

## À La Vôte

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# À La Vôtre

by [aimmyarrowshigh](#)

## Summary

On Memorial Day, they painted the living room bright blue.

## Notes

**Rating:** PG-13 (though R if you speak French...)

**Warnings:** Some sexual content.

**Disclaimer:** I don't own anything. All characters, settings, and proprietary language are owned by the author of the work from which this is derived. Also my French is quite rusty.

**Notes:** I intended for this fic to be 1k max. But oh, well: more AATFK/LATBND fic in the world! I'm happier with this fic than I've been with anything I've written in a while.

Also this is fluff. The fluffiest fluff that ever fluffed. It is a basket of puppies playing happily with a bucket of sloths, it is so fluffy.

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## À La Vôte

### *001.*

On Memorial Day, they painted the living room bright blue. Anna got paint in Étienne's hair, so he painted a stripe across the backside of her jeans. Around noon, Cricket successfully attached four rollers so he could paint sheets of wall all at once, so by the time Nathan arrived at two with the hotdogs and cherry pie, everything was done, and Étienne's hair was still speckled.

Susan St. Clair arrived next, bearing red-white-and-blue macarons.

"How festive," said Cricket.

"How French," Anna corrected.

"How British," amended, Étienne, shaking his blued hair. "That's Union colors, obviously."

"Whatever they are," said Lola, "I want to make barrettes out of them."

"I will eat your hair," warned Anna, Cricket, and Étienne in one voice, so the adults all laughed.

"To the roommates," toasted Andy, raising his glass of Atlanta sweet tea.

"May they have a wonderful summer," agreed Susan. "And much luck moving forward."

"À la vôtre!" toasted Étienne, and they all drank.

The triplex looked like a pointed Dutch chalet tucked next to a palm tree. They had almost no yard, but water and trash collection were included in the rent, so no one complained. Lola mostly appreciated that they were right down the street from the MacArthur BART stop – she'd heard two very exuberant poets waxing haikus about fried fish sandwiches on the way

in last night – and Anna couldn't have been happier that they were within walking distance of UC's Pacific Film Archive, where Cricket suspected The Couple would go watch weird French movies about *les cousins dangereuses*, or whatever French movies were about. Cricket had gotten a job at one of the four bike shops in the mile around their cottage, repairing fixies for hipsters and trying vehemently to deny his own inherent hipster lineage, but... he was an inventor whose girlfriend wore panniers to the winter dance; there was no denying anymore.

When Cricket first told Lola that he was moving in with Anna and Étienne at the end of the semester, she had thought he was insane.

"Are you insane?" were the first words out of her mouth. "Why would you move in with a couple? Especially Anna and St. Clair? They're all over each other all the time! All. The. time. Did I tell you that I walked in on them sucking face behind the popcorn butter bags in the supply room last weekend? Cricket, they even suck face when surrounded by bags of liquefied chemical butter."

"They're not that bad," Cricket said, trailing his fingertips over the inside of Lola's arm. "They keep their clothes on. And besides, none of us can afford to live alone, and you know how they're always trying to save money. It's easier if we all pool together for rent."

Lola kissed the side of his neck in the warm, good-smelling place just beneath his ear. "Curse your financial sensibility."

"You *like* Anna and St. Clair," Cricket reminded Lola mildly as he hooked a long leg around hers to flip her down beneath him.

"I know," Lola said. "I had just been hoping you'd get your own place. Because then," she murmured, tapping her thumbnail just beneath the waist of his trousers, right in the shadowed hollow of his hip, "we could be as loud as we wanted."

"Cheeky," said Cricket. He leaned down to kiss her. "Nearly too brazen for my tender virgin ears."

"Then I don't think your tender virgin ears will survive living with St. Clair," Lola laughed. "Anna said he keeps up a running commentary in French."

Cricket made a face. "Ugh. Why would you tell me that?"

