

Vice of Romance

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Vice of Romance

Aria Folla's improved nose only hurts when she sneezes. Or when she scratches it.

Aria avoids the temptation to do either as she navigates the frosted, tree-lined pathways of the campus, dark and deserted at this early hour, and carefully ascends the steps to the entrance of the Communications Hub at the United Nations International Romance Office in Turin, Italy.

As she waits for the door to scan her iris and let her in, Aria observes her reflection in the door's glass front. She sees a thin, middle-aged woman dressed in finely tailored clothes that were fashionable not so long ago. The shoulders of her close-fitting overcoat are laced with dandruff from her once-curly blonde hair whose grey roots only show at the central parting. The face she sees is pinched and careworn, but her right nostril is at last free of that black wart. Ah, the perks of her job! Now she need no longer feel nostalgia for the days when everyone had to wear a face-mask in public. She sighs with satisfaction, and glances up with longing at the Department of Information and Communications that stretches all along the third floor. The door finally opens and chimes in greeting. Aria sashays in and takes her personal lift up to the next floor. It releases her straight into her office, where she turns up the central heating, though not to a wasteful degree, before doffing her coat and switching on her computers. Her office door looks on to a large open-plan space, one of whose work stations is already occupied. Through the door's one-way glass panel, she can see two of the usual supplicants seated facing each other, but not looking at each other, just outside the door. Neither is the nose-job man.

Aria opens the door and calls a hearty greeting to Stookie, whose pale face reddens slightly as he smiles and replies without taking his eyes from his computer screen.

Good boy! thinks Aria, before turning her attention to the two seated women.

“How nice to see you both. Are you here to see me?” she asks. They both nod.

“Well, who was here first?”

The woman who is older than Aria gestures at the younger one, whom Aria considers may have been too favoured by Mother Nature to be as malleable as a young lady should be. But then, these days ... At least she smiles pleasantly, shy rather than coquettish, as Aria invites her into her room, only now putting on the lights and switching into Italian with a heavy local Piedmontese accent, in which Aria asks what she can do for the young woman, although what her visitor can do for Aria is more to the point.

With his early presence noted by his boss, Stookie decides he can afford to go and get some breakfast. It has been a long early morning, and Stookie is really hungry. He invites the woman sitting outside Aria's door to join him, but she declines, anxious not to risk her place at the head of the queue for mutual favours. Stookie has seen the woman here before, and knows that she runs a small translation agency in the city, but whether she is after work for her company or something more personal he can only guess. In any case, if she has something worth offering to Aria in exchange, her business must be booming, or else she is simply desperate. Stookie feels a twinge of pity for her, as he does for all Aria's supplicants.

“Can I get you anything from the Coffee Lounge?” he asks.

The woman gives him a smile that warms his heart.

“Why thank you. You could bring me a *marocchino*.”

What's wrong with a South African? Stookie wonders, before she clarifies: “Espresso, hot chocolate and milk foam. None of that nutella rubbish. In a small glass, pre-heated, of course.”

“Of course,” Stookie answers, before donning his multi-coloured mountain jacket and heading out into the invigorating cold of a February morning in Turin.

When he reaches the Coffee Lounge, at the other end of the campus, he finds that it is packed. Breakfast, like mid-morning coffee, is a focal point of both the United Nation International Romance Office and Italy's National Institute on Training, with which Uniro shares the campus. It is when news is spread, ideas are sparked, alliances are formed and dissolved, strategies are outlined and discussed

among people from a range of departments, and oceans of coffee are consumed, together with mountains of pastries, by officials from across the globe.

The young South African joins the queue for pre-payment and looks around to see if there is anyone here he can have a decent natter about football with. He spots a couple of likely South American women sitting at a table with a pair of local men. Well, yes, he could banter with the men about the decline of Juve following the collapse of Fiat Peugeot, or ask the women about the latest boy wonders yet to be lured from Latin America to Europe. Stookie reaches the head of the queue and orders himself a *cappuccino*, no froth, in a china cup, with brown sugar, together with a couple of pastries, and the *marocchino* on a separate ticket so that he can collect it just before he returns to the office.

