed much the same to me as those of any small animal.

"With a maid", he said.

Oh dear oh dear. I had a sinking feeling, one of those where your stomach seems to vanish and reappear a foot lower than it was before.

He saw my dismay. "Don't worry", he said, "it isn't Maria. It's Angela. And she's like an angel".

And then I was pleased for him, although the word “love” left me feeling a little uneasy. My stomach remained just a few inches than it should have been, and I was left with dreadful heartburn for the rest of the day.

151

“**B**ut I’m not sure I like it very much.”
Now what’s going on here, I thought. The King complaining that he doesn’t like his dinner very much? That doesn’t sound very promising - not very promising at all. Heinrich snaked forward to the table, and I shuffled back into the gloom.

I thought the dish was rather good. A perfect steak, resting on a potato pancake, with oysters and fruit, surrounded by a lovely creamy sauce, garnished with a sprinkling of chives. I was certain that King had never had this before, and I thought it tasted truly excellent. And yet:

“I just don’t think I like it, somehow.” A look of puzzlement crossed his craggy features. “I can’t quite put it into words.” His voice tailed off.

This sounded very bad indeed. I wondered whether I should run for it, but I knew it was hopeless. Many of swifter limb than me had tried, and no one had ever succeeded. No, flattery was the only way forward here.

“But majesty”, I said, “beef and oysters are traditionally a royal combination”. I bit my quivering lip; I’d instantly regretted the word “traditional”. I feared I was shouting. Heinrich looked at me with utter contempt.

“But still, there’s something about the flavour I don’t much care for.” It was a good job the King was pensive tonight. Most other occasions I would have been sent out for remediation a long time ago. My mind went entirely blank. That’s it then. The King pushed a few lumps of pancake around his plate. And then a miracle:

“I like it” said Princess Sophia, “I like it very much”.

“Humph”, said the King. “What do you think, dear?” he asked, turning to the Queen.

The Queen’s mouth was full of meat. She tried to speak but something just dribbled down her chin. “Er ur” she said.

“Humph” said the King, and carried on eating. And that was that.

It was a story I got used to telling quite a few times over the next couple of days. But was it my imagination or were people avoiding me on the stairs? Were they looking at me with furtive, suspicious glances? Why didn't Hermann linger when he passed me when I was sharpening the carving knife? One day someone even spat at me in the street. Fortunately, the spittle landed in my glass eye, but my pride was hurt. I'd always thought that everybody knew that I was more than a decent chap.

It was all rather unpleasant. One day I passed Princess Katharina on the stairs. She was measuring the height of each tread. She paused as I passed; I bowed deeply, almost touching the stone. She peered at me through her thick glasses, and then she closed her eyes and started reciting a prayer! This event disturbed me more than anything.

After a couple of days, when nothing else happened, and I wasn't discovered standing astride any more bodies, people started behaving more normally towards me again. It was clear that I was still the same old loveable Max that I'd always been. I wasn't going to leap at their throats with my poultry scissors, or force a lemon squeezer down their throats, or stick their thumbs in my garlic press. Sometimes I could still detect a residual emotion in some people when they talked to me; after a while, I decided it was fear. I didn't like it. I wanted to be loved.

Ludwig and his sorry group of detectives appeared to be making no substantial progress towards apprehending the miscreant. Whereas before I thought this was, if anything, amusing, I now found it annoying. I realised that whatever the facts, for many people I was going to be under a cloud of suspicion until either proved completely innocent - and that probably meant finding the real criminal - or, less attractively, murdered myself. So I started to find Ludwig's wooden manner and slow, painstaking approach rather annoying.

"You aren't getting anywhere with this, are you?" I asked him in our Council meeting. He went red and muttered something about difficult conditions and making substantial advances he was not presently at liberty to divulge, but I knew he had nothing. Still, "this is a fiendishly clever criminal", he said, trying to stare at me, "a devil".

So they were getting nowhere. Maybe I should try and sort this out myself, I thought. I knew which outcome I preferred: the only way people are ever going to look at me normally again is when the real murderer is caught.

In a way, it's a pity the murders don't impinge on his Majesty more. Then we would see some real action; then we would see activity. As it is, everyone sits around waiting for the day the murderer turns himself in. I get the feeling no one cares very much.

I tried making a list of all the dead people I could remember. Who was there? A lot came to mind, but I had to sort them out into two mental piles, as it were, one of interesting dead people and one of uninteresting dead people. At the moment, on my interesting pile I had several items, although I found it hard keeping them on still. Their little dead bodies moved around in front of my mind's eye. There was a footman. A couple of maids. The traveller. I screwed up my eyes, trying to think, but nothing happened. Perhaps more. Perhaps not. Exactly how many maids had been remediated before their time? No, there were definitely more than a couple of corpses now rotting in their graves.

It wasn't so easy being a great detective after all, I decided, and chose to have a flagon of ale to help the thoughts along. After a while it was apparent that it was all too difficult, for the corpses were dancing around quickly on their little piles, and so I had another beer instead, feeling a trifle more sympathetically disposed towards Ludwig and Sigismund and their little difficulty.

There was another close shave last night: the King had indigestion. This happens from time to time, and it's always uncertain as to who is going to get the blame. Indigestion makes him even more fractious than usual, so it's a difficult time for us all. On the end he blamed it on too much wine, and the footman who served him the last glass had to drink a couple of crates. I thought it was pretty uncertain as to whether he would blame the wine or the eggs. I thought the eggs were the more likely culprit myself, but I certainly wasn't going to say anything.

