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Contains: *Weight Gain*

The Royal Visit

"What part of this troubles you, my dear?" Lord Pryce asked his wife, "It is a great honor to have the Royal Family visit Hawthorne Grange, is it not?"

The Marquis' hyperbole was excellent indeed, for the lands, tenancies, farms, and village, not to mention the manor itself, surpassed all in the prefecture, if not the entirety of Her Majesty's realm.

"I'm sure all will be as it should," Lady Pryce answered, "There is just so much to do, so much to prepare."

"Whatever you need, Lisbeth. We shall spare no expense for Her Majesty's visit."

The Marquis and his Lady Wife had no political ambitions save the growth of their estate in both size and wealth and to fill their coffers as they stewarded the portion of the Queen's land that had been entrusted to them. The Queen herself, on the other hand, was of a paranoid disposition. Thanks to the industriousness of its Lord and Lady, Hawthorne Grange had accrued sufficient wealth to threaten the Capital itself. Should he or his wife have designs on *Her* throne, the Marquis need only raise an army. Such an expense would be a mere fraction of the estate's income.

The Queen was also a woman of considerable greed, though of a rather more gastronomic persuasion than the Lord and Lady of Hawthorne Grange.

"*-Mphf-*, these omelettes are even better than they were yesterday, *-chomp-* Lady Pryce. What manner of fowl are they?"

"Wild pheasant, Your Majesty," Lady Pryce murmured.

The Queen perched on a padded and reinforced bench the Marquis' carpenter had stayed up all night making after it was discovered—to Lord and Lady Pryce's shame—that none of their dining chairs could contain Her Majesty's royal corpulence. Clad in layers of silk taffeta such that she resembled an enormous puff pastry, the Queen devoured omelettes with the merest pause between plates. Each rolled entree was cooked in butter churned fresh that morning, with green onions and wild hare sausage, and required half a dozen eggs apiece. Lady Pryce suppressed a wince as she watched the coin paid out to the pheasant trappers disappear into the royal mouth in three massive bites.

The dining table was, of course, filled with other Lords and Ladies of the Queen's court. While none of them could match Her Majesty for size or voracity, each was served one of the luxurious omelettes, and the Ladies at the table indulged in at least two or three. As is often the case, the Queen set the fashion for her realm, and every last Lady in her court strained the arms of her chair with her plenteous hips. Lady Pryce herself eschewed this trend. Her appetite, like that of her lord husband, was only for gold, and she imagined she could see the coin purses emptying in steady trickles into the noblewomen even as it poured into Her Majesty.

Unfortunately for the Pryce's coffers, though fortunate for the waistlines of the Queen's court, the royal visit extended throughout the spring and well into the summer. Breakfast, luncheon, and supper were well over ten times what was typically served at Hawthorne Grange, both in quantity and expense. Every evening's dinner was as elaborate as a grand feast. The meals were made with such rarified ingredients that, even had there been no guests, the cost for a single sitting would have exceeded the estate's weekly dining budget. However, one simply does not cut a royal visit short, no matter how high one's standing among the peerage. And thus, the Queen and her Ladies slept in rooms needing extra maids to suit their lofty standards. They ate meals so large the kitchen staff was more than doubled. They bathed daily, which required constant fuel for heating water and the import of fine soaps from the Capital. They had picnics on the green, complete with more food and drink and servants to haul benches and chairs for their ever-widening bottoms.

Lady Pryce could almost see the Queen and her Ladies growing plumper by the fortnight. Slurping and chomping and stuffing themselves four times a day with an endless parade of sweets in between. They were fattening themselves off *her* land, and she could do naught but smile and simper and offer second helpings.

"Lady Pryce," the Queen said one afternoon, "I should like to throw a ball."

A tightness filled Lady Pryce's chest. She loved planning and throwing balls, showing off the wealth of Hawthorne Grange to their less prosperous neighbors. But after weeks spent catering to the gluttonous nobles' every whim, she dreaded the expense of a social event suitable for such elevated company.

"That's a splendid idea, Your Majesty. When would be suitable?"

"Saturday next, I think."

The planning would be rushed, but the Marchioness was up to the task. "Excellent. I shall begin the preparations at once. Do you have any particular requests?"

"I should like a reprisal of several dishes we've enjoyed: the veal, the boiled prawns, the pigeon eggs with hollandaise..."

"Of course," Lady Pryce winced as Her Majesty rattled off a list of their most costly meals.

"And does your charming little village have a seamstress?"

A bead of sweat ran down Lady Pryce's nape. Her seamstress had been imported from a distant kingdom, and none of her work came cheap. "Naturally."

"I shall have a new gown commissioned."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the assembled Ladies. The housekeeper had intimated to the Marchioness that her maids and lady's maids were frequently up into the small hours adjusting the gowns of the Queen and her court. Doubtless, they were outgrowing their finery on a regular basis.

"Of course," Lady Pryce waved for her butler. "Have the carriages brought 'round. We're going into the village." She tried not to think of what they'd spent on grooms and feed for the extra horses that had accompanied the royal party.

In the seamstress' shop, the Queen and her courtiers picked only the finest, most expensive fabrics. One by one, the Queen's Ladies stepped onto the elevated platform where they could be measured. Lady Pryce watched with mounting horror as the measuring ribbon stretched farther and farther around widened hips, rolling bellies, and corset-bursting bosoms. More than one of the Ladies requested new, larger corsets, and even the smallest new gown needed thrice the material Lady Pryce required for her own dress.