By the time he has joined the queue to be served, got his order in and collected his share of it, the group he intended to join has already left. A dark-skinned man sitting with a slim, raven-haired woman hails him, and Stookie goes over to join his occasional drinking buddy Vijay and the harassed-looking woman, who is attacking a sandwich with fast, delicate bites. Vijay introduces Stookie to the Acting Chief Coordinator's personal assistant, Kim Ha-yoon, who cleans her hand on a paper napkin and extends the hand to Stookie. Her eyes gleam.

“Oh, Stookie! I've been looking forward to meeting you. Don't look so surprised. I mean, you're so exotic with your pale face and red hair. Ah, if only you had freckles. Oh well, I must dash, Comrade Jin will be gnashing his teeth already.”

With that, she smiles a goodbye at both of them and hastens out of the Lounge in the direction of the Management Block.

Stookie is speechless.

“Sweet, eh?” is Vijay's comment.

“Cor, yes. Er, is she North Korean, too?”

“Blimey, no!” Vijay had picked up a load of Britspeak somewhere. “She's from the South. The 'Comrade' was ironic. They're both spying on each other, I think. While fomenting Romance in the world. She helps rein in some of Jin's wilder schemes, like holding a cross-border Romance Festival in Cyprus or Belfast or

Tijuana. I think the strain is getting to her. Anyway, I've gotta go, too. Are you coming? Come on, there's something I need to tell you.”

“Oh, all right. I guess I'm good to go.”

The lounge is still reverberating to Uniro's anthem, *All You Need Is Love*, as they leave.

Vijay, too, works in the Management Block; the Communications Hub is way beyond that, on the far side of the campus.

“Look,” says Vijay, “your 'MalAria' is up to something. She's so desperate to become head of the Department of Information and Communications that she's trying curry favour with Acting Coordinator Jin.”

“That's nothing new. Everyone does that.”

“Yes, well, her latest idea is to save money in the current crisis by replacing translators, interpreters and you desktop publishing wallahs with software.”

“What? All of us?”

“As many as she can get away with. I mean the Union won't like it, but she thinks they can be handled. She reckons the saving in overhead offsets will make Jin love her extremely and make her Head of the DIC if Ahimee Hosseini gets the Vice Coordinator post.”

“Hah! If Feydeau doesn't come back from New Orleans, and if our real Chief Coordinator doesn't reappear as mysteriously as he disappeared, which has happened before.”

“Yeah, it's a long shot. But ... forewarned is forearmed.”

“Cor! Thanks, buddy! Oh damn, I forgot that beggar woman's coffee. 'Scuse. Thanks again.”

Stookie sets off back to the Coffee Lounge, the remembered warmth of Ha-Yoon's smile protecting him against the unaccustomed cold.

“*Ciao*, Vijay. Bet you're feeling colder than the rest of us on this cold morning!”

The speaker is Carlo Abete, a short dark man from South Tyrol, in the Italian Dolomites, head of Public Intromission, Safety and Security, a big job at Uniro, and

another contender for the vacant, much sought-after post of Vice Coordinator. He has come down the steps from the Management Block and clearly overheard most of what Stookie and Vijay were saying.

“*Ciao*, Abete Sahib. We also are having brass monkey weather in our North. You have heard perhaps of Himalaya, of glaciers? We are asking soon your experienced help on melting same.”

Abete looks at him in puzzlement and Vijay wonders if he has pushed his irony beyond his pay grade.

“Do you know young Stookie?” Vijay asks, to change the subject.

Abete shakes his head.

“Nice lad. Bit naive. Publications chap. I was warning him about Aria Folla's plan to replace most of her staff with software.”

“That's not going to happen, young man! Once I'm Vice Coordinator, I'll soon put a stop to her nonsense, just you see! In the meantime, kindly get to work and stop frightening people!”