Nevertheless, it was clear that eggs had better be taken off the menu for the moment. It's a pity, because I enjoy cooking eggs; I have eggs down to perfection. What to cook tonight then? I went for a walk in the garden. It was sunny and much warmer of late. As spring was now most definitely in the air, I sported a jolly saffron gilet. A few

brave but nondescript white butterflies were out, fluttering like lost leaves in the breeze, along with a some brightly coloured birds I couldn't remember the name of. I really must be more observant.

I met Jorgen, supervising the moving of some rose bushes. The Queen liked roses, so some had to be kept under glass throughout the year and moved out each day so as to provide a continual stream of flowers, whatever the season. He was still trying to breed the perfect rose in the hothouse, but he didn't seem to have made much progress.

"Not in prison yet Max then?" he quipped.

"Ha. You don't think I did anything, do you, really? Not you."

"Of course not. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But people talk, as you know. I'd feel uncomfortable if I were you."

"No need to tell me that; I do feel most uncomfortable. But I couldn't hurt a fly. I don't understand why everyone can't see that." As it happened I found I just accidentally trod on one of the butterflies; the irony didn't escape me.

We strolled around the garden. A fountain that wasn't there yesterday was making a most pleasing tinkling sound. "I've been trying to work out who might have done it", I said, "and I haven't got very far. It could have been anyone. Now I see why Ludwig is so disgruntled about it. It would have been very convenient for him if he'd found the knife that night, I think. He and Sigismund are starting to look incompetent. They look like they're not in control."

"Do they know anything about who might be doing these things, and why? Things might make more sense if there was a reason."

"Not really. At first I thought they were just a band of incompetents. Then I tried working out what was happening, and I could see their point of view. I couldn't even remember who'd been murdered, yet alone deduce any positive motive."

"Come now", said Jorgen, "you've been spending too long peeling potatoes."

"I remember the first one quite well", I said. "It was the footman, number thirty-nine, found afloat in the moat. That was several weeks ago. Then there was the first maid, stabbed and also found in the moat. Then there was the traveller who supplied me with exotica, quite recently. Then this maid."

"You're forgetting the second maid."

"The second maid? Oh, the one that fell. Maybe. I thought it was unclear whether she fell down the stairs by error or by mischief?"

"You must admit in the context of these other killings it looks more likely to be mischief."

“That’s three maids then. The killer definitely has a thing about maids. And then there was Viktor.”

“Ah, poor fellow,” said Jorgen. “I never liked the man. Too pompous. I suppose we must assume that the stone was pushed rather than just worked its way loose?”

“Just the moment Viktor drives away to live happily ever afterwards? I don’t think that it was just an accident. And then there was Jakob.”

“Jakob! Now that wasn’t murder. He deserved the King’s wrath. The accident was his responsibility.”

“It might have looked like it, but I’m not so sure. Why should there have been five nails in a straight line just where the King’s jalopy drove?”

“So we have three servants and a traveller cut up with a knife, as yet undiscovered. A maid who was pushed down the stairs. A man crushed to death by a falling stone, dislodged at a fortuitous moment. And a chief engineer caught out by some nails. The last two could be accidents, I suppose. Or Cuthbert might have had something to do with the nails. I didn’t like him much, although I don’t like to speak ill of the flayed.”

“And those are just the ones we know about.”

“I don’t remember anyone else dying lately.”

“Come along! The Castle is always full of the stench of death. Remember Konstantin?”

“The line between murder and rightful execution is a thin one. The boundaries are blurred. I’m sure Konstantin was responsible for himself.”

We scratched our chins. Jorgen’s was always covered in thick stubble, whatever the time of day or night. His face resembled a grey lawn that had been starved of water.

“There’s not much of a pattern, is there?” said Jorgen.

I couldn’t tell whether that was a question or an observation. It sounded like a question, but I decided I couldn’t answer. “I have thought about it over some beers”, I said instead, “and I really don’t know what is to be done. There aren’t any clues. There isn’t a pattern. There are no witnesses.”

“Apart from you.”

“Apart from me.”

“Who found the body of the traveller?”

I sighed. “I did. They don’t seem to be making a big thing of it. Yet.”

“It does look a bit odd”, said Jorgen, just to cheer me up.

“My only thought”, I said, “is that I wonder who would want to kill all these people. The lack of an apparent pattern is in itself somewhat odd. It’s a curious mixture of unimportant people and important people. You can imagine someone lowly wanting to kill all his chums, or those above him, but why both? And why would anyone want to bother with footman thirty-nine, whatever his name is? Was? The only thing is that someone who wants to kill Viktor, or could kill him, must be quite high up. But we were all there then.” I brightened up when I remembered this.

“It might have just been an accident. It doesn’t fit like the others.”

“So we really know nothing.” I now saw it was to my advantage to argue that Viktor was indeed no accident.

“And why do you assume the killer is a he?”

“You’re right”, I said, “there is no reason”.

We looked at the roses catching the winter sunshine for a while. The scent of them was amazing. There was an old rusty plough leaning against one of the old trees.

“We just discovered it”, said Jorgen, “completely buried underground. It’s very old indeed, I think.”

I took my trusty little stopwatch out of my pocket. It seemed to be running a little slow. I shook it gently, and it made a worrying tinkling sound. I thought I ought to be getting back to the kitchen.

“I’ll keep my eye open”, said Jorgen, “and I’ll tell my boys to look too. Gardeners get around a bit. We see more than trees growing, you know.”

“Thanks”, I said.

And then when I was walking back to the Castle, I met Princess Sophia. She looked radiant. We sat in a little bower and I started shivering. It certainly wasn’t as warm as it was a little while ago. I didn’t feel at all nervous, so I don’t know what was the matter with me. She was shivering, too.

“You have mud on your trousers”, she observed.

“I’ll wash them.”

“I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“I’ve been here”, I said, rather foolishly.

“Shouldn’t you have a guard?” I asked after a while.

“I’ll be safe with you”, she said.

