

# The Captain's Virgin

By

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Château de Fontainebleau*

*France, 1661*

"Make haste, Perdita! We'll be late if you don't stop dawdling."

Marguerite du Thierry seized her hand in the dim light, dragging Perdita down the stone-flagged corridor.

"I am hurrying." Perdita clutched her sketchbook under one arm. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Marguerite rolled her eyes. "Are you still asleep? We are going to watch the tennis match. The Count de Guiche has challenged an Englishman, and all the world and his wife will be watching. That includes us, if you will but hasten!"

Breathless, they entered the tennis court. A gallery ran all along one side, providing seating for spectators. They sat down with a flurry of petticoats, the nearest maid-of-honor making room with a good-natured grumble. The tennis court was divided by a net, and two men with rackets were idly exchanging volleys.

"That's the Count de Guiche, on the right," whispered Marguerite. "They say he's the handsomest man in France!"

The count was tall and well made, with a flashing smile and dark hair. Perdita could find no fault in his appearance, but a blaze of color in the opposite court caught her eye.

His opponent was a young man with long, curling hair, lit with fire by the morning sun streaming through the windows above. He was taller than de Guiche, with the lean, hard look of a man who had earned his muscles. He was dressed simply in shirt and breeches, without the excess of lace and ribbons usually worn by courtiers. He was not beautiful, Perdita decided, but something about his strong, angular features compelled attention. That is, if one happened to be interested in attractive, athletic young men.

A rustling of silk and the murmurs of the maids signaled the arrival of Henrietta, the English princess, now called "Madame" in the French fashion since her marriage to Philippe, the

king's brother. The spectators stood respectfully while she arranged her skirts, and the match began.

Perdita had little interest in the game itself, but her artist's fingers itched to sketch the beauty of the young man's long, muscled back as he returned a difficult shot. She drew a pencil from her pocket, scrabbling for a sheet of paper. If she could just capture his intensity, his single-minded focus on each stroke of his racket. Her fingers tightened on the pencil until it twisted and slipped from her grasp, rolling along the floor of the gallery.

She stood to retrieve it, but the sudden motion must have diverted the young man's attention from de Guiche's volley. He returned it with a strong stroke that flew high and straight into the gallery, where it caught Perdita on the shoulder. A spike of red hot agony lanced through her. The impact spun her around. She teetered a moment, then struck the bench, and collapsed behind it. Her face hit the wooden planks. She heard a man curse and the sound of running footsteps.

Marguerite helped Perdita from the floor. She slumped on the bench, clutching her shoulder. The young man with red hair bent over her, stormy gray eyes narrowed. His lips were well cut above a firm chin, his nose straight as a blade.

Perdita struggled to sit up, but the pain made her dizzy.

"Is it broken?" he asked, leaning closer.

Perdita could feel the heat of his body; smell the sweat that trickled from the copper curls at his temple. His fingers moved tentatively along her sleeve, where she cradled her arm, and the world tilted.

"Don't touch me!"

He swore under his breath and retreated. "Someone fetch a physician! You," he said to Marguerite, "don't just sit there. Fetch cold cloths to keep the swelling down. And someone find some brandy." He winked at Perdita. "I could use a drink."

Perdita ignored him and tried to get up. The movement made her groan, and the young man immediately crouched down beside her again. He blew out a breath that stirred her hair. She closed her eyes and felt him touch her cheek with gentle fingers.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll take care of you."

Perdita opened her eyes. "A pox on that; I'll have the brandy."

He laughed—a low, delicious sound that sped her pulse.

"You've got spirit, lass."

His voice was dark and deep as a Highland burn—definitely not English. He stayed with Perdita until Monsieur Fournier, the fussy old man who served as physician to Madame's ladies, arrived clutching his leather satchel. Monsieur Fournier fretted over her shoulder, wrapping it so tightly Perdita wanted to scream. He waved away the young man's attempts to assist him, informing him that he was neither wanted nor needed.

The young Scot caught her eye, as the physician thrust him out of the gallery. He shrugged and tossed off the brandy Marguerite had brought him. Then he bowed and strode off with an air of scarcely contained energy. Monsieur Fournier told Perdita to keep to her room for the rest of the day, adding that he thought her shoulder was merely bruised and would be better in a few days.

He assisted her to their dormitory, and Marguerite helped her out of her dress and into bed. Her friend clucked over her, until Perdita told her she was making her head ache. Marguerite drew the curtains and left her alone with her thoughts, which turned, unbidden, to the young man with red hair. His presence excited her, in spite of the pain. Who was he, and what was he doing at the court of Louis XIV?