Then, the Queen stepped onto the dais. So weighty was her frame that she required the aid of at least one servant to stand or move anywhere. Deep, wheezing breaths escaped her lips as she stepped onto the platform, and the seamstress called two assistants to help stretch the ribbon around the royal circumference. Clad only in her undergarments, the Queen's legs were larger than the waist of her smallest Court Lady. The royal bottom was wider and more round than the rumps of the carriage horses that bore them into town. Her stomach was so vast it spilled over her waist in rolls, a solid ring of fat that encircled her waist and protruded forward so that Lady Pryce thought it might bear Her Majesty to the floor at any moment. There was more excess lard in each royal bosom than the Marchioness had in her entire body.

With her chubby hands and sausage-like fingers clutching the shoulders of two servants to keep her bulk aloft, the Queen stood shuddering as the seamstress and her assistants laboriously strung the measuring tape around her girth. Lady Pryce watched the servants walk, step by step, running the tape farther and farther until they reached the end, still far short of their starting place. The young assistant's eyes were wide as saucers as she gave her boss a desperate, pleading look. Saying nothing that might draw the ire of Her Majesty, the seamstress reached into a basket on the wall, producing a second measuring ribbon. Placing one end under the assistant's finger, aligned with the first tape, the seamstress continued the girl's route until she met the other assistant at the Queen's left hip. She scribbled the number down. Then, the trio repeated this process. Both tapes were required again to encompass Her Majesty's bosom, with less dangling ribbon left over than when they recorded the royal hips.

When they walked around the Queen's belly, Lady Pryce once again could not stop tallying up the elegant, opulent, plenteous meals that had contributed to Her Majesty's vastness at the expense of her estate. The marks on the ribbon slipped through the first assistant's hand, then the other's. Each mark represented a small pile of the Pryce fortune, and the Marchioness struggled to keep the contents of her own luncheon from making a reappearance. Then, to her horror, as the second assistant neared the spot where the seamstress was holding the first tape, she reached the end of the second with several spans of cotton-draped Queen still separating the two ends. Two of the seamstress' measuring ribbons were insufficient to surround the corpulent royal. Lady Pryce made some hasty excuses and fled to the powder room.

Later, as she watched the seamstress scribble item after item onto the tally, Lady Pryce thought of the entire street of seamstress and tailoring shops in the Capital. The Queen and her retinue could very easily have sent word to their own favorite

seamstresses at little-to-no expense to the Pryce estate. But, naturally, as their host, the Marchioness was obliged not only to offer the services of her own seamstress but to make a gift of an entire wardrobe's worth of gowns to the Queen and her court.

The Queen's ball was the grandest event Hawthorne Grange had ever seen. Every member of the peerage within a day's ride was in attendance. Tables lined every wall, and a battalion of servants bore countless trays piled high with the finest, richest, most luxurious food even these elevated guests had ever tasted. The Queen and her courtiers gorged themselves beyond even their usual voracity, and the visiting noblewomen seemed determined to keep pace.

Lady Pryce held a suitably polite demeanor throughout the event, refusing to let her wincing reach her face, but as the night wore on, she feared one or more of her guests might burst from overindulgence. These beautiful, powerful, bulging, ponderous women stuffed meats and fish and cakes and pies and cheeses and bread between their painted lips, barely pausing to make polite conversation or set their over-pampered forms to feeble approximations of dancing. While none of the Ladies burst, more than one snapped a stay on her corset or tore eyelets from her bodice.

That evening, as the few servants not abed made their final checks on their charges, they heard sounds creeping through nearly every guest room door. Most common were the labored breathing or outright snores from the more corpulent noble Ladies. Several rooms emitted very unladylike burps and belches. More than a few doors failed to contain groans and whimpers as one or another guest had indulged her stomach far beyond what was prudent. One servant blushed furiously when she heard the giggles and whines of a Baroness while her Baron showed his appreciation for her over-sated form. From the Master Suite, which the Marquis and Marchioness had vacated, the Queen slept in peaceful stillness. The sound of her calm, satisfied breathing so quiet as to not escape the room's heavy mahogany door. Nearby, in the second-finest room in Hawthorne Grange, Lord Pryce tossed and turned in his sleep while his Lady wife wept softly into her goose-down pillow.

When the days of summer began to finally wane, shortening into the early hints of autumn, the Queen announced her intention to return to the Capital.

"We must make preparations for the upcoming season," she declared over her seventh plate of steak and eggs.

Lady Pryce could barely conceal her elation. "So soon, Your Majesty?"

"I'm afraid so. We thank you for your generous hospitality, Marchioness. My seer tells me the upcoming Friday should provide the most favorable weather for our journey."

The royal bottom had grown beyond the bounds of even the generous bench specially constructed for her use. It seemed to Lady Pryce that her Queen had nearly doubled in size under her "generous hospitality."

"I'll see to the preparations, My Queen."

At the urging of every chauffeur they'd hired for the royal visit, Lord and Lady Pryce hired over a dozen extra carriage horses. A full team of eight beasts was required for Her Majesty's carriage, and each of the smaller ones that carried her Ladies and their husbands needed at least four. The springs on the lead wagon were pressed nearly flat, and every last conveyance sat dangerously close to its wheels. The Marchioness stood beside her husband as they watched the carriages depart, resisting the urge to lean into his strong frame for support.

"Peace at last," the Marquis breathed.

"Dare I ask how bad it was?"

"You wouldn't rather enjoy a moment's tranquility?"

Lady Pryce looked up at her husband, cold horror blossoming in her middle. "Surely, Her Majesty's visit has not beggared the estate!"

"It's not quite so dire as that, but I fear we shall have a lean winter. It will take years to recover."

Lady Pryce sighed. "Ah, well. We did it once. And shall do so again."

The Marquis patted his wife's hand. "Quite right, my dear, quite right."