“A lot of people don’t seem to think so, your Highness. Surely you’ve heard the rumours.”

“I know it wasn’t you”, she laughed, “you’re too kind. And you’re a cook. You respect flesh.”

“Flesh is my business”, I agreed.

We walked around the garden, keeping behind bushes and trees. This is more difficult when you don't really know where they are. Sometimes I wish the garden could stay the same for a while.

"I hate the way everything moves around all the time", she said, as if reading my thoughts. "there's no certainty in this world. I hate that."

She put her hand in mine. I gasped and grasped it, felt her bones; it seemed such a small, thin hand. This is a risky business. We walked around the shadows.

"When I was young", she said, "my father said that I was a princess. He said that I could have anything I wanted. But I soon realised that I can't, really. I can never have what I really want."

We entered a charming little grotto, and sat on a cold stone seat together, hands entwined.

It was very dull now, and suddenly bitterly cold again. I hadn't realised the weather could change so suddenly.

"You know", said Sophia, "it's mummy I most feel sorry for". It took me a while to work out who mummy was. It had never occurred to me that anyone should ever feel sorry for the Queen. I certainly didn't, but I wasn't going to go and say so.

"I just don't know what we're going to do", she said. I found myself a little distracted by an ivy-clad gargoyle that was sticking its tongue out at me. I hoped it was a real gargoyle, and not a living statue. I hoped it wasn't spying for His Majesty.

Sophia let out an enormously long, elegant sigh. She let go of my hand and adjusted the gold circlet around her brow. We got up and walked around a bit more, and then all of a sudden it started to snow, so she left me, by the big tree, shivering, wondering what the butterflies would do now, as little white angels fell to the ground.

144

My lovely trousers were more than dirty; on closer inspection, they were dirty and torn. I changed into a new pair, and took the soiled ones to Martha. It was a dull day, and a wall of drizzle fell across the courtyard.

"I must have caught them on a rose bush, or sharp twig", I told the seamstress. She turned up her nose and peered at me over her little glasses. Then she looked down again.

"We're very busy", she snapped, turning back to her work, "the King needs so many changes of clothes when he goes out hunting".

"There's no great hurry. Any time soon will do, please."

She stiffened and looked up again. She obviously despised being rushed. I regretted being so peremptory. “Now I think of it, we’re very busy, what with the show and the games coming up. I really don’t know when we’ll be able to do these trousers.” She threw them back at me. “Get a new pair.”

“Oh Martha, please.” I’d done it now. “These are my favourites. They’re so jolly, don’t you think?”

“You should have thought of that before you went gardening in the dark in them, shouldn’t you?” She returned to her sewing. For a dreadful moment I thought she must know.

I just stood there. “So when can you do them?” I persisted.

She glanced up, needle mid-air. “I finish in four days”, she said, “come back and bother my successor. Go away, little one-eyed man.”

That annoyed me. I didn’t mind the one-eyed bit, because it was true, but for some reason I hate being called little, even though it’s just as true. I wonder if she meant little inside as well as out. I’d never liked Martha. I took my trousers and my leave of her, swearing away under my breath. “Baggage baggage baggage.”

143

I’m getting rather desperate about His Majesty’s meals. Last night we had a salmon, rolled in walnuts and lightly grilled, served with a citrus sauce of plums, topped with a little salmon heart. I liked it; it’s the kind of food I really enjoy cooking, although I would have preferred it without the heart. The flavour was quite exquisite, although I say it myself. There wasn’t anything the King could complain about (no bones! the lad who did that was very careful – at least people learn this way! the wisdom of His Great Highness must be truly infinite), but I could tell he was ready to pick fault. The great gourmand was craving discovering a mistake. He found a crack in his plate, and that distracted him, and he cheered up while the waiter who had served him was taken away to have his head cracked in a few places. But I could tell his heart wasn’t in the dinner. It wasn’t exciting enough for him. He was bored by its simplicity. Fortunately he got distracted by a fly buzzing around the room. Where do they come from in the depths of winter? Still, good news for me, but bad news for the fly, and very bad news for whomever was deemed to be responsible for letting it in. I didn’t hang around to find out who Heinrich and the King decided was responsible, but there was quite a rumpus for some while, I can tell you.

Next I spent some time with Maria, and then I knew how the King felt, because my heart wasn't in that either. She wasn't exciting enough for me, any more. Nothing wrong exactly, just not exciting enough. Oh, she was exciting enough in the play department, perhaps a little too so (where did she get some of her ideas?), but not as exciting as a princess. She was excited enough though, soaring through the ranks of maids. She wouldn't shut up about it.

"I can't believe it", she said, "number twenty already." Her delight in the means of this rapid promotion was disconcerting to the point of annoying.

"Those poor girls", I said, "they could have been you, you know."

She sniffed, turning her nose up at me. "I'm careful", she said, emphasising I'm.

Now a princess, she has a right to be proud and dismissive of others, but a maid doesn't. I didn't like her attitude at all, and told her so. I hoped that my stern tone would instil some good sense into her, but she just told me to shut up. The nerve of it! Merely a mid maid too! I told her that it was all for her own good, that I, being so much older and wiser, knew better than her, and she told me to shut up again. Such impudence, when I only had her best interests at heart, had two effects: I realised that I didn't really like her very much, and it made me mad. So I ordered her from my room, but she just started shouting at me. I wasn't going to put up with this sort of abuse from a maid, even if she was up to number twenty already.

"Out!" I said, "termagant!"

This word took her aback sufficiently to enable me to shut the door in her face. She looked quizzical. I locked it quickly; I could hear her on the other side, hammering away, shouting all sorts of obscenities and threats. I went back to bed and covered my ears with a pillow, wishing that she would just jolly well go away.

