

THE TALES OF
Book X
MARIELLE CLARAC

The Springtime Chime
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro



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The background of the cover features a night scene with a large, full moon and a castle with blue-roofed towers. In the foreground, a young woman with long, flowing red hair and orange eyes is smiling. She is wearing a green dress with white lace and a white shawl. She holds a golden candelabra with five lit candles. A young man with blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a white military-style uniform with gold buttons and a dark blue collar, stands behind her, looking down at her with a gentle expression. He is holding a large, ornate golden key. The overall style is anime-inspired with soft lighting and detailed character designs.

The Springtime Chime
of *Marielle Clarac*

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❁ Julianne Silvestre (née Sorel)

19 years old. Marielle's best friend and an avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content. Engaged to Prince Severin after being adopted into House Silvestre.

❁ Duke Silvestre

One of the three great dukes of the Kingdom of Lagrange. Handsome, but a real pain to deal with. His whims can make him seem either generous or vicious.

❁ Princess Henriette

20 years old. Prince Severin's youngest sister. Can seem imposing, but is a sweet and openhearted princess.

❁ Leonid Georgievic Pimenov

22 years old. A member of the Slavian imperial family. Introduced himself to Marielle under the pseudonym "Yeremei Yugin."

❁ Stephane, Duke of Embourg

Cousin of Lagrange's king. Has recently passed away.

❁ Laetitia

Wife of the Duke of Embourg. Older sister of Duke Silvestre's wife.

❁ Anna

18 years old. Only child of the Duke and Duchess of Embourg.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

28 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

When it comes to books, I'll gladly read anything and everything, but my favorite will always be novels, especially in the romance genre. I adore spending time turning the pages, letting my heart race as I wonder how each love story will play out.

However, when tales of love turn tragic, I'm not so fond of them. I understand there's demand for such stories; a number of people definitely like them. And indeed, they do have a certain dramatic flair that stirs up emotion. The leads fall in love, reach out their hands to one another, their happy union all but certain—only to be cruelly ripped apart. It leaves you shaken to your core. I can fully understand why a reader would fangirl over that.

Still, I would rather close a book with a feeling of joy. To be satisfied knowing that the couple overcame every twist and turn, then finally found their happiness. I don't mind how much heartache and struggle it takes to get there, as long as that reward comes at the very, very end.

As such, I invariably avoided *writing* any tragic love stories.

I insisted as much to my editor. In today's meeting, he had suggested I go in a slightly different direction, but I'd firmly refused with a shake of my head. "A tale of blighted love? No! The central pair *have* to live happily ever after. When I write, I always have the steadfast intention of giving them that. It's my driving force. I'd never be able to write knowing they won't end up together!"

"I'm not saying it *has* to be a tragic tearjerker. You can try whatever you like." Frowning awkwardly, my editor—Paul Satie, the head of Satie Publishing—presented a bundle of envelopes. "But some of the readers have been saying it too. You've been repeating the same kinds of plot twists lately, and they're getting bored."

A strained noise escaped my throat.

"If most of your readers are looking for a happy ending, then in principle,

there's nothing wrong with giving it to them. But happiness can come in different forms. If you don't try to explore those facets, people will grow tired of your books. They'll complain that it's just the same thing over and over."

Groaning, I looked away. What exactly could I say to that? I knew what he meant, at least on a vague level.

I took the thick bundle tied with string from Mr. Satie's hands. Though I felt glad to have received so many letters from fans, this time I was a touch scared to read them.

"You have an established style, so if you suddenly end a story with miserable heartbreak, you'll spark a backlash. Readers like you, who always look forward to a happy ending, will feel betrayed. So instead, you should try to change the mood without altering that core through line, or...how shall I put it? Instead of always writing sugary sweet chocolate and cream, try including some more bittersweet, grown-up flavors."

"G-Grown-up...flavors?"

He'd hit upon a thorny subject. Adulthood—my greatest weakness.

After our meeting concluded and I returned home, I read through my fanmail, musing all the while on what a more grown-up sort of love might be like.

That night, when my husband and I were alone in our private living room, I broached the subject, turning to him while he was tending to the cat with a brush. "Lord Simeon," I asked after some hesitation, "I have a favor to ask, if you wouldn't mind."

Just as he was about to brush the cat sitting in his lap, Lord Simeon found his hand firmly grasped by her front paws, and her hind legs delivered a hefty kick. She even bit him, which he took with a smile still on his face. *Well, she didn't run away, at least. I suppose that's some degree of progress.*

"What is it?" he replied.

