Chapter Five

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Lady Anne had a very different mien. Great beauty had bestowed on her much attention – rarely did she go to a party and find herself without a flock of admirers. This created in her a need for love, which she courted assiduously and needed like a deer needs water, but also its opposite – a desire to run from the suffocation of always being the object of attention. It invaded her privacy, which she carved out for herself, often mid-conversation, by abruptly turning away. The result was like blowing on a fire, it fanned the flames of ardour amongst those who sought to know her. Men, disconcerted, would wrestle with what they had done to elicit such a summary dismissal. Women, likewise would feel cast in darkness by the light that lady Anne always made sure was sustained at a level of phosphorescent brilliance. It was not enough that her beauty would take her to the position of high priestess of the land of which she was queen, she also needed to reinforce her status by making faintly humiliating remarks. Thus it was that she said to Elijah:

“I passed your house the other day – does selling truffles make any money?”

Elijah knew the cottage needed re-thatching and had garnered the look of an old farmer in need of a haircut. A spate of orders for wood had made him neglect the garden over the summer so that nettles and brambles grew in profusion where rows of beans and lettuces should have been.

“It makes as much as we require,” he replied stiffly.

The day of the truffle hunt had arrived and it was just as bad as Elijah had dreaded.

“I imagine it must be hard for you to leave dear Oswin and Matilda when you go off for long hunts,” she continued with an expert instinct for the nerve.

“No, it’s easy enough when they have been scrapping all day,’ retorted Elijah trying to sound jocular.

Whenever she had dashed somebody Lady Anne was always quick to issue a pleasantry so it was she who next said:

“Lady Deveigne said that your truffles are better than those at Simpson’s.”

Elijah carried on walking, saved from the silence that he knew not how to fill by Curly who abruptly left his side to sniff out a badger scuffling around in some bushes.

“Curly!” he shouted in a deep bark that had the dog instantly return to his master.

Her frustration at not getting Elijah to rise to her advances – for that is what they were – grew as the two trudged over the icy ground.

She tried a different tactic. “I always love this time of year, with its raw energy and howling winds outside. There is nothing worse than a hot summers’ day as it makes you feel you have no excuse to be unhappy” she said, her voice a mixture of plaintive and honest.

He turned to her, startled. Was she unhappy? She seemed to have everything any mortal could possibly wish for – a large estate, great beauty, wealth, intelligence. What could possibly make her happy if those things had not?

“I often feel I should live in Scotland than here – those large expanses of moorland in winter echo how I feel much better than the cosy business of this part of the world.”

Yes, he could imagine her astride a white mare streaming across the moors of Glencoe or Rannoch, her beauty accentuated by her loneliness. Her disclosures seemed to invite him to reveal things about himself but instead he just said: “Yes, the cows have a lot to answer for.”

Although entranced by this mercurial and fascinating creature his instinct for danger was second only to his dogs that both slunk obediently close to his heels and he knew only the foolhardy assumed familiarity with those of different orders – both higher and lower. The easy charm and courtesy of the ruling class often belied a savageness that he had noted early in his life; at the age of ten he had once had been instructed to take a corn dolly to the church for harvest festival that his mother had lovingly crafted. As he presented it to God with a brief nod of the head, placing it under the altar he gazed in wonder at a new and beautifully carved altar panel above it. Carved delicately in oak, Jesus

was surrounded by his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane; the figure of Judas, whispering to soldiers at the margins, his finger to his lips signified the ultimate betrayal. A few minutes later a group of visitors arrived to see the new work, led by Lord Charles, Sir Richard's father who had commissioned the work and picked up the corn dolly and said laughing; "I imagine this is what passes as high art in these parts."

Recalling his mother's flushed and beaming face after hours of straining and reworking the - to him - superior figure of a goat, complete with horns, drooping ears and curling fronds of hair, Elijah felt the first taste of that unbridgeable alienation that would never leave him.

He walked along side Lady Anne, scanning the ground for signs of truffles; they liked sunny spots best, where small clearings in the dog's mercury with its large pointed oval leaves with toothed edges allowed them to be warmed and proliferate under the ground; nuggets of life that depended on both trees and hedgehogs, squirrels, badgers and other omnivorous creatures of the woods to carry their spores in much the same way that generations of human forest hunters had spread them from copse to thicket.

But on this day, the only evidence there was any life in the wood at all were the occasional snatches of sound ; the trill of a wren or the harsh screech of a distant jay. The crows clustered high up in the spoke-like branches of the ash trees above; the sentinels of the bird world their rasping cries echoed around the wood; almost human in timbre yet with a death-like rattle that was unnerving.

The ground lay in an inky blackness; boggy patches hemmed by horsetails and couch grass. An easterly wind slapped his face where it was exposed under his soft felt cap as dark as Lady Anne's face was rosy and expectant.

All his senses were alert when deciding where to look for truffles; currents of energy that relied on him entirely working in harmony with the natural world around him. But the multitude of tiny signifiers that led him to his quarry; the angle of the sun; the density and type of vegetation and an ineffable sense of peace, as if God himself had decided on where best to plant these gifts, were all trammelled and sent awry by the presence of Lady Anne and her intelligence, winking like a light beside him.