142

I saw Charles in a corridor this afternoon, loudly berating a maid. He had caught motes of dust floating around in a sunbeam. He was puce with rage. He looked like he was going to hit her, and the poor pretty little thing was crying. I wanted to leap to her defence. He's never liked maids, finding most of them too flighty for his liking, and rarely quite interested enough in dirt. It's a failing in a maid, it must be said, a lack of interest in dirt and dust. His rant did seem excessive though. I started to wonder whether he was

behind the murder of the maids. He had all the knowledge of who was where in the Castle and when and why, after all.

141

I love my Ruler with all my heart, but I never ceased to be amazed by how pleasant it is when he's not here, and how everyone suddenly seems less happy after his return. In fact, things can be quite miserable when he comes back. Only three people seemed happy today.

First, the Queen. That's understandable. She's had something peculiar done to her hair, but she likes it. I wouldn't know how to begin to describe it, so I won't.

Second, much more oddly, the Duchess of the North, fatter than ever. Indeed, she seems to be a little fatter every time I see her. She is smiling at everyone and walks around with a plate of hard-boiled heron eggs, occasionally popping one in her mouth.

Third, Martha. Her Time is almost up. Good riddance. She is looking forward to her freedom. She says that she is moving to the south (they all do, don't they?) to end her days sitting in a rocking chair in the sun. She has given years of service, and it's never easy, so I can't really begrudge her that wish, even though I dislike her immensely.

I found it annoying the way she was playing up to the King on his return. She wants to be careful; people have overdone this in the past. I don't know why she would risk anything so close to the end. The King, bless him, believes that is aware of the distinction between servility and sycophancy. He says that he likes the former and despises the latter. I must admit though that many people whom I consider to be empty-headed sycophants have done very well, gaining the odd gold gift or extra sum of money at their Time. On the other hand, it is true that many sycophants have met sad ends. The last one had his tongue cut out and sewn into his arse; I particularly admired the inventiveness of that remediation. The King said that he had found it hard to swallow and that he was full of shit. So sycophancy is a risky business. But fortunately for Martha, the King had enjoyed some moving royal rigidity while hunting, and as a consequence was happy enough to overlook Martha's forwardness.

I cooked a large sausage for tonight's dinner, a very large sausage indeed. After a few swigs of culinary brandy, I cooled down a bit, and soon felt well disposed to the world and all in it. So just before her party I decided to make it all up with Martha. There was no point in

leaving her on bad terms merely about a name and some trousers. I wouldn't like it happening to me. I want to leave with everyone here thinking well of me and my knowing it.

That's why at six o'clock I walked up the spiral staircase of the large, gloomy turret that housed the maids and the seamstresses, carefully trying to dodge being seen in case Maria should be about. Hell hath no fury and so on. Fortunately it was dark, and many of the candles had blown out in the gale that was blowing outside. In fact I needn't have bothered being so careful; it was virtually impossible to see anything. I brushed aside some cobwebs; I accidentally swallowed a large hairy spider. That made me retch, I can tell you. Given that this was the place where the maids lived, this must have been the filthiest place in the Castle; nearly as bad as the stables. A maid, wrapped in a cloak, passed me on the stairs, and I couldn't see anything other than the black swirl of material as she hurried on down. At least it wasn't Maria; I was certain that she wouldn't have been so quiet, after our recent incident. Unless she had reached the ignoring me stage, of course. And then a rat scurried in front of me! The squalor of this place merits attention, I remembered thinking.

I knocked on Martha's door, three times, rap rap rap. No reply, so rap rap RAP again. The door moved slightly; it was open. I knocked again. "Martha?" There was no answer. I poked my head around the door. Martha was sitting with her back to the door, in her old rocking chair. The level of light seemed just wrong.

"Martha", I repeated. She didn't say anything. "Look you old bat", I said, moving into the room, "ignore me if you like, but I came to wish you well." No reply. "Come on", I said, "let's not part enemies".

I wanted to shake her, but as I moved round her chair I saw that there was a very good reason why she was ignoring me: she was quite dead. A knitting needle was stuck through her spectacles deep into her right eye. Blood and goo too disgusting to think about were oozing down her chin. There was a look of complete surprise on her face.

"Buggery", I said, stepping back. "He-." The cry for help didn't get very far past my lips. I realised my position. I was already in a great deal of trouble. This wasn't going to look very good.

"Thoughts, Max, thoughts", I muttered to myself. I was sure I was bright red, and although the room was cold, I was dripping with sweat.

If I followed my first instinct and called for help, Ludwig and Sigismund would be onto me. They would think it very suspicious that here I was, next to another dead body, very suspicious to say the least. Things would look bad. But they wouldn't be able to prove anything.

If on the other hand I crept away from here, and no one noticed, they might be suspicious, but there would be nothing to link me to the crime. Nevertheless, things would look very.

But if I snuck away and someone did see me, well, that would be real trouble. Things would look very bad indeed for me then.

And if I hung around here much longer and someone see me lingering here like this, well, things would look exceptionally bad.

Whichever way I looked at it, things looked bad for me – it was just a question of how bad: bad, very bad, very bad indeed, or exceptionally bad. It was however clear the longer I waited, the badder things would be. I edged towards the door without really thinking about it. My legs were deciding for me; they were definitely creeping away. I hated them for it. They had little minds of their own that didn't respond to my mind.

And then I saw someone coming up the stairs.

“Help!” I cried, my brain taking over once again. “Murder! Murder! Murder!” Bad, bad, bad.