\* \* \* \* \*

Sebastian slipped along the narrow passage, the dust beneath his feet so thick that it felt like a velvet carpet. His candle sputtered and went out, leaving him in total darkness. Although he wasn't completely human, he still needed some light to see. He spoke softly, using a language that had disappeared from the world centuries ago. The candle flickered and then glowed with a steady flame. He started walking again.

After several minutes, he rounded a sharp turn and headed towards a bar of light that shone on one side of the passage. He heard voices—a man and a woman—and she sounded upset. He stepped up to the light flickering from a narrow slit that revealed a view of a small room, richly decorated with embroidery and gold leaf. The man looked familiar. Sebastian leaned forward. It was the Louis, the king, and he was speaking to his mother. Sebastian smiled his satisfaction.

Anne of Austria, the queen dowager of France, paced the apartment, tapping her furred

fan against her palm in agitation. At nearly sixty years old, she was still a regal figure.

"I will not tolerate this disgraceful behavior any longer!"

"Must you fuss, *Maman*?"

Louis smiled easily at his mother, but his dark eyes were watchful.

"You have to leave Henrietta alone. She is your sister-in-law, for heaven's sake. Your behavior with her is shocking the court, and your brother is furious."

"My brother would rather dress up in women's clothing than sleep with his wife."

Sebastian smothered a laugh.

Anne paused. "Well, if you won't give her up, will you at least throw some sop to convention? Henrietta has several beautiful women among her maids-of-honor. Set one up as your flirt, so you have an excuse to be with her so often. That should help stop tongues from wagging."

Louis raised an eyebrow.

"*Maman*, I love you, but you are the most managing of all women. You've yet to realize that I am a grown man and quite capable of running my own life."

"Your kingdom is still recovering from the wounds dealt by the Fronde. We claimed victory in that uprising, but your presence here, your very life, is due to our vigilance. Now my dear Cardinal Mazarin is dead, and you are the master." Anne slapped her fan against her palm. "You must learn to act like one."

"Very well, I'll do as you ask. Which girl should I choose?"

Anne frowned. "I don't know, and I don't care. Just pick one of them."

Louis sketched his mother a graceful bow. "I shall do as you command, *Maman*."

Anne's smile broke out. "Command, indeed. I have only your best interests at heart, my son."

The king took her hand and placed it on his arm. "Of that I have no doubt. Let us take a promenade and enjoy the fountains. I'll endeavor to listen to all your good advice."

Sebastian saw the queen's fingers tighten on the king's arm. Anne looked away for a moment and her mouth trembled. She knew her reign was ending, and that a new sun shone on France.

Sebastian waited until they'd left and walked back to the storeroom that had given him access to the secret passages that riddled the ancient chateau. So Louis panted after the pretty

English princess. A fascinating tidbit that his own Dark King would be interested to know.

He wondered which woman Louis' eye would fall on next. There were several possibilities. Louise de La Vallière—blonde, pretty and amiable. Or Athénaïs de Rochouart-Mortemart—a beautiful bitch, both vain and ambitious. And Marguerite du Thierry—she was not pretty, but good-humored. The king could do worse.

Then there was the English girl, the one he'd been sent to find. He had yet to speak with her, but the scent of her power was an irresistible lure to creatures like him. It amused Sebastian that the poor thing had no idea what she was, or what she might become.

He could help her. She might prove to be a valuable ally, once she came into her power. It was new to her, and fragile, as mortals were. Yes, Sebastian would befriend her, take her under his wing, and when the time was right, he would bring her to the Dark King's realm, to the Perilous Court, where few mortals visited, and even fewer left.

She might not like that. In fact, he was quite sure that she wouldn't. Sebastian shrugged. Her wishes were irrelevant, as she would soon discover. Power had its price.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, Perdita lay back against the window seat in Madame's sitting room. The sketchbook in her lap showed a drawing of the other girls as they languished over their needlework. Her arm ached. She would have to finish it later.

"Are you quite recovered, my dear?"

Marguerite plumped down in the seat beside her, her round, merry face solemn for once.

"The bandage is off and it's a bit tender, but Monsieur Fournier says it's healing well."

"The physician told me you were lucky it wasn't broken."

"No thanks to that red-haired man. Do you know he hasn't even apologized to me?"

"What a lout!" said Marguerite. "Of course, he is English, after all."

"No, he's not. He's Scottish."

"Is that worse?"

"You have no idea; my governess was Scottish and she was the most stubborn woman I ever met, besides never, ever being wrong. He probably thinks the whole incident was my fault. He certainly looked angry enough when he came to see what had happened."



"I thought he looked worried," said Marguerite. "What young man wants to be responsible for injuring a pretty girl?"

"Why, Marguerite," Perdita said, "that is truly the kindest thing you've ever said to me!"  
Marguerite giggled.