As Vijay climbs the steps to the Management Block, shaking his head, Abete stomps off to the Coffee Lounge, his dark curls bobbing on top of his robust frame. Abete feels his fury mount at the thought of Aria Folla, the dreaded 'MalAria', conspiring to get Aimee Hosseini kicked upstairs into the Vice Coordinator post he covets for himself, a post hastily abandoned by its occupant, Frank Feydeau, for a job at the United Nation headquarters in New Orleans, at Frank's beloved wife's insistence. No replacement has yet been announced. Abete knows he is already well placed as security chief to keep an eye on all the dangerous subversives and foreigners attracted to the service of Romance around the world, but someone has to be in a higher position to put a brake on a North Korean with the almost unlimited powers given to Uniro's Chief Coordinator. Preferably an Italian. Preferably Carlo Abete.

By the time Abete is queueing for his second caffè lungo macchiato in a small china cup, he is feeling better. He sees Luke Sax sitting by himself – a stroke of luck – and once he receives his order, goes to join him. Luke is a tall, thin young man with

ginger-blond hair, sharp of nose, chin and mind. Although he works in the Festivals Department, he is known to be a confidant of Aria Folla. Quite how close they are, no-one is really sure, though both are famed for their unswerving loyalty to their respective partners, a major qualification for advancement at Uniro.

Abete comes straight to the point.

“What on earth is your friend Mal – your friend Aria up to?”

“Our dear MalAria has many irons in the fire, which – ”

“Which she juggles splendidly, I know. I'm talking about this idea of ditching staff in favour of artificial intelligence! I mean, what happens when the AI breaks down?”

“What happens when human staff break down? You get a fix. Only with machines, Carlo, it's quicker, cheaper and longer-lasting. But don't get upset about it, it's just a question of OO.”

“What?!”

“Overhead Offsets. Fixed costs. OOs sounds better; well, it did to begin with. Anyway, you know how keen Aria is on cutting them. We all are, in this financial crisis. Once she can devise a better way, she'll probably forget about swapping meatware for software. Why don't you speak to her about it?”

“I haven't got time.”

“You could make time. There's something she wants to see you about, as well. Don't know what it is, but she said it's important. In fact, she asked me to tell you that if I saw you.”

Abete looks at the younger man with incredulity, then with exasperation; then he shrugs.

“Will she be in her office at five-thirty?”

“Sure. You know how she is: she's more likely to leave at 5.30 a.m. than at 5.30 p.m.”

“Tell her I'll drop by then. If you see her.” Abete gets up to leave.

“Oh, I will. Hey, don't go. Let me tell you about Comrade Jin's latest.”

Abete sits down again and leans in for the gossip.

Later, as the city's smog dissolves into dusk, Abete treks over to Aria Folla's office. Aria has finished her dealings with the supplicants, and sits at her desk gazing lovingly at the portrait photograph of her husband that adorns it.

“Ciaaaaaaaooooooooo, Carlo,” she coos as Abete walks in. “How nice of you to come and see me.”

Abete avoids her embrace by turning to shut the door behind him.

“Let's cut the crap, Aria. Just tell me what you want.”

“For myself, of course, I don't want anything. You know that, Carlo. Everything I do is for Uniro.”

“And?”

“Well, going forward, I really think Uniro could benefit from my skills as head of the Department of Information and Communications, wouldn't you say so?”

“It doesn't matter whether I would or not. The DIC has already got a head, and a damned good one, too.”

“Yes, Carlo, so good that the grapevine says Ahimee Hosseini is going to get Vice Coordinator now that Frank has eloped to New Orleans for ever.”

“No she isn't, Aria. I am.”

“Well, let us suppose she were to get the job, just for the sake of argument, you know. I hope, in those circumstances, you'd support my push for DIC Head. You would, wouldn't you, Carlo?” Aria gazes at him with what were once considered bedroom eyes.

“You and Ahimee are both great at your jobs. I don't see what Uniro has to gain by promoting you to positions where that might not be the case.”