140

Today meant was to be a day of great celebration for the seamstress. It was supposed to be a day of celebration for Mrs Zeren, her number two, but that had been ruined, too. In the circumstances, she could hardly be seen to be full of public joy. It was obvious to me that there would be another lengthy delay before my trousers would get mended. Perhaps I would even have to buy a new pair after all. No one was in a very good mood; on the contrary, we were all rather depressed and somewhat irritable with each other. The weather didn't help, all dull and gloomy and so windy that it blew one's hat right off. Sigismund in particular was being most contrary. I knew things would be bad.

“So let's go through this one more time”, said Sigismund, “just so that you realise how preposterous you sound. You say you went to see Martha to apologise.”

“Yes.”

“And then you just noticed that she was lying there with a knitting needle in her eye.” He sighed.

“Yes.”

“And then you cried for help.” He rolled his eyes.

“Exactly.”

“You must admit”, said Ludwig, “this little situation does seem bad for you, given all the other corpses that pop up wherever you go.”

My only ace was that I had cried for help when I could have run. They knew this didn't quite fit in with what they wanted to believe, and it made them uncomfortable. They had no explanation for it. A rational man wouldn't do this; not unless he was very clever.

But I am very clever. I said nothing and instead played with the hem of my favourite purple cloak, wondering how clever they thought me to be. It's not often you hope people think you're a little bit stupid.

"And someone was coming", said Sigismund, brightly, too brightly for my liking. "What better way to deflect attention?" Perhaps after all he too was very clever.

"What motive could I possibly have for hurting poor Martha?"

"You were heard to argue."

This banter went on for some time. "We don't know when she died", I said. "Who was the last person to see her alive?"

This question provided my first stroke of luck. She had last been seen by Mrs Zeren more than three hours before she was found dead. She could have sat there, pierced through the eye, the, for up to three hours before they found me there. They couldn't pin the murder on me, not this time, although the reluctance with which they let me go troubled me greatly. How could I have the stomach for cooking in a situation such as this?

137

No one likes an unsolved murder, but try as they might, they couldn't solve it by blaming me. It might not be nice, being under a cloud of suspicion like this, but at least I'm a free man. Free that it is to wander around the Castle with most people staring at me with distrust bordering upon fear and hatred in their eyes. Good job I don't pay too much attention: you've got to have a thick skin to be a cook. All those cuts and all that.

People are talking; news of these murders is getting around. I detect a distinct chill in the air beyond the bitter cold that appears to have returned and put an end to all those butterflies, a distinct climate of worry and fear. (Note to myself though: how can butterflies be turned into a scrumptious dessert?) Something's definitely cooking, and I don't like the smell of it. For many people I am the focus of that fear. Not everyone, by a long chalk; it is in Ludwig's interest to keep news of the dirty deeds hush hush for as long as possible. The King does not like an incompetent castellan, and a competent castellan does not keep on letting murders happen on his doorstep. The King must

not know of them, although I am a little tempted to slip a word into his ear over his dock and parrot soup.

So I am in a strange limbo.

136

I nearly made a mistake last night. It's the worry; it's getting to me. I nearly slipped up by giving the King something he'd had before! Amazing - you hear of such things, but I never thought that might happen to me. The original dish was served a long time ago, but that doesn't matter. Hermann stopped me half way through cooking it, we checked the records, and there it was: buttered elk in snail sauce. We turned the elk into something different, but I broke out in the sweats, and started shaking, and had to take to my bed. This whole affair was dreadful.

As it was, there was trouble at dinner. The lights went out. Eventually Eberhard was found and the torches and candles relit. The gas had gone. Eventually responsibility was laid at the feet of steward number fifteen, whose job it had been to check the gas levels this week. He had forgotten. Forgotten! Forgotten! I repeated to myself, as I heard others doing. I can't remember the last time someone had just forgotten something. The whole purpose of the Castle is to run things smoothly so that people don't just forget things. Remediation is a wonderful aid for the ailing memory.

The King was astonished. He pushed his crown back from his brow; the rubies and emeralds glistened in the light of the newly lit torches. For a while, he was speechless. Forgotten? The rarity of this event meant that something special had to be done. People make mistakes, of course, but people never just forget. After a while Bruno discovered from the stupid boy that he was in a dalliance with a maid, and his head was full of love poetry. How sweet. Love is no excuse, however, as he was about to find out. His profuse apologies were too late; he needed a special remediation.

The King decided that he needed a boot up the arse; literally. As the punishment should fit the crime, the boot was filled with flaming oil. That way he wouldn't let lights go out again in a hurry. Yuk. It made me feel glad I'm a cook. There was also talk of making sure his head never forgot anything again, but the oil went a surprisingly long way, and there the matter ended.

It made me shiver even more. What a desperate place this is. What a close escape I'd had with dinner. I owe Hermann a favour; I must find him a present. He need not have acted so morally. He could have

remembered that I'd forgotten at dinner, in front of the King. It doesn't bear thinking about.

133

I don't remember my childhood very well. My first real memory is being chef number two hundred, many years ago. Before that I lived in the Castle, at the edges of the kitchen. I remember my mother, very dimly. She was very small, even smaller than me, like a wren. I didn't remember my father at all. He'd been a cook, and had made it up to seventeen before an overly acidic salad dressing became his undoing, leading they say to his being undressed in acid. I had faint memories of school in the Castle, and playing in the market square. Somewhere along the way I lost my mother, but exactly when, or how, I couldn't say for sure. I once heard a story that one day she just threw herself off the battlements, but the Castle is rife with rumours, many of them not true. More likely she was remediated for some unspecified lapse.

132

I have found Hermann a present: a cute little dog. He is a curious shade of orange, and has only one eye, so I hope that he will remind his master of his other master. And I am to the King as that dog is to Hermann, I suppose. The more I thought about it, the more the analogy baffled me. We couldn't think of a name for him; after a while, Hermann suggested "Carrot", as he was indeed the colour of a carrot, and would remind us of our profession. As if we needed reminding. Later, I wondered whether Hermann thought that I looked like a one-eyed carrot.

