

A Miscreant Gentleman

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The day was oddly hot for a day in Dunkirk, France. Days around this area were usually cold and rainy, and that was exactly what Lord Willem L'Arcade had loved about the place. He and his girlfriend Adrienne had decided to take a quick vacation to run away from L'Arcade's busy schedule and take advantage of the time they could have for themselves. It was some time during April, and the town's festival was at its best. Jesters, children, beggars, clowns, and fortunetellers could be seen everywhere. The *commedia dell'arte* was in town and was also performing while Lord Willem and Adrienne were walking around the tents of the fortunetellers. Adrienne had always been interested in knowing about their future, so she asked Lord Willem to stop at one of the tents and get their cards read. He felt reluctant to do so, as he had never believed in fortune telling, but he knew it would make Adrienne happy. So the couple stopped in front of one of the tents and went inside looking for someone. As they stepped into the tent, Madame Christelle appeared in front of them. The old gipsy had a faint smile, but she looked inviting.

"Nice to see you again. Still want to know about your future?" said Madame Christelle, the smile still on her face.

Lord Willem thought to himself that it was weird for her to say that, but she was an old lady indeed, and he felt a tad sad for her.

"Let me help you with what you need." Madame Christelle interrupted Lord Willem's thoughts.

"We want you to read the cards for us." said Adrienne with an overexcited tone in her voice.

"I'll be happy to. Please, sit down."

Madame Christelle's smile disappeared as she pulled her deck of cards from underneath the table. The place grew cold and dark and Lord Willem started to feel uncomfortable. "We should probably go", said L'Arcade to Adrienne. She looked at him with her big brown eyes. The same eyes that had made him fall for her.

"You, Lord Willem, please sit in front of me". Lord Willem was less comfortable every minute that passed. How did she know his name? Lord Willem could not focus on his thoughts as Madame Christelle had sat down and begun to speak

"Let me tell you that this deck is not just a regular one. It can be mean and predict the worst of tragedies."

Madame Christelle's tone was serious now. "The FENESTRA will tell us what your destiny is. Your current life is not the only one you have. Your past lives are all intertwined with the decisions you make now, but my deck can change that. My cards can bring you wealth or they can bring you doom."

Madame Christelle began to shuffle her deck. The room was gloomy. The first card got flipped. Adrienne was looking deeply into the deck. Hope showed in her eyes.

"Ahhh... *Two Cups, inverted card* ..." she said, "You need to rethink with whom you are spending your time and who you are nurturing. There is a relationship in your life that is rotten."

Adrienne immediately came closer to Lord Willem and kissed him on the cheek. She was sitting right behind him and she was leaning forward as not to miss anything of what was happening on the table.

"*The Hierophant*...this one shows there is a male figure in your life who has always tried to use his wisdom to help you and guide you." Madame Christelle kept going, but Lord Willem did not listen to her words. He had started thinking of his beloved Uncle Lucas. The old man was a wealthy and cruel banker who had never been nice to anyone other than Lord Willem. No one really understood their relationship, but they indeed loved each other. "*The Queen of Swords*...you must learn to think with your head and not with your heart." Madam Christelle interrupted L'Arcade's thoughts once more.

"Adrienne", whispered Lord Willem while Madame Christelle flipped the next card, "Are we going to go through with this? This woman is crazy."

"Shhh. Pay attention!" – whispered Adrienne, frowning this time.

Finally, Madame Christelle flipped the last card. "*The Inverted Tower*... This card stands for chaos, sudden change, impact, and hard times. The Tower is struck by lightning because reality will be different from what is expected, Mr. Willem. You should prepare for what's coming."

Lord Willem stood up, took Adrienne by her hand and both stepped out of the tent. Lord Willem seemed disheartened. Adrienne failed to notice because she was pulling on him to get to another tent quickly, as if she were trying to forget what they had just heard and wishing they had never entered the tent.

The trip lasted another two days, but Lord Willem couldn't stop thinking about Madame Christelle. He knew nothing could be true, or at least he wanted nothing to be true. Yet, there were still things he didn't understand. Why couldn't he stop thinking about Uncle Lucas after what the fortune-teller had said? The thought made him feel wary.

Lord Willem L'Arcade and Adrienne had gone back to their lives in Toulouse. Lord Willem wrote a letter to Uncle Lucas, asking him to visit them. His uncle's city was not far from Toulouse, but it would take the beloved uncle a couple of days to get there, especially with how much rain had increased in the past days. Uncle Lucas was more than happy to do so and decided that he would come to them right away. Seeing the couple was one of the very few things that made Uncle Lucas smile. He asked for his carriage to be prepared immediately.

But things at home were not going well back in Toulouse. Adrienne was no longer happy and felt oppressed by Lord Willem's behavior. Madame Christelle and her cards had changed him. There was something about her that had impressed Lord Willem deeply, and he had become troubled, almost erratic and mumbling constantly about Uncle Lucas. He had grown cold towards Adrienne, who had tried to regain his trust and love. She certainly knew he loved her, but all her efforts had been in vain. She had lost him. "Damn fortuneteller," she thought, "she made everything worse." So, that same night, Adrienne asked the charioteer to prepare her carriage.