“I could say the same about you, Carlo. You know, lots of people do.”

“Jin doesn't. He appreciates how easily I could've had his appointment blocked. What is more, New Orleans love me. The top brass know they won't even get pickpocketed when they visit Turin. The only problem for Uniro will be finding a decent security man, I mean person, to fill my boots.”

“I'm sure you're right, Carlo. I'm sure you are. I mean you could be. Oh, if only you had the moral qualities.”

Abete's face turns crimson with anger.

“How dare you!”

“I mean, Carlo, our mission is to promote romance in the world, isn't it? Not a quick one on the side, unless it's *very* romantic. And certainly not adultery. United Nation has always been very clear on this point.”

Abete's jaw drops. *She couldn't know!*

“Our Catering Coordinator's a lovely lady. Have you ever met her husband? No, best not. I don't expect you'd get on.”

She knows! By the Madonna, she knows. Jesus, Mary and all the Saints!

Abete struggles to keep calm. He hopes his face is not burning the way his brain is. He recalls the series of anonymous letters sent to the nominal or former Chief Coordinator, Angelopolous. Their accusations of impropriety had ruined careers at Uniuro, even though none of them had ever been verified. Now he knows who probably wrote them. It is time to back down. But not to grovel.

“Never mind rumours and gossip! Look, getting back to promotions, Aria, you know that all these positions have to go out to public tender. It's not as though we can just sit here and divvy them up among ourselves.”

“Oh yes, we all know that. I mean, Jin came from outside, Frank came from United Nation HQ, and a few others did, too.”

“I know I'm on the Selection Commission, but I personally really don't have much say all.”

“Oh Carlo, come now, when you pull yourself up to your full height and flex your muscles, who is going to argue with our Security Chief?”

“You'd be surprised. Look, as the number one in Public Intromission, Safety and Security, I have some clout in *stopping* appointments, but not much in handing them out.”

“Dear Carlo, that's good enough for me. Just tell me you won't bring up my student indiscretions.”

“You mean manning the barricades at Milan University? On the fascist side.”

Now it is Aria who looks found-out. Abete cheers up a little and continues.

“No, I won't mention any of the reasons you're not fit to be running anything here, but on one condition.”

“Relax, Carlo, your own peccadilloes are safe with me.”

Abete doubts that.

“That goes without saying, Aria. No, my condition is that you drop this dumb plan to get this entire department run by AI instead of people.”

“I'm only trying to save on OOs, Carlo, like our Chief Coordinator always insists. What's wrong with that?”

“First of all, you're playing with people's jobs, Aria, their livelihoods. Don't you have any loyalty to your staff?”

Aria shrugs her shoulders.

“And second, to show the bosses that you can run the entire Hub, you need to have real people working under you, plenty of them, not stupid bloody machines!”

Abete gets to his feet.

“Do you agree to my condition?”

“Of course I do. Sweet Carlo, you do take things too seriously sometimes. Letting everyone know your sins was only a little idea I had.” She blows on her fingers. “Look, it's gone!”

On his way out, Abete passes in front of Stookie's work station and gives him a discreet wink.

“Job's safe,” Abete whispers. He notices that the younger man has a file open on his screen entitled *Teach Yourself Korean*.

Stookie clears his desk and for once leaves the office early, before eight o'clock, hoping in vain that Aria will not notice his desertion. He cannot face the prospect of cooking dinner for himself from the meagre stock of food he has at home, so he strides over to the campus canteen. There, to his delight, he sees Kim Ha-yoon weighing up the selection at the salad counter. She sees him and smiles a greeting. Stookie grabs a tray and arms it with cutlery. He hurries over to Ha-yoon at the salad counter.

“Spooky! How good to see you again so soon! We can't go on meeting like this.”

“Stookie, actually, not Spooky.”

Ha-yoon giggles behind the hand she has raised to cover her mouth.

“Sorry, Stookie Actually. Only joking. Joking! Kind of an odd name, though. How did you get it?”