The sun shone through the window, casting rainbows on her sketchbook and illuminating the dresses Perdita had drawn. Marguerite called her pretty, but that was mere kindness. She was a colorless moth amid the other girls' butterfly brilliance. Perdita sighed and looked out the window to see a familiar blaze of red below. It was him, the tennis player.

"I wonder what he's doing at court," said Marguerite, looking over her shoulder.

"He looks like a soldier."

"So he does—the way he carries himself, and his clothing, so plain like a uniform. Your big blue eyes are very observant today, Mademoiselle Rayne."

"Not really. I just have interests other than the cut of my bodice and the curl of my hair."

Marguerite pulled a face. She peered out the window.

"He looks perfectly charming. Do you think he would ask me to dance? Oh, no, it's Mademoiselle de Rochouart-Mortemart!"

The blonde woman in lilac silk was speaking with the Scot, laughing and gesturing in a vivacious manner.

"She's voracious, my dear, completely voracious. If she gets her hands on your beau, we'll never get a crack at him!" Marguerite said, with mock anger.

Perdita's fingers itched as she reached for her pencil, compelled to sketch the scene below. He looked serious, and although he listened to the blonde, the young man did not smile at her. Athénaïs de Rochouart-Mortemart placed a white hand on his sleeve, gazing up into his face. When she finally fluttered away, he didn't look after her. He looked up at the château, instead, at the very window on the second floor where she was sitting. He stared at her gravely for a moment, then turned and walked off.

"He saw us!" Marguerite shrieked. "I'm completely embarrassed."

"You'll live," Perdita said and looked down at her sketch. She had captured the red-haired man and Athénaïs fairly well with a few broad strokes, but she'd also drawn something else, something she couldn't possibly have seen. A snake coiled around Athénaïs' upper body, its flat head resting on her shoulder, like a beloved pet. As Perdita traced its outline, she felt a tiny

vibration under her finger. The snake in the drawing raised its head and hissed at her, forked tongue flicking through exposed fangs.

Perdita gasped and slammed the sketchbook shut.

"What's the matter?" Marguerite asked.

Perdita shook her head and cautiously lifted the cover, leafing through her pictures until she came to the sketch of Athénaïs. There was no snake in the picture she'd drawn. Perdita stared down at the paper. Was she losing her mind?

The murmuring of Madame's attendants wafted through the room like the whispering of their silk skirts. The king was coming.

\* \* \* \* \*

Louis XIV was not tall, but possessed such grace and self-possession that one always forgot about his height. He was handsome, his dark good looks favoring his Medici grandmother. The other maids-of-honor all sighed and fluttered around him like moths intoxicated by a flame, but not Perdita. She had no ambition to be the king's new lover, only to be cast off when he moved on to his next conquest.

Perdita looked over at her mistress, the English princess, whose delicate features were lit with the smile she reserved only for Louis, her brother-in-law. It was obvious she basked in Louis' admiration, a balm to the neglect she suffered from her husband. Louis bowed over Henrietta's hand with his usual grave courtesy.

"I thought we might have a picnic tomorrow, if the weather holds," Louis said.

Henrietta clapped her hands. "What a wonderful notion! It's been so terribly hot."

"Will we all go?" Perdita asked Louise de La Vallière, the quiet, pretty blonde girl who sat beside her.

Louise turned with a smile. "Yes, of course. Perhaps we might even go boating on the river. Madame loves to swim."

Perdita stifled a sigh. Since coming to court a month ago, she had quickly learned that all her time was scheduled to suit Madame's every whim. She was never alone, and the constant whirl of useless activity chafed her. She wanted to wander the château's beautiful gardens with her sketchbook, to draw when her muse beckoned. She longed for a chance to be quiet and at

peace with her own thoughts. Still, to be outdoors on a beautiful June day, to drift along the cool green water of the Loire, did sound idyllic. She turned back to the game. Perdita quite hated cards.

A few minutes later, she threw down her hand. She had lost again. The Grande Mademoiselle, the king's cousin, asked Perdita to fetch a glass of wine. She crossed the room to the buffet where the carafes of wine were displayed and poured out a glass. A painted screen shielded her from the rest of the room. She lingered for a moment, to enjoy a quick moment of solitude. Then she heard two voices, pitched low, in intimate conversation—the king and Madame.

"Who is the new girl, the dark-haired one, who was sitting by the window? I don't remember seeing her before," she heard Louis ask Henrietta.

"You always notice the pretty ones! Her name is Perdita Rayne. Her father is English and her mother is French, a Serrigond from Brittany. Madame Rayne was a maid-of-honor to my mother when she went to England to marry my father."

Perdita froze. She wanted to move, but if she left the alcove, the king would see her. Would he think she was spying on him? She gripped the glass tightly and waited.

"She looks like an English wildflower among a garden of French lilies."

"So she does. And like all wildflowers, she should not be plucked." Henrietta's voice was soft, with a tiny edge.

