

Fabien de Cadaret, 1756 (one year before Royal Affairs, five years before Honor Bound)

Author notes:

- Includes alcohol, cigarettes

The President's Winter Honours Ceremony is all ice-themed this year: pale chandeliers dripping with pale lights, fake icicles hanging at the windows, sugar crystals coloured the palest of blue encrusting the edges of the drinks glasses. It's ridiculous, Fabien thinks as he watches the President ascend the stage, because New Belmir City has barely seen snow in its life and it's only in the mountains and beyond that you'd have a winter of the kind this party hearkens to. But that's the theme the President wanted, so a cold-weather look it is, while the Elites flutter around in sleeveless gowns and linen suits, looking as though they're off to the Hanwells for a summer holiday. Fabien's uncomfortably warm already in his blue brocade jacket but he's reluctant to remove it yet for the look of the thing.

He stretches out his legs. The Elites are still settling in the theater hall; the layered seats reach high. He has a front row seat for this, though, of course, with the other Westerlind staffers clustered around him and Teranese Parliamentary Officers nearby. He's close enough to pick out the gold swirls of embroidery on President Faraci's plum-coloured suit, which isn't quite a military dress uniform but reminiscent of it - not that Faraci has had a military position for at least a decade, but they always like to remind people.

President Faraci begins their speech. Fabien will admit that they're a good speaker, rolling and clear and good-humoured. He can't decide whether the countryside accent is an affect or not. Nicola Faraci has the look of a former athlete, bulky and barrel-chested and loud-voiced; they take up space and draw the eye whether or not you like it - or them.

Fabien is not sure whether he likes them, which is interesting in its way because usually he knows that sort of thing very quickly. In principle, he can appreciate this as a spectacle but he's not in the mood tonight. Faraci's all benevolent cheer and acting as though this event is nothing other than a wonderful occasion to give a treat to all their friends. But visiting Teran enough times, and being here for the months leading up to the Honours Ceremony, he's seen what this is about: not really rewarding hard work, but ducking, diving, and political maneuvering.

Which, ordinarily, Fabien would be perfectly happy about. With some scorn on the side, obviously, because it's all so *vulgar*, this showiness and shine and glitter everywhere, matching the blatant bribes and open favouritism - they can't stand subtlety here, can they, whatever happened to the careful craft of it all, at least in Jezhan you can catch a glimpse of a hint and your pulse quickens as you realise you're on the scent of something interesting, but here it's out in the open and there's no *challenge*, not in the way there is elsewhere. But yes: he will admit to some enjoyment when tension thickens the air and he can lean over someone's desk and say things like *this isn't good enough, I'm frankly disgusted that you'd think I'd even share this with Estell*, and the Parliamentary Officers start exchanging nervous glances because what they

don't like to admit is that no matter how much a President scrabbles for approval a Queen will always sit above.

He plucks another glass of sparkling rosé from a passing server and sips while the guests applaud the next person to receive their title. No, ordinarily he would throw himself into things but tonight he's honest enough to admit to himself that the real reason he's out of sorts is that he's terribly homesick, and Estell and the children will be gathering to celebrate Hearthlight next week in Vossau Castle, and he is not there to stamp through the real, cold, snow.

The final new Elite kneels for a medal: Honored Fiore, apparently, some manner of scientist, who does not look excited to be here in the slightest and instead looks like a nervous rabbit caught by a flashlight. No, not exactly that: a *sad* nervous rabbit, which is vaguely interesting, but then stagefright can hit in any manner of ways.

"And now we can get on and do what I know you're really here for," President Faraci says, spreading their arms. "Enjoy the party!"

Fabien sits and watches for a short while, and tells his assistant to go and have fun. Fiore does not mingle with the other new Elites when they all sweep off the stage and flutter through with the other guests, but instead disappears into the gardens. Fabien puts that out of his mind, determined to finish his rather inferior rosé, and once he's done so he strides through the smoke-choked room of card-players to the bar - of course there's a bar in the Presidential Houses, there's everything here - in search of something more pleasant.

What he finds, surrounded by bursts of laughter and back-slapping and shouted affectionate insults, is President Faraci sitting on a tall stool. They've abandoned their jacket and have rolled up their crisp white shirt-sleeves. Not entirely what Fabien had in mind, but he's perfectly decent at putting on a cheerful face so he strides through the hangers-on and claps a hand on the President's shoulder.