“Scottish mother. Too fast on my bike. Fell off time and again.”

Ha-yoon looks perplexed.

“Mother fell off bike? Your bike? Fell off time?”

“No, *I* fell off my bicycle *a lot* when I was a kid, broke an arm, a wrist, an ankle. *Stookie* is a Scots word for a plaster cast.”

“Oh yes, set the bone, sign your name, “Ha-Yoon was here”. Big heart. Kiss, kiss.”

Stookie smiles but drops his gaze. Ha-yoon's English recovers its precision.

“Hey, Stookie, don't look at my legs. Look at my eyes!”

Stookie blushes.

“But in gender-non-awareness training, they taught us it was bad for men to look women in the eyes. So what am I supposed to look at?”

“Hell, I don't know. How about my tits?”

Stookie stares.

“Ah yes. They're very ... appropriate.”

“Stookie! Only joking! Joking 'cos I like you. Join me when you've got yourself some food.”

Stookie notices that although Ha-yoon has stopped giggling, she is still smiling.

An hour later, Stookie and Ha-yoon leave the canteen and head toward the campus gates. The cold night air pierces Ha-yoon to the bones, and she leans into Stookie for warmth. Stookie cautiously places an arm around her shoulders, and tightens his grip when he feels her shiver.

“Where do you live?” Stookie asks.

“Other side of town. But I have to be here early tomorrow to wipe Comrade Jin's bottom, as it were, so I just need to see if old Gaviscon is in a sweet enough mood to book me a room next door.”

Gavin Gaviscon is a Belgian-Canadian who holds the franchise to operate Uniro's Welcome Centre. He also runs various services for the UN campus next door. Indeed, because of institutional rivalry that has led to a ban on Uniro staff ever working for the UN in Turin and vice versa, Gaviscon is almost the only point of contact between the two bodies.

Their voices open the door to the Welcome Centre at the third attempt. Gaviscon is at his usual place behind the reception desk, blinking behind his trademark steel-framed sunglasses at his computer screen. He nods at Stookie but gives Ha-yoon a warm smile that lights up his pinched face. Stookie signs out and walks over to check the notice-board while Ha-yoon sweet-talks Gaviscon. From the corner of his eye, he sees Gaviscon pick up the phone and Ha-yoon put a note into a glass jar on the counter labelled “Brazilian Refugees”. Judging by its contents, people have been generous.

As well they might, Stookie reflects, feeling a visceral pain at the thought of the recent Amazonian massacres.

Ha-yoon joins him at the notice-board.

“All fixed,” she says. “Their student accommodation now has room for little me. Under a different name, of course. Olli 9.0 is on its way. I'm so glad I have business dealings with Gaviscon. What, you didn't think I'd come all this way just to live on a Uniro salary, did you? Oh, look, here's Olli.”

The UN's self-driving campus shuttle draws up outside Uniro's Welcome Centre. The small vehicle's once-sleek surface is covered with the logos of former sponsors. Ha-yoon steps out into the cold, shouts “Open up, Olli, you little so-and-so” and steps on board as soon as it obeys.

“Well, good night,” Stookie mumbles, his hopes dashed.

Ha-yoon reaches out, grabs the sleeve of his multi-coloured winter jacket, and yanks him onto the little bus.

“You may be a threatened species, Mr Exotic, but you don't get away from me quite so easily.”

As Olli 9.0 trundles away towards the exit gate, Ha-yoon stands on tiptoe and sinks her perfect little teeth into the scarf around the South African's sturdy neck.

Gavin Gaviscon watches the shuttle's departure, smiling with pleasure at the sight of two young people practising what their organisation preaches. With this happy thought, he removes his sunglasses and uses his reflection in the computer screen to pluck a grey intruder from his still-sandy locks before turning his attention to the main lucrative task he has set himself to occupy his night shift: designing furnishings for an LGBT+ sexbot brothel.