131

It was raining, a cold, piercing rain, so I met Sophia in a tower above the library. She let a note fall into my hand as she passed me with her ladies-in-waiting on Thursday. We sat in the window-seat, looking out at the grey sky. Raindrops detonated against the window. As soon as we were comfortable the rain stopped, and a rainbow emerged across the distant hills, before disappearing immediately, chastened by the thick clouds.

“I do so enjoy your company”, she said. “I can almost be myself with you.”

“Almost?”

“It’s not easy being a Princess.”

“You’re not at all like your father. Or like your mother.”

She tossed her golden curls and laughed. I felt sick and dizzy.

We heard the sound of steps being moved around in the library below us. Otherwise, up here in the tower, it was as though we had the world to ourselves, and could forget about everything. We could nearly forget who we were; princess and cook; and just be people.

She was wearing a white dress; I could see her breasts rise and fall. She was very slim. She touched my hand, and my heart stopped.

“You don’t mind, do you?” she asked, obviously sensing my surprise. I wanted to kiss her then, but there’s a limit to the liberty you can take with a princess, even a very friendly one.

“Not at all” I said, holding it tightly.

“I’ve been starved of love”, she said. “I don’t think they care at all. Sometimes it’s as though they’re not real people.”

I felt so sorry for her just then. It was certainly difficult to imagine the King as a father or a real person or indeed anything other than a king. Only she among them seemed real.

“I don’t think my brother will make a good king”, she said, amazingly echoing my thoughts, “he’s too cruel. Father tries to be just, but Johannes just likes to see the suffering.”

“You’d make a better king”, I said, “if you see what I mean.”

“I’ve got the worst of both worlds. I can’t be normal, yet I can’t be in charge. I have to take control somehow. I do the best I can”, she sighed. “I care about some things, I really do. I do the best I can. I try to make a difference, but I can’t always do everything I’d like to do.”

We looked out over the desolate landscape. How could it be any more grey without actually raining, I wondered? Spring was late this year, without a doubt. There’d been that little flourish a little while ago, but now we were back to this mind-numbing uniformity. How will this inclement climate affect the vegetables this year? Will the early peas be late?

My mind was wandering. Suddenly she turned and kissed me. Our mouths met and our tongues entwined in a moment of wonderful passion. For a moment I forgot about who she was and who I was and what she could do to me. I didn’t ever stop to think about whether I trusted her or whether we were safe here. Her saliva tasted like fruit juice. I forgot about peas.

“We’re safe here”, she said.

I sighed and looked into her eyes.

It is my great misfortune in life to have fallen in love with a princess.

130

First, find your wild ducks. This is often harder than it sounds; they're usually very wary little fellows. Here's a tip: I disguise myself as a duck. Second, shoot them. Shooting them with a musket is too risky; the shot gets scattered through the bodies, and it is always possible to miss some shot in the flesh. You can imagine that the consequences of the King cracking his tooth on a piece of neglected shot are too terrible to imagine. So you have to shoot them with a bow and arrow. This means an early start, so I prefer to cook duck in winter, when dawn is later. Hermann and I are quite good shots, but not that good. It takes us three or four hours from just before sunrise, of stalking and waiting and shooting and missing and waiting and shooting and collecting and waiting and shooting and missing and shooting again and collecting once more, before we have anywhere near enough ducks. Third, you must clunk on the head those you've winged but that aren't yet quite dead. I hate that part. Sometimes you have to clunk some on the head again that you didn't clunk hard enough the first time; you see a pitiful look in their eyes. They're reproaching you, pleading with you, their eyes asking you whatever did they do to you? What mistake did I make? It makes me want to cry. I can't imagine being Bruno. Fourth, take them to your kitchen. Usually we drop one or two along the way. Fifth, take the feathers out and eviscerate the birds. I'm good at that part. Sixth, strip the flesh from the bones. Use the bones to make a stock. Reduce it until it is the consistency of syrup. Reserve for other use. Remember to be very careful with the bones, very careful indeed. Check carefully for any small remaining bits of arrowhead. Seventh, fry the minced flesh in a little oil with onion and spices until barely cooked. At this point add the livers that you preserved from the evisceration. Eighth, add a bottle of the most expensive red wine that you can afford. It is better if, like me, it isn't your wine. The point of this dish is decadence and to waste the best wine in a way that the King could never imagine. Ninth, wait until the duck mixture has cooled. Skim off all surplus fat; this can sometimes be rather tedious. Then shake well. Tenth, empty the wine and juices into the pan, keeping the bottle. Eleventh, stir well, and strain. Return the wine to the bottle. Discard the meat mixture. Remember at each stage to taste with your trusty little testing spoon. Not too much salt mind! Nor too little! Twelfth, and finally, return the

wine to the bottle, piss in it to make up the volume lost in evaporation, replace the cork as best you can, and serve to the King as his dinner. And there you have a feast fit for a king! He will never discover the secret ingredient.

He is taken aback, but he can't think of anything of which to complain. He's never had anything like this before. He is astonished. He even admits that the flavour is rather good. He slaps the Queen on the back as she tastes the soup, of sorts, a sure sign that it is a success. I am the toast of the evening, but I avoid having to eat my own meal.

129

The weather early in the morning of the games was fine, brilliant sunshine with the sky a deep blue, if rather cold yet humid at the same time, but by midmorning little fluffy clouds were bubbling up all over the place. We had to have our council meeting earlier than our custom so that we were free to attend the games. We raced through the agenda. As we left, Jorgen licked a finger and put his arm high above his head; he sniffed the air and said "storm's coming". No one paid much notice.