"Are you jealous, *chérie*? You have no need to be. You must know you are the only woman I desire."

"You are always so gallant, cousin."

Did her mistress really believe him? Though rumor had it that Henrietta was completely infatuated with the king, she must be aware of his reputation. Louis considered it his duty to sleep with any woman at court who wanted him, and the list of his conquests was a lengthy one.

"How is the queen feeling?"

Maria Theresa, the Spanish princess who had married the king just last year, was pregnant.

"The heat bothers her. But the *accoucheurs* are confident of a safe delivery. I will leave you now, and we will meet this evening. Ladies, I bid you good day."

Perdita heard the click of the king's high heels on the wooden floors as he left the room.

She made her way back to the card table and handed the glass to the princess.

"Took you long enough."

Perdita murmured an apology and slipped back into her seat on the low bench.

Louise was still watching the door, her large blue eyes soft with emotion. "He is so very handsome," she sighed.

Perdita smiled and picked up the cards. She was more determined than ever to stay out of the king's way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"My dear boy, come in, come in."

Sir Percy Marland, the English ambassador to France, beamed at Iain Gilmore as he ushered his godson into his study. "Brandy? This is one of the few things I must admit the French do better." He helped himself to a large glass and waved Iain to a seat, before plumping down in the chair behind his desk. "Your parents are well?"

"Yes, sir, last I heard. My mother is undertaking some renovations in the castle." Iain grinned. "My father is, presumably, off fishing somewhere else."

"Excellent. Well, it has occurred to me that they must both be missing you very much. It came to me, like a bolt out of the blue, that your portrait would make a wonderful birthday present for your mother."

Sir Percy, small, bald and red-faced, sat smiling at Iain, with an air of expectancy, as though he were about to confer some great treat.

"My portrait?"

"Yes, yes, my boy. Now we haven't much time so I have thought up a wonderful scheme. Our dear Princess Henrietta tells me one of her ladies is quite a competent artist. I have hired her to do a likeness of you, not a formal oil portrait, but a study, shall we say. I will send it home, and if your mother likes it, she can have it copied in oil. I daresay it will look very well in their gallery, very well, indeed."

Sir Percy cocked his head and looked at Iain hopefully, very like a bald and wizened sparrow.

Iain sipped his brandy. "What aren't you telling me?"

Sir Percy leaned back in his chair. "You spoke to the Rochouart-Mortemart girl the other day."

"Your spies do you credit."

"You should know."

All semblance of a dear old man had been laid aside. The only avian Sir Percy resembled at the moment was a bird of prey.

"She approached me, fishing for information."

"Athénaïs is clever, charming and ambitious, like the rest of her family. She is also a very dangerous woman."

"How dangerous?"

"Imagine the most powerful monarch in Europe allied with a sorceress pledged to the Dark Court."

Iain swore.

"Exactly."

"But how? Her sister is a bloody nun, for Christ's sake."

"It's an old family. Rumor has it that the immortal Mélusine herself was an ancestress. As for Athénaïs herself, who knows? But she's been in correspondence with a certain midwife in Paris."

"She's with child?"

"Not to my knowledge. But the midwife has an unsavory reputation. There are rumors about Black Masses and worse. Athénaïs fancies herself as Louis' mistress, and woe betide any who get in her way. Meanwhile, the king is pursuing another woman."

Iain rubbed his jaw. "What's our interest in this affair?"

Sir Percy laughed. "Right to the point, eh, lad? Normally, we'd get rid of the sorceress and use the other girl to influence the king. But there are a few wrinkles. I've been instructed to avoid the witch and protect the girl."

"Why? Protecting the innocent is hardly your style."

"You wound me. It appears the young lady has a peculiar talent, one worth cultivating."

Iain pondered the implications. "What's our source for this information?"

Sir Percy shrugged.

"And her particular talent?"

"Unknown at this point."

"And you want me to..."

Sir Percy's gaze was benign, an expression belied by the cold spark in those perceptive eyes.

"Befriend the young woman. She is at court for the first time, probably lonely and unsure of herself, like most girls. Get her to trust you, to confide in you, if possible."

"And the king?"

Sir Percy poured himself another brandy.

"We'll await further instructions on that point."

Iain sighed. "When do I start?"

"You have an appointment with the lady in question this afternoon, in the queen's rose garden. Now, off with you, I am quite run off my feet today." Sir Percy took another healthy swig of brandy and crossed his legs.

Iain got up to leave. "Thank you, sir."

"Oh, you will thank me when you see how pretty she is," Sir Percy said. "And bring your spyglass with you."

A feeling of inevitability settled over Iain's shoulders like a shroud. "What is her name?" he asked.

"Miss Perdita Rayne. I hear she is very talented."

I'll wager she is, Iain thought.