Lord Willem woke up the next morning to an empty bed. He got up and went looking for Adrienne, but she was nowhere to be found. He thought once more of what Madame Christelle had told him. Was Adrienne the rotten relationship? How was that even possible? He had never loved anyone else. Not like he loved her. He had always given her everything she ever asked for since they met at that banquet. Adrienne looked lovely that evening. How could he have missed her at the other banquets? He remembered seeing her across the salon, capturing her staring directly at him. She was young and exuberant, with those big brown eyes. Those damn eyes. He fell for her right then and there. Lord Willem felt ill and went back to bed. He felt deep sorrow. At least he would get to see Uncle Lucas in a few days, and he would know what to do. He turned around and fell asleep one more time.

Uncle Lucas was already on his way to Toulouse to give his nephew, and who he still thought was his mistress,

a surprise. But the weather had only gotten worse for the last couple of days and there had been a big storm hitting on Toulouse. That night the wind and the rain were heavy.

Lord Willem decided to write to his uncle telling him to delay his trip until the storm had passed, but it was already too late. Uncle Lucas was on his carriage in the middle of the woods fighting the storm and the wind, but his horses were losing their strength and his charioteer couldn't make them move anymore. The storm was unbearable. Uncle Lucas thought he had seen Lord Willem standing in the middle of the woods calling out for him. He jumped out of his carriage hoping to embrace his nephew and feel his warmth. The wind was howling in his face, and the cold rain felt like a million needles piercing his skin and freezing his bones. He turned and yelled at his charioteer, demanding the whip from his hands and proceeded to whip the horses' necks until they bled. The horses did not move.

Uncle Lucas had never been kind to animals or people, but he couldn't wait any longer to see Lord Willem. Willy, as he called L'Arcade, had always found the way to making him feel whole. He knew he loved Willy the minute he held him in his arms for the first. All of the sudden, a lightning bolt split the sky in two, frightening the horses. Succeeding where both men couldn't, the animals went berserk by fear and began to push each other around. One of the horses jumped up and kicked Uncle Lucas, leaving him unconscious. He dropped to the floor, and before his charioteer could do anything about it, the horses tumbled all over beloved Uncle Lucas, killing him.

There was nothing the charioteer could do to stop the animals from crushing the old man's bones and skull as they stepped on his body. The charioteer decided to pick up what was left of the uncle and continue on to Lord Willem's home. Lord Willem was devastated at the gory sight of who had been his mentor and the only father he would ever meet. L'Arcade felt completely guilty. If he hadn't written that letter, his uncle wouldn't have come. He thought of the gipsy once more. The doom, the grief...were Adrienne's departure and his uncle's death somehow related?

Lord Willem L'Arcade was the only heir to Uncle Lucas' fortune, and fulfilling his deed, Lord Willem went on to take over his uncle's business. Thus, he traveled to Lourdes to take over the bank. He didn't feel ready to stay at his uncle's place, surrounded by his things, his smell, his memories. Lord Willem went to a hotel. The trip had been long and tiresome and there was too much paperwork he had to go over. He threw himself on the bed and stared at the roof for a while. The room was open and comfortable. He didn't really care. He was in so much pain and grief he couldn't think straight. He tried to fall asleep, but that was the last thing he wanted to do. He couldn't stop thinking about the gipsy. She had said something about using his head, but he could not remember. He could not think straight with Adrienne and his uncle gone. Were her departure and his death somehow related to that gipsy's deck?

"No. It's all a coincidence." – Lord Willem said to himself out loud, but deep down he felt it was more than that. He decided to leave the hotel and find a place to get his mind off of the darkness that invaded him.

Lord Willem was a man who, like a good gentleman of his day and age, enjoyed both women and drinks only if there was any Blackjack involved. And so, he went on to find company for the night and a gaming table where Lady Luck could smile back at him. But one man's luck is another man's doom, and the grieving nephew was close to finding that out. Things continued to go better for Lord Willem the more glasses of scotch he gulped down. Men drowning their emotions in alcohol had come and gone from his table; yet, Sir Lacroix never moved. The businessman drank and played, his eyes fixed on Lord Willem. L'Arcade knew Lacroix wasn't leaving without winning his money back. Lord Willem had read the papers and knew that Sir Lacroix had recently lost his newborn and his wife during what had been an unassisted birthing at Lacroix's request. Lord Willem felt pity for the grieving man at the other end of the table, but as he had recently found out, every man has his own burden to carry.

Unfortunately for both, they chose the wrong day to drunkenly gamble off each other. Hand after hand, Lord Willem beat Sir Lacroix, who would come to discover that night that the death of a son can be a powerful feeling. Lacroix lost control and reached inside his jacket. Lord Willem understood not what the hot burning sensation meant. He looked at Sir Lacroix as he buried the knife another inch deeper. And so, Lord Willem met his end, at the other end of a sharp, short blade that gutted him and spread his innards over a Blackjack table he had very proudly won with a perfect hand of a queen of swords and an ace of spades.

Two years later, the story of Lord Willem was only a low whisper in the wind of the city of Dunkirk, where a festival in honor of King Charles VI of France was being held. Suddenly, a couple stepped into Madame Christelle's tent. "Nice to see you again." said Madame Christelle with a smile on her face. Adrienne smiled back at her and sat behind the man accompanying her.

He looked reluctant and uncomfortable. He turned around to ask Adrienne to leave, but she looked at him with her big brown eyes. The same eyes that had made him fall for her. They stayed. Madame Christelle pulled out her deck of cards while Adrienne was leaning towards the table, so as not to miss what was about to happen there.