"Lovely speech," he says. "I enjoyed the part about bringing new voices to the new generation. I hope the Parliamentary Officers weren't too disappointed not to be awarded titles?"

President Faraci toasts him with their cocktail glass. It's a vile turquoise colour that looks like a scientific chemical, and has been treated with dry ice so an uncanny smoky vapour curls above it. They lean in to speak loudly in his ear over the noise of the crowd. "It keeps them guessing," they say, then withdraw and laugh as though it were a joke. "Do you want one of these?"

Fabien inclines his head yes. Why not? It looks horrid, but it may be deceptive. A staffer brings a fresh cocktail, greener than Faraci's, and he clinks glasses with them. When he sips, it contrives to be burning hot and sickly sweet at the same time. Hideous. Still, it spreads a decent amount of heat through his chest and relaxes his shoulders.

"Horrible, I'm afraid," he says bracingly.

Faraci laughs. "You're brave, then," they say. "I can ask for something else?"

Fabien's fingers tighten on the stem of the glass. "Maybe later."

Faraci looks up at him, the smile still hovering around their mouth. The others start converging again, sensing a gap in the conversation, but Faraci waves them away and rises. They're around Fabien's height, but heavier and more muscular: they could probably lift Fabien off his feet, which is not the sort of thing Fabien is accustomed to considering. They sling an arm casually around Fabien's shoulder and steer him away from the hangers-on and into the card-players' room.

"I'll play a game with you," Faraci says, "if you want."

That idea makes Fabien smile properly, and he relaxes into the game. He wins two hands, and wonders if Faraci's letting him, but they're cheerfully sloppy enough with their strategies that perhaps it's just for fun. Then he decides it doesn't really matter. After he's won the third hand, he stands. The cigarette smoke's stinging his eyes.

"If you want to return to the coffee import tax discussion," he says, "I'm in a better mood now I've beaten you."

The observers laugh, and so does Faraci. They guide Fabien to a quieter alcove a little set apart from the main rooms though with an elegant arch rather than a door: a small library area with squashy leather armchairs in front of the bookshelves, a decanter of brandy and crystal glasses between them.

"Here," Faraci says, settling in one of the chairs and pouring a brandy for him, "this room should make you feel more at home."

"It actually does," Fabien admits. It could almost be a Fenburg social club like St Eleuterio's, except for the shape of the window opening onto the dark gardens outside. When he sips, it is Westerlind brandy; it washes away the aftertaste of the turquoise monstrosity. "We usually have real doors, though."

Faraci barks a laugh. "It's for air circulation in the heat, not that you'd know how it works."

"I know plenty," Fabien says, but mentioning the heat makes him conscious of his jacket again. He shrugs it off and places it on the studded arm of his chair. Relief, feeling the breeze from the open window on his back.

"Talk to me about coffee," Faraci says.

They talk about coffee, then, and grain, and Fabien cannot get them to promise anything but they both argue over numbers before bursting into laughter over nothing and returning to the argument. At one point Faraci reaches over the little table between them to laughingly punch Fabien's shoulder, and Fabien freezes because it puts him so much in mind of Georges that his throat hurts. It's stupid, the things that suddenly remind him. Faraci stops, clearly knowing something's happened but having no idea what, and Fabien has no words he can say so instead he surges to his feet.

Faraci startles. It's satisfying to see it, that he can be shaken out of his irritating complacency. That they do not know why Fabien's angry. Fabien is not entirely sure himself, but that doesn't matter: he embraces it eagerly.

"Honored Fabien," Faraci says.

Fabien's face is hot, his lips numb. He's steady enough on his feet but it's his mind that's skittering around, so he leans down, hand heavy on the arm of Faraci's chair. "It's Lord Fabien," he says. "Lord. It's not hard to remember."

"I do apologise," they say, but it's evident that they barely mean it, and Fabien cannot stand it one bit.

He leans closer for emphasis. "Three point five percent," he says. Faraci shakes their head, smiling, almost laughing again. "I mean it. Do you want me to spread it around that you were treating Westerlind visitors with disrespect?"

They face one another. Faraci drums their fingers on the arm of the chair. "You know I'd never dream of disrespect," they say. "We've only ever been welcoming and cordial to you and your people-"

"Three point five percent," he says.

Faraci lowers their gaze. Somehow despite their broad build, they look a little smaller. It's good to see. They pat Fabien's arm in a placating sort of way, and, as Fabien withdraws, they smile. "I'll see what I can do."