Lola grinned coquettishly and bounded up to nip at Cricket's lip. "It was sort of a, 'this tastes gross, here, try it' situation."

"Ah, the classic, 'dude this smells nasty, you have to smell it.'"

"Exactly."

"You know, St. Clair actually did that the other day?" Cricket said with a small grin, fingering one of Lola's blue curls. "Some French cheese he and Anna found at the Ferry Building."

Lola set her lips into a grim line. “You agreed to live with that. Good job, genius.”

“It *was* genius,” Cricket argued. He lowered his face and kissed just beside Lola’s mouth, little touches of tickling lips until she stopped scowling and let him kiss her properly. “You’ll see.”

Now, in the wash of afternoon sunlight, everything smelling a little like turpentine and a little more like hot dogs and sharp relish and luscious cherry pie, with everyone they loved spread out around the little two-bedroom and signs of Anna and Étienne and Cricket all over – a poster for *It Happened One Night* in a frame on the wall; the Oxford English Dictionary, all volumes, sitting in a precarious stack on the floor; a tiered case labeled things like “wires” and “cogs” in Cricket’s steady, small print – Lola couldn’t help squeezing Cricket’s waist to make him yelp as her way of saying, *you were right. This is genius.*

## 002.

Lola’s eighteenth birthday was the hottest day of the year, and while the Little Apartment That Could had a great many wonderful things – a garbage disposal, north-facing windows, a hidden trunk beneath the windowseat in Anna’s bedroom, blue paint on the walls – one thing it did not have was central air conditioning. Lola and Cricket, Anna and Étienne spent most of the day bouncing from the Alemany Flea Market to the Far East Market, where St. Clair bought a lucky cat statue for no reason and Lola bought jewelry. As always, Cricket bought wire.

“They’re going to think you’re building bombs, you know,” Étienne commented with his mouth full of lumpia at dinner.

“Who is?” Cricket asked, frowning. He coiled the wire carefully and put it back in his pocket.

“Them,” Étienne said with an air of certainty. “You know. The Man. The Black Hats. The Fed. The Fuzz. The Lady in Red.”

“Carmen Sandiego?” Anna asked, raising an eyebrow at her boyfriend. “Well, I guess if Cricket disappears, we’ll know where he went. Somewhere from Kiev to Carolina.”

“She’s a sticky-fingered filcher from Berlin down to Belize,” Lola agreed.

“What I never understood,” Étienne barreled on, “Was how she managed to take things like the Indian Ocean. I mean, for one thing, why would anyone want the whole of the Indian Ocean? Was an aquarium not large enough to keep the Loch Ness Monster alive? And secondly, what did she put it in? A Ziploc bag?”

“She drained it,” Cricket said. There was a smudge of bola-bola siopao on his chin and Lola licked her thumb to wipe it away. Cricket pursed his lips while Anna grinned. “She drained it with a big vacuum.”

“Well, that’s just dead silly,” St. Clair decided. He dug his spoon with a vengeance into the little crown of mango pudding he and Anna shared.

“I could probably build one if I really wanted to,” Cricket mused.

“See?” Étienne cried, gesturing with the spoon. “The Lady in the Red. She’s gonna be after Cricket any day now if he stocks our poor little flat with any more wire.”

Lola wiped grease from her lips and leaned over to press a small kiss into the side of Cricket’s shoulder. “There’s only one Lady in Red who’s going to have anything to do with Cricket, and she’s sitting right here.”

St. Clair grinned widely at Lola, his dimples crinkling up like some sort of Depression-era soap ad cherub. “Touché.”

Lola wore a bright red satin sundress with a stiff winged collar like a Rice vampire or Abrams space captain, electric blue boots that she’d cobbled into a peep-toe style and painted with yellow flowers, and bright yellow lace gloves. Her bright blue, floppy-brimmed Hepburn sun hat was trimmed in yellow peonies and bright red cherries, and its brim was wide enough to shade Cricket, too, when he leaned in close.

