

*Jones, a perfect codename for a nova who looks like a CPA*, Jane Mallory through irreverently. With a hairline that had receded in his early twenties and almost vanished by his thirtieth birthday and a belly that seemed determined to make up for his cranium's loss, Jones was old before his time. Still, his deceptively faulty body contained one of the sharpest minds Jane had ever encountered. *Which is why he's the boss*, Jane conceded. It took a *very* sharp mind to manage the Janissaries.

And a tight budget. Which was why Jones wanted to talk to Jane about her latest expense report, filed after a bit of industrial espionage in France. Seeing Jones' pained expression, Jane didn't know whether to wince or laugh.

"Seven hundred dollars under 'miscellaneous'?" he began abruptly. "Isn't that a little steep for a week-long visit? Even in Paris?"

*Ahh, no small talk this time, hm?* "That was the little things." She replied smoothly "Tic-tacs, dental floss, bribes to maitre d' at Clarke's hangouts..."

"We have a separate accounting code for bribes, Widow. On the second page of the spreadsheet," Jones pointed out patiently.

"Oh? We do? My mistake." Far be it from her to prevaricate. She honestly hadn't seen it. "Just so you know, I had to get into Restaurant Au Cote somehow, and the bloody place was booked solid for three weeks. I had to be Santa Claus to even get as far as the bar."

"Clarke at there every night?" Jones asked skeptically.

"There or somewhere like it," Jane shrugged. Jones' irritation didn't bother her that much. Not over that piddling amount of money.

"Fine." Jones sighed, looking back at the papers on his desk. "Four thousand dollars for clothing?" he continued, his voice very dry.

"I appended a check for that," Jane said, slightly defensive now. "I needed some good clothes in a hurry. And I thought I would keep them for future use."

"But four thousand dollars?" Jones persisted.

Jane shifted a little in her seat. "A bargain for Dior and St. Laurent, I assure you." Jones stared at her levelly and Jane felt compelled to elaborate. "I was supposed to be a brat with a trust fund. I had to dress the part. When it became apparent that the skirts and slacks I packed weren't going to do it..."

"You couldn't have called us for eufiber? We have a supply of it for this sort of thing."

Jane sat back in her chair. "It would have taken you at least 2 days to get it over to me. I couldn't wait that long."

Jones couldn't argue that, not after the fiasco involving a Jannisary team and the tardy delivery of vital funds.

"Fine," he sighed. "You didn't have to include a check – we could have taken the expense out of your salary. Then again..." he continued, looking back at the post-its festooning the expense report on his desk. Jane suppressed a guilty grin.

"A thousand dollars for Embassy Escorts?" Jones' voice was distinctly dubious at that.

"I had to learn how to be a guy in a hurry." Jane explained patiently. "A *gay* guy." *And that's also why I needed decent clothes. Who ever heard of a rich gayboy who didn't wear designer?*

"So you hired a..." Jones paused, reaching for a euphemism.

Jane's feelings weren't so dainty. "A whore, yes. A very expensive, very discreet whore." Jane smiled at the memory. "Actually, he was rather sweet. Jacques, his name was. I told him I was being cast for a revival of *La Cage Aux Folles* and that I'm very method. He didn't believe

me for an instant, mind you, but oh, we had some fun. We went shopping, watched boys, talked about the culture and you wouldn't *believe* who we saw at-" Jane had become quite animated during the past few moments, but she paused as she noticed Jones' slightly pained expression.

"And, uh, clearly, I picked up a few flaming mannerisms." She half-apologized, settling back into her seat. "I'm sure I'll shake it off in a day or two..."

"A thousand dollars for a lesson in gay culture?" his tone was as dry as the desert air outside.

"Well, it *was* a long date and time *is* money to these people." Jane shrugged. "And after I was done with Jacques, I hooked up with Etienne – with another face mind you – to pick up some-" Jane stopped abruptly. "To, uh, pick up some field technique." She finished lamely.

"I see." Jones replied evenly, clearly not wanting to hear the details. "Would that explain the three hundred dollars in 'gratuities' on the sixteenth?"

Jane nodded and ignored Jones' deep sigh. She believed in rewarding a job well done and, in her opinion, Etienne had been *outstanding*.

"One more thing." He began.

*Here we go...* Jane braced herself.

"Five thousand dollars to a automotive repair shop. What did you do, trash your rental?"

"Ah, not *my* car, no. It was Clarke's, but it was my fault. I felt obligated to pay for it – since I was a rich kid and all."

"But what *happened*?"

"Bad timing." Jane suppressed a grin.

"Bad...timing...?" Jones repeated slowly. "Do I really want to know the details?" he asked, his imagination fraught with suggestions.

"Probably not." Jane's suggestive tone only encouraged Jones to believe the worst.

Jane's boss sagged in his seat, tired and weary of paperwork. "Do you realize, Widow, that even with your successful completion of this mission, we lost seven thousand dollars? Does that strike you as a *sound* way to run a business?"

Jane couldn't help herself. She started laughing. "No, no it doesn't." she giggled.

Jones regarded his employee carefully. *Has she gone mad? Shapeshifting novae can be a bit high-strung, I know...* "Share the joke, Widow?"

"Sure." Jane chuckled, reaching for the bulky shoulder bag that she had brought in with her. Jones reached for the panic button hidden under his desk, but stayed his hand when Jane revealed the bag's contents: money, lots of it. U.S. dollars, in large denominations, hand bundled.

"When I went through Mr. Clarke's house – which is simply fabulous, by the way. He's got the most darling-"

"Jane, you're doing it again." Jones warned.

"Doing what?" Jane blushed. "Oh, sorry." She took a deep breath to calm herself and continued. "As I was looking for those business plans we needed, I came across a few other things, too. Such as that," Jane nodded towards the currency. "Now, any guy who goes to such trouble to hide *this* much money, as Mr. Clarke had, well, he's not going to be able to report it as stolen to the cops. So I thought *gosh, Jane, Jones is going to have kittens when he sees your expense report. Why not set his heart at ease, and add a little to the team coffers, too?* So I did."

Jones' mouth twitched for a moment, then broke out into a reluctant smile. "I won't ask how you got that past Customs." He decided.

"Good idea."

Jones looked at the pile of cash. “How much is it?” he asked, already earmarking the funds for certain outstanding expenses.

“About seven hundred thousand, I think. Minus my finders’ fee, of course.”

Jones glanced sharply at her. “Excuse me?”

“I distinctly remember in the Employee Handbook,” that was the ongoing nickname for the various rules and regulations of the Janissary Elite Organization. “That in order to encourage us peons to keep our eyes open for those opportunities to help the company, we get three percent of any such finds over a hundred-k.” Jones looked from the expense report on his desk and then at Jane, his expression disapproving. “Oh, come on, Jones,” Jane sighed. “This more than covers the losses. And besides,” she smiled. “I’ve got to pay for those gorgeous clothes *somehow*. You think that check is going to clear, otherwise?”

Jones chuckled. “Alright, alright. You’ve convinced me. I’ll have this counted and you can have your three percent.”

“Which is just about four times what I would have been paid, anyways. We all win.” Jane laughed again. “And that can’t be bad, right?”

“Right.”

As she left Jones’ office, Jane wondered if she should mention that Faberge egg that she had also removed from Clarke’s office, shortly after stealing the contents of his personal computer. *No, I don’t think I will*, she decided. *That can go into my retirement fund. Besides, it’s a nice souvenir...*