A huge tent was erected on the edge of the field where the games were to take place. The crowds gathered; most people from the Castle stopped what they were doing and came to watch. At eleven, one of the guards blew a trumpet three times, and the King and the royal family and the knights and ladies of court, and all the visiting dignitaries, took their places in the shelter of the tent. I thought I saw Sophia waving at me, but at a distance it was difficult to be sure. Surely she would not be that rash? There was a handsome looking knight behind me; I had a horrid pang of jealousy as I thought that she might instead be waving at him.

The first game wasn't really a game at all; a couple of dancing bears came on and performed to the sound of a brass band. They weren't very good, it must be said, and kept on falling over, but people found their clumsiness quite amusing. The harder they fell the more they laughed. I felt sad for the pitiful beasts, taken from their homes deep in the forest, but as I looked around me at the roaring crowd, I seemed to be alone in this empathy. So I laughed too. The jester ran on prodded one of the bears with a stick; the bear cuffed him with a huge paw, and the jester fell over. We all laughed the more loudly. Then some dogs were raced round and round the field, chasing some pretend rabbit made out of fur, pulled along by one of the engineers' more useful contraptions. The main purpose of this event was to bet

on which dog would win. I bet a small sum on yellow. After all the bets were placed, the King placed his.

“Purple!” he pronounced after careful thought and examination of the dogs’ legs and behinds, and threw a large pile of gold into the pot.

So the race began, and the dogs set off at a rush. As they went round the circuit, we started encouraging our particular dogs to run faster, and then we were cheering and exclaiming, and the band started blowing their horns and beating their drums, and the dogs started barking, and there was a most dreadful cacophony. After a while, it was clear that yellow was going to win. I started to get quite excited, and jumped up and down, cheering it on towards the imminent winning post. But then someone shot yellow, and it fell dead to the ground, and then the red dog took the lead. After a few moments he pulled clear of the pack, and he was shot too. It was apparent that this was going to be repeated until it was certain that purple was going to win. This was all new to me, and now it was clear that really we hadn’t been betting on which dog was going to win, but on which dog the King thought was going to win. In due course purple won, after grey was felled too, beating green and brown by a good head, and his majesty scooped the pot, to great cheers of approval from the crowd – particularly those members of it that had also bet on purple. He threw a few coins at the owners of the dogs, and a few more at the crowd just to encourage the roars of approval, but passed the remainder on to Heinrich to fund the war in the south.

This event set the pattern for the day. As we became poorer and poorer, the King and his army became richer and richer. If he’d just said before the events, we could have just given him all our money without all the needless fuss of these games. Most of them weren’t even much fun to watch. The blindfold archery contest was the only event that really took my eye.

The clouds looked more and more threatening, and I remembered what Jorgen had said. Next, we had a joust. It was obvious who we should all put our money on when it was apparent that Prince Johannes was going to be playing. The joust went just as we predicted; Johannes’s opponent took great pains to lose spectacularly after an exhilarating contest, and to roll around the grass in agony. Just for good measure, Johannes came up to him, and jumped on the vanquished to display his supremacy, and then he rolled around in more obvious agony. When we all won our bets, the King was rather perplexed, as though he hadn’t foreseen this eventuality. He had his share of the pot, but so did everyone else. The first time, he took it on the chin, and scratched his beard. The second time Johannes won, he started to look angry. The third time, he’d obviously hatched a plan.

He pointed at the first person who stood forward to collect their winnings, and said, "he's wearing green!" There was no denying it, for the fellow, a rather lowly gardener I believe, was wearing a green coat. The significance of this escaped everyone; we all peered around, looking for some kind of clue as to what was wrong with wearing green. A few people muttered quietly to their neighbours. I certainly couldn't remember seeing any instructions about wearing green. Those wearing green looked a little concerned. We have rules, you know, and the King can't just make them up without telling anyone. It isn't fair; even the King has to abide by his rules. Heinrich saw of this of course and stepped forwards, in his serpentine way, and whispered something in the King's ear. Meanwhile I saw a couple of chaps discreetly remove green coats and hats.

"But green", said the King, "you can't see him against the grass". This was hardly true, and had a distinctly pathetic ring to it. By now everyone wearing green was starting to look very nervous, hoping no doubt that they really couldn't be seen against the grass. And I had a blue coat on; one of my favourites. I started to worry about what was coming next; could it be claimed that I couldn't be seen against the sky?

In fact there wasn't much that was blue about the sky by that point. The clouds did look dark and threatening, and if anything, there was a distinct green tinge to the sky. So some people presumably couldn't be seen against the grass or sky. As if in sympathy with my disturbed ruminations, there was a distant rumble of thunder. I wished I were indoors.

Heinrich looked most unhappy about the whole thing, but fortunately the jack of the woods who had triggered the whole affair was a smart lad who looked destined to go far. "Majesty", he said, "I donate my winnings to the royal coffers, as my meagre contribution to our glorious army". There was a great cheer as the tension burst. Then another smart chap wearing brown donated his winnings as well, and in a short while we had all handed over what we had won. Some people obviously weren't too happy about it, but it was clearly safer this way for all. The King made a little speech thanking everyone and forgiving all wearers of green for the rest of the day.

The final event of the day was the wrestling. But by this time the thunderclouds were right above us, and before we knew it the rain had started, so the whole thing soon degenerated into a muddy farce. The rain made the frozen ground slippery, and it was soon churned into a little lake of grey mud. It was hard to tell who was who, but the King still always won. At five o'clock, there was a brilliant flash and a roar, and lightning struck the weather vane on top of one of the turrets. The

thing exploded in a most spectacular fashion. This brought the day's events to a timely end, and we retired to the inn, very wet, very dirty, thirsty and hungry, and all considerably poorer. Meanwhile a terrible storm outside raged with a ferocity greater than anything I could remember in a long time. We marvelled at it all, clapping each flash of lightning and cheering each roll of thunder, as we swigged our ale and ate our venison sausages.