He did, and kissed her just above the heart-shaped red beauty mark she’d drawn at the crest of her cheekbone. “Thank you,” he said. “Are you having a nice birthday?”

Lola smiled and stole one of his egg tarts. “Smashing.”

The foursome rode the BART back to the apartment as the sun finally set, late and low and purple-orange, and all groaned at the apartment’s roasty air. They opened every window above the ground floor and turned all of the fans on full-blast before all settling onto the creaky, overstuffed couch to watch all three *Back to the Future* films. Étienne fell asleep with his curly head in Anna’s lap, and she smiled to Lola and Cricket as they moved to go upstairs.

“Do you want me to carry him up?” Cricket asked, gesturing to St. Clair. “He can’t weigh more than my backpack on lab days.”

Anna smiled wryly at him. “No, thanks. If my legs fall asleep, I’ll just wake him up.”

Lola nodded and yawned, stretching her arms. “If we hear anything that sounds like a wounded cat, we’ll know that your legs fell asleep, then. G’night, Anna.”

“Happy birthday, Lola,” she whispered.

Hours later, the fan in Cricket’s window whirled – choked – and sputtered to a stop, succumbing to heat exhaustion even in the dead of night. Lola woke from the noise and the sudden stillness and rolled over to stare at the ceiling. Her hair stuck to her face and Cricket’s arm was too uncomfortably hot where it wrapped heavy around her waist beneath the sheets.

She moved his arm and slipped out of the bed, grateful for the chill of the wood floor beneath her feet. She felt her way over to the dresser and found her stash of hairpins amid all of the bits of wire and screws and pinned up her hair, shivering from the gooseflesh that broke out over her sweaty neck as the air hit. She shuffled across the floor, groped for the doorknob – wincing as it creaked – and crept down the stairs for a glass of water.

She stopped just before the foot of the staircase.

Étienne had woken.

The arm of the sofa half-blocked them; the darkness and blurry wet heat of the humid night seemed to cloud Lola's vision. But the tilt of Étienne's face and the low rest of his eyelashes and the tension in Anna's brow, the arch of her back as she sat over him, were unmistakable.

Lola took three quick steps back up the stairs, then paused and crept back down. She was curious. Max hadn't been bad, at first anyway, but what she and Max – there was no way that Anna and her Étienne would be anything like that, was there?

Frankly, Lola had to believe that there was something more in it than what she and Max had. She didn't think that Anna would smile at Étienne the way she did as she hooked a finger into the front of his jeans to pull him closer if there weren't. All of the gushy romantic movies that she and Anna watched while the boys were off doing whatever it was boys did without their girlfriends wouldn't exist if all there was... was like Max.

They both still had their shirts on, soft on damp skin, and Anna's fingers were knotted into the fabric over the winged blade of St. Clair's shoulder, crumpling the cotton. She looked like she was barely moving, just circling and rocking over his lap in small figure eights, but the back of St. Clair's neck was glossy with sweat and his disproportionately long, graceful hands drew constant circuits over Anna's side.

And she hadn't been lying. Lola could just barely hear him, but Étienne was speaking French, rapid and hoarse and low, and even though she couldn't understand the words, she knew what he was saying and it was enough to make her toes curl.

*Tu me rends folle... je veux sentir tes douces l'Évres parcourir tout mon corps...*

Anna's brow creased and she melted down against him, her lips resting on the slope between his neck and shoulder, the hand that had been fisted into his shirt sliding up into his curls. Étienne's hand spread on her hip, fingers going taut, as he started to move his hips up into her. His muscles shifted under his rumpled shirt, and for a second that made Lola's heart stutter. She thought that this, she knew. She knew tucking her face into a shoulder and just getting... fucked.

But then Anna lifted her chin and kissed St. Clair's ear – light, small, sucking – and asked, in a voice Lola could just make out, "Fais-moi mimi?"