With few comings and goings to distract him, Gaviscon makes good progress. Around ten p.m. his mobile phone vibrates. He is surprised to see that the caller is listed as Betty Feydeau, the wife of Uniro's former Vice Coordinator, Frank Feydeau. Gaviscon answers, keeping his voice low though there is no-one to overhear him.

“Betty! Where are you? It's been a long –”

“I'm at the airport. We've just arrived. Look, Gavin, the plan is to hit the ground running and Di Vieto's house in the hills must be fucking freezing, it's been empty so long. Could you be a dear and book us in next door?”

“Well, yes, sure, of course. Are you moving back to Turin?”

“Not on your life! No need to send transport. It's quicker for us to get a taxi. Just make sure they know we're coming, the two of us. OK, bye, *un bacio*.”

Imagining the kiss, Gaviscon sets to his new task. He wonders why she mentioned Di Vieto, the big boss at United Nation HQ in New Orleans. Is she here with him? Or with her husband? Or someone else? No doubt he will find out in the morning.

As indeed he does, early in the morning. It is pitch dark outside when Gaviscon is prodded into wakefulness by the alternate whine and humming of Olli 9.0 as the electric shuttle pulls itself to a halt outside the Welcome Centre. Ha-yoon and Betty Feydeau disembark, chatting, followed by Stookie and Frank Feydeau, each lugging suitcases but looking pleased with themselves. Gaviscon presses the buzzer to let

them in before they engage the voice recogniser and have to wait. The Feydeaus greet Gaviscon like a long-lost friend while the younger couple sign in and walk on air towards their respective offices.

Alone with Gaviscon while her husband stores their luggage in a back room, Betty seeks to relieve the receptionist of his puzzled look.

“This isn't what it looks like. We're not back here permanently, just long enough for Frank to get this place ship-shape again, choose his successor and get Angelopolous back to run it like before.”

“Yeah,” says Frank, coming back in to the reception area, “HQ finally located your real Chief Coordinator, alive and well in a Buddhist retreat in Luang Prabang.”

Gaviscon giggles. “Tantric, was it?”

“I doubt it. Angelopolous said he'd needed all those months to reach a degree of illumination from which he could take Romance to a higher level. Seems to have done him good, anyway: he's full of new ideas, like bringing CRAPCON – you know, the Chocolate, Romance And Pictures Congress – to Turin, the home of Gianduaia, Nutella and Baci.”

“Actually, –”

“Not to mention,” Betty butts in, “setting up a Joint & Pension Fund fed by sales of marijuana as an aid to romance.”

“Madonna!” Gaviscon's eyes are wide. “That won't go down well in North Korean circles!”

“There won't be any more North Korean circles around here. Their Mr Jin will be packed off to Pyongyang with a nice pension to donate to Party coffers, or, if he prefers, to spend on himself in New Orleans or somewhere else in the wicked West.”

Gaviscon is speechless.

“Just give me my office key, would you? Betty is going to help me get it spic and span for my first long and busy day back at Uniuro. I'm gonna hit this ground running!”

Betty smiles and winks at him over her husband's shoulder.

Just don't slip on the ice, Gaviscon thinks as he hands over the key together with a torch in case the lights are on the blink.

The last person Gaviscon expects to see arrive for work even before the Coffee Lounge opens is Acting Coordinator Jin, but that is exactly who rolls up not long after six a.m., looking smart and bright-eyed. The Acting Coordinator, of course, does not have to sign in, but his habit is to announce his presence at the Welcome Centre and chat a while with Gaviscon before turning his attention to Romance across the world and Uniro's promotion of it. This morning he asks Gaviscon about his collecting jar, and the receptionist expands about the plight of people escaping persecution by the military regime in Brazil.

"It's a terrible business," his boss comments, "but do we really want to remind people of something so sad? After all, our mission is to promote romance and joy."

Gaviscon has thought this through.

"Well, I think we should promote Romance that is connected with love, and surely helping refugees is an act of love."

"Yes. Yes, I see what you mean. Good thinking." Jin reaches inside his stylish Italian jacket, takes out a leather wallet, extracts four crisp fifty-euro notes and finds space for them in the collecting jar on the counter.

