The Supreme Lie – Geraldine McCaughrean

From Chapter Three: Clearly A Good Day

Timor proved to be a merciless teacher. Gloria had no sooner got her vowels the right shape than he started lacing them together with consonants. She felt like a baby bird being fed screws and nuts and bolts: her mouth ached with chewing on them. He was never satisfied. "There's something you're not getting – something missing from the voice – honey, I think. Try to spread honey over every syllable."

It was a sweet thing to say, and Gloria thought how terrible it must be for him to be sitting here with his maid rather than his honey-tongued wife – missing her, wishing he, too, had caught that train…

"Now add the armour-plating," said Timor. "Studded with rivets. Think barbed wire in a party dress." (That sounded a little less romantic.)

Long before Gloria's efforts could win his approval, they ran out of time.

"Who's going to be there to see me sign this whatever?"

"Decree. It's a decree. Or an edict, if that's easier to remember. About twenty Senators, I should think. I'll sign the thing as soon as Kovet brings it, so you'll pretend to sign it, right? But you will have to learn to write her signature sometime soon. They may just watch and clap. If they start asking questions, stress that the gates won't be closed for long. It's temporary, say – also how fortunate we are that our forefathers built such mighty walls and gates to keep us safe.

Something along those lines. Soothing. Use the word 'safe' as often as you like. We don't want them dwelling on the fact the rain hasn't stopped."

They stared at each other in mutual panic.

"I don't think I can do this," she said.

"Nor me. But we seem to be about to. Pretend you have a cold. And if in doubt, just say, 'What is your opinion on the matter?'"

Two reporters from The Voice arrived at the gates of Foremost Mansion at noon and sheltered from the rain in the empty sentry box, which, on special occasions, held a soldier in fancy uniform. When the various Senators of State and lawyers arrived, the reporters managed to scurry through the gates behind them.

This time, there was no one to greet the visitors with umbrellas. Instead, Madame Suprema's lanky husband opened the door.

It seemed at first as if he was the only person at home.

There were no lights anywhere, and rain clouds so shrouded the house that its elegant rooms were merely a stack of dark boxes. Here and there, the glimmer from a simple candlestick hinted at dead chandeliers hanging overhead.

"It would appear Madame has lost her power," Kovet observed and allowed himself a little smile.

"Rain got into the generator," said Timor, who had ensured darkness throughout the house. "This way, if you please."

No one was sitting at the Desk Supreme in the Audience Chamber – though it took some peering about to be sure.

"Where is she?" demanded Kovet rudely.

Gloria was in fact sitting on the stool in front of Madame's dressing table. Every few moments, fright turned a key in the centre of her back, winding her insides into tighter and

tighter knots. She had used too much of Madame's perfume; the reek made her feel sick. The veil in front of her face reminded her of walking through a cobweb in the outhouse;

spidery fear tickled her scalp. Her hair was much thicker than Madame's – it threatened to betray her by bursting suddenly out of the hat. The dark red lipstick tasted of oil.

The clothes hanging in the wardrobes looked suddenly like headless, wicked girls, strung up as an example to others.

But even by candlelight, Gloria recognized the girl in the mirror all too well: it was the maid – the one who did nothing right, who regularly made Madame Suprema ptach! with irritation. On the wallpaper (Gloria knew without seeing it) was a faint red stain where Madame had thrown a pot of jam at her because it was not apricot. The stain looked like traces of blood.

Anyway, surely the Senators out there would recognize Gloria at once – she had answered the door to them often enough.

But the clothes fitted perfectly and someone ought to wear them. Also, Foremost Mansion had bars on the windows to keep out thieves or assassins or pigeons, which meant she could not climb out and run away. So Gloria buttoned up the jacket collar, found herself a really big handkerchief, pulled on the lace gloves and blew out the candle. The girl in the mirror disappeared. Only Madame Suprema Mark 2 remained to feel her way through to the Audience Chamber.