And Étienne kept moving, hips driving up into Anna and the flat of his back taut, but his face broke into the most brilliant smile, and he laughed lightly through his nose, and kissed her. A tiny thing.

And Anna smiled back and nosed at his dimple before kissing him again, and again.

Lola's heart stopped racing. She touched her mouth and realized that she was smiling, too. A breeze finally shifted in through the window.

Lola tiptoed back up the stairs, careful not to step on the creaky fifth step. She shook the pin out of her hair and slid back into Cricket's bed.

One of his eyes fluttered open with the drop of her weight on the mattress. "Y'okay?"

"Mm-hmm," Lola whispered. She looked over at Cricket and meant to say, *well, you were right, they do leave their clothes on*. But the moonlight, her moonlight and all of Cricket's stars, caught in the bend of the blinds and striped softly, bleary, across Cricket's cheekbone, one of his eyes still closed against the glow as he smiled ever-so-softly up at her.

And so what came out of her mouth instead was, "Hey, I love you."

Cricket's hand came up from beneath the warmth of the pillow and wove through Lola's hair, cradling the back of her head like she was something precious and volatile. Lola hummed. Cricket murmured, eyes closed and nearly asleep again.

"I love you, too." He inched forward on the pillow enough to kiss the crest of her head. "Happy birthday."

### **003.**

By Halloween, the weather had slowed and cooled and Lola had all but moved into the Little Apartment That Could. Since she'd already mastered panniers, Lola felt a bit invincible in the costume department – and could convince Cricket to do most things that she wanted, especially if they involved getting to fiddle with cogs *and* see her in her underwear – and she'd decided to construct a fully functional steampunk ballgown with bronze wings that fluttered at the turn of a key in her back: a clockwork angel.

She and Cricket were spread out in the living room, she surging together gold lame and he soldering together little gears and keys and empty bullet shells to build a frame for Lola's wings, when Anna and St. Clair burst through the door, already half out of their shoes and breathing like they'd raced up the walk.

Étienne promptly stepped on a watch hand and cursed in French, stumbling over onto the arm of the couch.

"You've wounded me," he moaned, flopping over backwards. "Your watchface angel is a demon in disguise."

"Sorry, sweetcheeks," Lola said around a mouth of pins. "Some of us want to have good Halloween costumes."

"And that's more important than my ability to walk?"

"Yes," said Lola and Cricket at the same time.

"I suppose that's fair," Étienne said. "Although you haven't even asked me what my costume is yet, and that's really quite rude."

"Anna told me that you weren't dressing up," Lola said, looking up at last and taking the pins out of her mouth.



“Oh, no,” St. Clair said. “No, my costume is really quite brilliant. I’m going to be Cricket. I just need stilts and some glue for my quiff.”

“Can you walk on stilts?” Anna asked curiously, edging around the construction on the floor to head into the kitchen. She reappeared with two bottles of Orangina and handed one to Étienne.

“Of course I can,” Étienne said. “I am a man of untold talents.”

“If you can walk on stilts,” Cricket commented, still soldering away, “then you can walk in general.”

“Drats,” St. Clair grumbled good-naturedly. “Foiled by my own hubris.”

“That’s okay, Étienne,” Anna said. She petted his hair. “I like your hubris.”

“Do you like my hamartia, too?” St. Clair asked curiously. “And my anagnorisis?”

“I should never have let you take that critical analysis class,” Anna muttered. She tugged at one of Étienne’s curls to make him yelp before she slid down to sit beside Lola on the floor.

“What about my peripeteia?” St. Clair insisted. “Do you like that as well?”

“So, Lola,” Anna said pointedly, ignoring Étienne. “How is your costume going?”

“Not badly,” Lola said. “It’s not actually that different from framing the corset on my Marie Antoinette dress, except that it’s going to be more rigid. I think we’re doing it in two pieces that will click together like Legos.” She demonstrated by pretending to click a door shut around her ribs.