"Thank you, that's very generous," Gaviscon exclaims.

"I like to put my money where my mouth is," Jin answers. "And, in case you're wondering, that is my own money, not Uniro's or the North Korean State's or our beloved Party's."

"I didn't doubt it for an instant," Gaviscon lies. His surprise is such that he forgets to tell Jin that their former Vice Coordinator is back and waiting for him with mixed news. When he remembers, the doors of the Welcome Centre have already closed behind Uniro's Acting Coordinator.

Around forty minutes later, Aria Folla rattles the door for Gaviscon to buzz her in, smiling and waving as she does so.

Someone else looking unusually pleased with themselves, Gaviscon thinks as he duly obliges.

“Ciaaaaaaaaaoooooooo, Gahveen,” Aria coos as she enters.

“Bondi” he answers, knowing that his greeting her in the local dialect will be appreciated.

Aria signs in, then slips a five-euro note into the collecting box for Brazilian refugees, as she does almost every day, before heading off to her office with Gaviscon's thanks ringing in her ears. He does not want to spoil her morning by mentioning the Feydeaus' arrival, and he does not know how she will take the imminent return of Uniro's Chief Coordinator, Angelopolous, so does not give her that news, either.

The door to her block is adamant in refusing Aria entry. Fortunately, one of the cleaners recognises her through the glass and lets her in, suppressing a laugh. Disillusioned with machinery, Aria eschews the lift for the stairs. These lead her to the door into the collective workspace instead of her own office. She is not surprised to see Stookie there already, but is astonished to see him chatting to the once-familiar figure of Frank Feydeau, who she thought had got himself a permanent posting to United Nation headquarters in New Orleans.

The Canadian greets Aria warmly and accompanies her into the privacy of her office. She regrets having come too early for supplicants to be waiting for her, a sight that usually impresses people.

“It's so good to see you, Frank,” she says, her voice wavering. “We thought you'd escaped for good.”

“So did I. To be frank,” says Feydeau, “our big boss in New Orleans is not too pleased with the way things have been going here since I left. He's sent me over as a trouble-shooter.”

“We don't have any trouble, Frank, except replacing you, of course. You've left oversized boots to fill. Is that the right expression?”

“Something like that, Aria.”

“Won't your wife miss you terribly?”

“She's here with me.”

“Oh, I see. Actually, that's a bit of a surprise. She didn't seem to like our little city. Well, if she needs to keep busy, and earn a bit of cash, I know several people in Turin, or even Genoa, who are looking for an American-speaker to do some PR work.”

“She doesn't, Aria, thanks all the same.”

“But won't poor Betty get terribly bored if you're giving all your time to the Office, like she did before?”

“Not this time. I've arranged a Grand Tour for her: London, Paris, Geneva, Milan ... You know, the places on this continent that are best known for their shopping.”

“Oh, Frank, we've missed your sense of humour.”

“Well, Aria, it works both ways. I've missed your technical competence. The documents HQ turns out in New Orleans don't look as professional as yours.”

“Oh, thank you, Frank. You've always been so kind. Are you taking up your old post? Are you going to be our Vice Coordinator again?”

“No, Aria, I'm just here to make sure Angelopolous has a smooth return, and that includes choosing my successor. Once that's done I'm outa here.”

“Oh, Frank, you could choose me. You've just said how good I am at my job. And I know the Office so well.”

“The international tender is going out today. You're welcome to apply, of course, but I'm hoping to get applications from people with more international experience and a broader skill set.”

Aria feels her throat go dry. She feels tears struggling to escape, and her effort to hold them back robs her of the power of speech. After a silence that hurts her, she forces out a few words.

“What about Ahimee?”

“Ahimee would be a strong candidate, but she's too good at running her department. In fact, we're going to integrate your department into hers – create synergies, exploit AI to downsize a bit – through natural wastage only, I'm not wielding the ax. Can you see yourself working under her?”

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