125

Sophia somehow contrived to put a message in my beer. As a result, we met in the catacombs beneath the castle; people rarely go down there, and when I saw the place, I could see why. They were cold and damp and dark and unthinkably horrid insects scurried away from the dismal light of our dripping torch. When I thought about it, it wasn't at all obvious to me that I'd ever been in the catacombs before, and I'd lived most of my life in the castle. But it must be said that Sophia was very insightful, as you would expect given her princessly education, for the Catacombs are an intensely private place, and even in the most unlikely event that someone else did come down, there are plenty of places to hide, and the whole thing is such a maze of stone corridors that we would be most unlikely to ever be discovered.

So we spread her fur cloak on top of the grave of one of her ancient ancestors. It was clear that this would soon get very dusty, so we had to put my second favourite purple cloak underneath it. At this rate I'd soon be out of my favourite clothes, what with one thing and another.

After we had finished, we were silent for a while. My heart beat loudly, whether with fear or with exertion I could not rightly say. Probably both. When I had recovered a little, and when I was sure that none of the skeletons would rise out of the graves seeking familial vengeance, I tried to explore the mystery of why she should love me. It was obvious why I should love her, but why should a princess love a cook, however good a cook he is? She didn't really have an explanation. She just said that it was just what she wanted, as soon as she saw me. Something moved, she said, from the very first. It is incomprehensible to me, but I'm jolly happy about it, whatever the reason, and you can't always expect everything to make perfect sense, can you? Especially not with a princess.

You can only avoid the inevitable for so long. After a few weeks of scurrying around the Castle, hiding behind doors when maids approached, using mirrors to peer into empty rooms, and asking footmen where people are and who's in a particular room, I bumped into Maria. Was she deliberately looking for me? I don't think so, because she knew where my room was, and she hadn't come to see me in all this time. But I was sitting happily in a comfortable chair in the library, reading a book of ancient recipes, hoping for inspiration, wondering why I couldn't present a nice simply fried escalope, when a maid came in to clean the wax off the candlesticks. It was Maria. I tried sinking as low as possible into the leather chair but I think I must have left my foot dangling off the edge. My little bootie caught the light.

"Ha!" she screeched, "it's you."

"It's me". I hoped that if I agreed with her, everything might be all right. So far it all seemed jolly uncontroversial.

"You soon lose interest when you've got had you wanted, don't you? I was warned about you. I should have listened."

"I wouldn't put it that way." If anything I thought that it was her who owed me an apology. I wondered who could speak such foul talk about me. I had a flash of inspiration. "And anyway, you've got your career to think of now. Where are you now?"

"Number seventeen", she said, biting her lip. Thankfully, there must be an awful lot of would-be maids outside the Castle to make up those lost numbers.

"Seventeen", I repeated. "Seventeen."

"That doesn't make it all right", she said, and then she was at me. She was like a mad woman, screaming and screeching and trying to scratch my eye.

"You bastard!" she was shouting, "you bastard!"

I fended off most of her blows, but she caught me here and then, on the cheek. It was definitely about time she cut her fingernails. It didn't really hurt, but it was annoying. This was worse than I expected. I don't like scenes. I didn't want to hurt her; I just wished she would stop.

All of a sudden she did stop, and burst out sobbing. Loud, wailing sobs. She seemed genuinely distraught; I think I preferred the anger and the blows. Out of nowhere two footmen appeared and lifted her away, still wailing. Why couldn't they have come earlier? I wiped the blood from my face, and dried my hands on a tablecloth.

“Here”, I said to a footman, handing him the tablecloth, “you’d better take this”. I went to wash my wounds.

The day ended on a sour note, too. His Majesty found a speck of dirt on his plate. The speck was so small that only he could see it. We all peered, but I must admit that it escaped my inferior eye. I was exhausted by recent events, and my head was still throbbing a little from the earlier attack on it, so I found my eye difficult to focus. Somewhat to my relief, Heinrich was also having difficulty seeing the dirt. Both Viktor and Franz came along, and they all scratched their heads. Yet no one wanted to gainsay His Majesty. Certainly not me, who might be expected to be at the sharp end of this one. I looked down at the legs of the table. They looked like the legs of a woman.

“Sire”, said Heinrich, moving back, “it is only the tiniest speck”.

“It’s huge!” bellowed the King.

“I’m sure there wasn’t anything on the plate when it left the kitchen”, I said, bright as a flash of lightning. I was pleased with this. It admitted nothing. The plate with the fingerprint was still fresh in my mind. It didn’t even in itself put the responsibility on someone else, because they could always try remonstrating with the King about the size of mote, or even say it was event of nature; that the speck just fell from the air, or was dropped by a spider passing above on the ceiling.

Which is exactly what happened. Footman eighteen came along and said that it was handed to him by footman forty-four. I had passed it to cook number eleven, who was adamant that the plate was spotless when he received it and when he passed it on. So footman forty-four was brought forth. He was clearly a smart chap, and might have been destined for great things in better circumstances. He looked at the plate and said,

“There’s nothing there, sire.”

We were all completely stunned by this display of brazen effrontery. The King went puce, and started to resemble the thunderstorm of a few days before. Then he collected himself a little, and remembered that he was the King and he must control himself in front of such lowly servants. He bit his lip, and was silent for a while.

“Nothing there?” he roared.

The footman looked at the plate again, turning his head from side to side. “I can’t see anything”, he said.

“His eyes need seeing to”, the King gasped. “See to them. And then make sure there’s nothing there of him.”

And that was that. The whole incident was most unsavoury, and left an unpleasant taste in all our mouths. All in all, it was not a good day.