Anna looked amused. “Are you going to be able to breathe?”

“I hope so,” Lola laughed. “I mean, it’s all in the measurements. The other problem is just making sure that we have enough watch pieces and metal junk to cover the fabric completely. I’m just sewing this to wear underneath so I don’t turn green from all the copper.”

“If you do turn green, then you’ve got a ready-made second costume as Elphaba,” Anna pointed out. She picked up one of the empty bullet casings. “I don’t even want to know where you got all these.”

“Flea market,” Lola said, shrugging. “They have the nickel bin by the door? I just buy a few bags of broken stuff every week and sort it out. I want to use the bullets like fringe.”

“Do angels wear fringe?”

Lola shrugged. “I do. And I’m an angel.” She looked over to Cricket. “Right?”

“What?” Cricket asked, looking up. His goggles slipped down his nose. “Oh, yeah. Sure. Of course.”

Lola snorted and shook her head to Anna.

“Hey,” she asked, “What’s your costume?”

“Oh, I don’t – know,” Anna said haltingly. “I just... I’m probably going to work or... something.”

Lola’s face fell. “Are you – like – anti-Halloween?”

“No, no,” Anna said hurriedly, “I just don’t have any skill to put together a costume like yours and I’ll feel sort of stupid making the effort when you go parading down the street in a working steampunk angel costume that, knowing Cricket, will probably actually be a jetpack that makes you able to fly,” she said, laughing. “And besides, time and a half on holidays and *no one* wants to work Halloween because all of the middle schoolers show up drunk.”

“Gross,” said Lola.

“I know,” said Anna. “But it’s time and a half.”

Lola made a derisive noise. “Who cares? Between your closet and mine, you definitely have a fabulous free costume somewhere. C’mon, let’s go experiment.” She stuck the pins into her tomato cuff and brushed off her hands, then promptly stabbed her palm with a stray iron skeleton key as she went to stand up. “Ow! Mfff – ”

“Ha!” crowed St. Clair triumphantly from the couch, where he still sat blithely sipping Orangina. “Hoisted by your own petard!”

Lola raised an eyebrow at Anna. “Did Webster over there swallow his Dictionary last night?”

Anna closed her eyes and shook her head apologetically before leading Lola up the stairs. Lola carried a Santa’s bundle of her own dresses and scarves into Anna’s room and dumped them on the older girl’s bed while Anna opened her own closet.

“Do you even keep your clothes here now?” Anna asked curiously as Lola started straightening up the dresses to lay them out.

“Not most of them,” Lola said. “But I keep a closet here since I end up spending the weekend here so often. I like to have options.”

“I’m surprised Nathan lets you get away with that,” Anna laughed. “Cricket said he thought he was going to get ground up into a pie and sold on a London street corner after that time last year when he caught you two together.”

“Well, that was – I was dating Max, and there my mom’s issue,” Lola explained haltingly. “But my dads love Cricket, and they really trust you guys. I mean, you’re all so... responsible and mature. Even St. Clair.”

She expected a laugh, or a gentle chiding that *well, everything with his mom*. But instead, Lola looked up to see Anna staring at her with her mouth drawn and eyes serious.

“You’re really mature, too, you know,” Anna said. “I know you don’t like to acknowledge it, but... everything with Norah, and Max, and your dads. Even how you handle Calliope now. You’re a lot more responsible than anyone else I knew at your age. I mean, least of all me and Étienne. I think that you have it in your head that we don’t see you for how... I don’t know, grown-up you are because you do wear all of the costumes and all that. But I actually take it back. What I said. If I were your dads, I’d let you stay here because I trust *you*.”

Lola swallowed and smiled down at the dress she was smoothing out over Anna’s bed – red satin, with a tall, winged collar; she’d worn it on her birthday. She pulled her accessory scissors out of her tomato cuff, snipped the collar, and pulled out its stiff wire so that the collar slouched down like a turtleneck.

“Here,” she said to Anna, her eyes shining. “Put this on – but backwards, so the collar’s in the front. It’ll be like a mod dress. Do you have boots?”

So Lola sewed a wide white ribbon down the back – now the front – of her birthday dress and another around a new empire waist, dotted with big, round buttons that she snipped out of the inside of one of St. Clair’s pea coats. Anna pulled on a pair of black stockings – “Ooh la la,” said Lola; “Listen to you, speaking French,” joked Anna – and her black Parisian boots, and Lola tied another ribbon into an Alice band around Anna’s dark hair.

“And all you’ll need on Halloween is eyelashes,” Lola pronounced happily. “I’ve got more than I’ll need for a month, so voilà – French again, there you go – a free Lola Nolan Halloween costume!”

Anna smiled, biting her lip. “You measure your false eyelash allotment by the month?”

“You’re welcome,” said Lola, droll, as she stitched a last accent button at the side of the collar.

“Thanks, Lola,” Anna said, canting her shoulders.

Lola laughed and hugged her. “Okay, let’s go make sure we don’t need to take anyone to the emergency room for sticking an antique watch gear up their nose or soldering themselves to the floor or something.”

Lola galloped down the stairs two at a time into the little living room, where she threw her arms around Cricket’s neck from behind, hanging over his shoulders to kiss the side of his neck over and over in a line. Cricket grinned and pulled his goggles up on top of his head, flattening his spiky hair. Lola kissed the pink indentation the glasses made over the bridge of his nose.

Anna came down the stairs, still dressed in her mod costume. And for once, St. Clair seemed speechless.

And then he bounded up from the sofa and folded Anna over one shoulder to carry her, laughing, up the stairs.

“Don’t you rip that dress!” Lola called after them.

Cricket cradled his ear ruefully.

**004.**

November blew in cool and rainier than usual, the Little Apartment That Could shivering through its cracks and dripping from swollen bites in the ceiling of the bathroom and up the hall. They set out pans to catch the water until Andy came by to help them spackle the worst of it, and Anna and Étienne took to wearing their woolens all of the time.

And then, just shy of three weeks before Thanksgiving, St. Clair pulled it out of storage.

“What,” Lola asked, by way of a statement, “Is. That.”

“It’s me hat,” Étienne said happily, pulling it down over his ears. His curls peeked out around the brim prettily.

“It’s The Hat,” Anna and Cricket corrected in one flat voice.

“You can’t wear that,” Lola said, “Please, St. Clair. For all that is good in the world.”

“My mum knitted it for me,” Étienne said cheerfully. “It’s the best hat there is.”

“I – can’t you ask her for one that isn’t so... I mean, it’s really sweet, but – gah, normally you dress so well, though!” Lola cried, despondent. “How did this happen?”

“I like it,” Anna said, coming up behind Étienne to tug on the pompon.

“Oh, you do not,” snapped Lola. “You just like *him*. You’d like anything he put on his head. Don’t!” She snapped at St. Clair, holding up a forbidding hand before the cheeky, dirty smirk even fully bloomed on his face.

He cackled. “Is my hat giving you the Fashion Fits, Lola?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is the ugliest hat I have ever seen.”

“I bet you,” said St. Clair carefully, “that I could make an uglier hat, and Anna would love it, and wear it every cold day. I will bet you ten quid.”

“We don’t have quid here, dork.”

“I will bet you fifteen dollars that I can make an ugly hat that Anna will love, and it will be better than any ugly hat that you could make for Cricket.”

Lola narrowed her eyes. “Ground rules. One: no googly eyes.”

“Granted. Two: maximum two pompons.”

“Three.”

“Granted. Three: no electronic gadgetry. Cricket can’t help you make him a spaceship hat or something.”

“I would love a spaceship hat!” enthused Cricket, his eyes lighting up.

“I know,” St. Clair said drily. “That’s why you can’t help her.”

“Granted,” agreed Lola begrudgingly. “How will we judge? Because they’re both just going to pretend to love the hats anyway.”

“Lindsey and Charlie can judge ugliness,” mused St. Clair, “And time will be the judge of the love. Whoever takes his hat off – ”

“Her hat off.”

“His hat off first is the loser, and does not necessarily love their girlfriend less, but does not show the sort of devotion that I have to my beautiful hat.”

“Which your mother made.”

“Shove off, the analogy stands.”

“Okay,” Lola said, sticking out her hand. “You have a bet.”

Étienne made to take Lola’s hand, but Anna grabbed his wrist first. “Wait! Do Cricket and I get any caveats?”

Lola and St. Clair narrowed their eyes at her.

“It will help ensure someone a win if you make something we can actually bear to put on our heads,” Anna explained gently. “My caveat: no bells.”

“Agreed,” said Cricket quickly. “And nothing like fake curls or Viking braids or anything.”

“Agreed,” sighed Anna gratefully.

Lola and St. Clair studied each other’s’ face carefully. “Granted,” she said in unison.

And they shook.

Subsequently, Lola began to spend less time at the Little Apartment That Could. She was still there for a while every day after school, but she was more likely to sleep at home to work on her Ugly Millinery Project before bed.

Cricket, as he was prone to – cue the scene in the record store a year ago, when Lola was still dating Max – grew a bit needy.

Anna, sensitive to Cricket’s neediness, became maternal and Sensible and tried to talk everyone out of the bet.

And Étienne wore The Hat every day.

The cycle of November sadness and poor choices rolled on.

And then, finally, just as Lola was about to fall asleep on the last Monday before Thanksgiving, NAKED TIGER WOMAN blinked on her phone.

*It's done. Showdown tomorrow after Anna's PoliSci final. Are you ready?*

Lola smiled into her pillow before rolling over to text Cricket back.

*Tell St. Clair that it's on like Donkey Kong.*

A few seconds later, her phone blinked again with a message from Étienne: *Fo shiz.*

The next afternoon was gray and drizzly, the sort of cold that rushed right through a coat and into the bones. A wet cold, the kind that called for Anna's favorite *chocolat chaud*, with extra whipped cream. Lola shivered as she let herself into the apartment, a wrapped giftbox full of Ugly Millinery Project tucked under her arm and Lindsey at her side. Charlie followed along behind them with his hood pulled up against the wind.

Cricket kissed her hello, then put his mouth against her ear. "Is it *really* ugly?"

Lola smiled and gave Cricket a pat just above his ribs. "We're gonna win."

"I saw St. Clair's," Cricket whispered urgently, holding her arm. "It's bad. I mean, it's bad."

"Trust me," Lola whispered, getting on tiptoe to kiss him again. "We'll win."

Anna and Étienne rushed through the door just as the drumbeat sound of a downpour razed across the windows, both of them tangled together as they tried to keep dry. Étienne let his coat fall and made a beeline for the kitchen to put on the kettle of milk for hot chocolate while Anna hung all of the coats and lined up all six pairs of shoes in a neat row, pair by pair.

St. Clair came back into the living room, took off The Hat just long enough to shake his curls about for a minute, swipe his hand across his bangs, and jam The Hat back onto his head with absurd pomposity.

"Lola Nolan," he intoned. "Are you ready for the heat of battle in this, Flat Stadium?"

Lola's mouth twitched. "Have you been watching Iron Chef America?"

"The Chairwoman and Chairman –" he gestured to Lindsey and Charlie – "deserve your respect on this day, the final showdown in the ancient art of Ugly Homemade Hats That Prove Love."

"And yours was still *made by your mother*," Lola pointed out.

St. Clair huffed. "The analogy *still stands*. Do you have your hat, or will you admit defeat now?"

Lola held up her giftbox. "Are you conceding?"

Étienne reached behind the sofa and pulled out a spangly purple giftbag. “Not a chance, little girl.”

Anna looked to Cricket. “Are you as nervous as I am?”

Cricket exhaled gratefully. “Honestly? My heart is racing. It’s ridiculous. But I’m actually kind of terrified.”

Anna took Cricket’s hand and squeezed it solemnly. “Whatever is in those boxes... Cricket Bell, you are a good man. And we’re going to get through this. Together.”

“Thank you for being brave when my tender, virgin heart cannot,” Cricket simpered, clutching Anna’s hand to his chest.

“Ugh, with the ‘tender virgin’ excuse,” Lola sniffed. She placed her box in Cricket’s lap. Étienne handed Anna the purple bag.

“On Lindsey’s mark,” said Étienne graciously.

Lindsey glanced from Lola to Charlie, then shrugged. “Go.”

Cricket and Anna both tore into their gifts one-handed.

Silence descended on the apartment.

“This,” Cricket breathed in a voice hushed by awe, “is the best ugly hat I have ever seen. It’s the best hat I’ve ever seen. It’s the best everything I’ve ever seen.”

Lola grinned. “Turn it inside out. It’s reversible.”

Cricket looked up at her with wide eyes. “I love you.”

The proper outside of the hat was steely gray, threaded through with silver foils. It was tall – which would look ridiculous on stretched-out Cricket – and pointed. It had blue knobs and gold levers and red pompons in a row. Two black, triangular fins distended to cover his ears.

It was a rocket ship hat.

Cricket lifted it lovingly and turned it inside out. Electrically-goozy green with knitted wide eyes and a gaping black mouth: an alien.

“And uh, just squeeze that right fin?” Lola prompted.

Cricket squeezed.

“Hey Houston, Apollo 11. This Saturn gave us a magnificent ride,” informed the inside of the hat in a tinny little voice.

“Hey, no bells!” protested St. Clair.

“It isn’t a bell,” said Lola. “It’s one of those record-your-own-birthday-card microphones. I just sewed it in.”

Étienne looked to Lindsey and Charlie. “Judges?”

They glanced at each other. Charlie shrugged. “I think it’s a bamf hat, so. Judges say: it’s okay!”

Lola and Cricket cheered as Étienne groaned.

“It’s okay, Étienne,” Anna soothed, pulling on her own violently orange-and-fuchsia hat with yellow pompons. “Your hat is ugly, too.”

“Oh, you can just take it off, Banana,” St. Clair laughed. “Even I know defeat when I taste it. It’s the one way that Napoleon and I differ.”

### **005.**

They decorated their Christmas tree one week after Thanksgiving. Étienne simmered a kettle of chocolat chaud while Anna attempted to bake macarons – she half-succeeded; they weren’t pretty, but they were very delicious and they all ate too much – and Cricket tinkered with their secondhand string of big-bulbed tree lights, replacing all of the bulbs.

He chuckled and grinned up at them from his perch on the floor. “And you scoffed at all of my wire.”

“It’d be just like the black helicopters to ambush us on Christmas,” St. Clair said sadly, shaking his head. He tossed his curls about and fixed them back in place just in time for Anna to run her eggy fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. “Ugh, god, that’s slimy!”

Anna smiled and kissed his cheek. “Eggs are good for your hair. You’ll live.”

Étienne looked down at the bowl of freshly peaked whipped cream. “Is dairy good for one’s hair?”

“No,” said Anna quickly, shooting Lola a look that spelled *not a word*.

Étienne’s face broke into a broad grin. “Too bad.”

He loaded up his fingers with whipped cream and lunged at Anna, who shrieked and hid behind Lola.

“Don’t you dare, St. Clair,” growled Lola.

“It won’t hurt,” Étienne said gleefully, waving the hand of white fluff, “And besides – you can just put on that prize-winning hat and none will be the wiser...”

By the time Nathan arrived at two with the pot roast and eggnog custard pie, nothing was done and everyone’s hair had become macarons.





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