"Well... Actually, could you put Chouchou down first? I wouldn't want her to start thinking people's hands are toys."

"Don't worry, she didn't bite me particularly hard. Not enough for me to

mind.”

“If you give her an inch, she’ll take a mile. Next time, she’ll draw blood. We have to be clear—if she acts like that, we won’t give her any attention. It’s the only way to teach her not to bite people.”

Now that I’d explained the folly of indulging her, my husband reluctantly deposited the cat onto the floor. Chouchou had gotten her satisfaction though, so she went over to the fireplace and sprawled out in front of it. The days were getting warmer now that March had begun, but the nights were still cold enough to need a fire.

Putting the brush down and his regrets aside, Lord Simeon returned to the matter at hand. “So, what was this favor you wanted to ask me?”

I moved closer to him and wiped away the cat hair that had gotten stuck to his lap. “I’d like your assistance with something.”

“What sort of assistance? For you, I’ll do my level best.”

Lord Simeon was the Vice Captain of the elite Royal Order of Knights, with pale blond hair, light blue eyes, and the refined beauty of a storybook prince—though with a faintly roguish air about him. His honed body boasted steely strength, and foes flinched at the sight of the icy gleam behind his glasses. His subordinates similarly regarded him as the fearsome “Demon Vice Captain.” Within him beat the heart of a brutal, blackhearted military officer, impossible to conceal and endlessly exciting!

Nevertheless, the gaze he directed at me, his wife, was sweet and tender. Yes, in truth, he was neither demonic nor blackhearted, but forthright and purehearted. That sharp contrast with his appearance was itself irresistible, and every time he spoke to me in his soothing voice, I could feel myself melting.

Now, as ever, he was treating me with such loving indulgence that I felt myself falling under his spell, and I had to caution myself not to allow it. *No! That isn’t the point of this conversation. I love Lord Simeon and his sweet, gentle nature, but I need something else right now!*

After clearing my throat to regain focus, I broached the topic on my mind. “Could you teach me about grown-up love?”

Lord Simeon, who had just taken a drink of his tea, suddenly coughed and spluttered; it seemed the sip might have gone down the wrong pipe. “Grown-up...love, you say?”

As he recovered from his coughing fit, I folded my arms and nodded. “You might say it’s redundant now that I’m a married woman. I’ll turn twenty next month, so I’m most certainly an adult at this point. And yet, much as it pains me to say—and it does; I feel ashamed indeed—there is a wealth that I do not know about the adult world.”

“I...see.”

“I’m always told how childish I am, and it makes me wonder: how do I become a grown-up? After spending so much time carefully observing the adult world, I thought I knew all about it, but it turns out that there is no substitute for personal experience. There’s nothing else for it—I need to become an adult myself.”

“Well,” he began, a touch flustered, “there’s no need to rush. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with your childlike qualities. I find them thoroughly charming.”

“No!” I leaned forward, closing in on Lord Simeon. “I can’t simply let you coddle me and take it for granted!”

“I’m not trying to coddle you. Besides, that sort of change happens naturally over time.”

“I can’t wait that long! I want to know right now. Grown-up love, and the dizzying world of adulthood... Please, teach me about them!”

Appearing overwhelmed by my intensity, Lord Simeon stayed silent a moment and set his teacup down on the table. After breathing a long sigh to collect himself, he abruptly repositioned his glasses with one finger.

“All right,” he said at last. He didn’t speak the words with reluctant resignation. Rather, when he raised his head, his face bore a sense of earnest dignity. His eyes, so often compared to ice, now burned with fire. “I cannot personally claim to have received the sort of experience or knowledge to call myself an expert in this matter. Still, if you wish it so ardently, I will give it my

every effort.”

“Oh, Lord Simeon!”

“I wouldn’t want to disappoint you by being a husband who cannot fulfill his wife’s wishes. Mocked as I am for being overly serious and stubborn, I am nevertheless a man of twenty-eight. I’ll show you what I can do if I put my mind to it.”

“How wonderful!” I said, jubilant. “That’s the brutal, blackhearted military officer I adore!”

Lord Simeon nodded at me, a smile on his face, then stood up in one agile motion. At the same instant, I suddenly found myself floating. For reasons unknown, Lord Simeon had lifted me off the ground. “What?”

“Well then, let’s begin.”

With me in his arms, Lord Simeon began striding animatedly toward the door with his long legs. Not the door leading out to the rest of the house, but the one connected to our bedroom.

“I have a day off tomorrow,” he continued, “so it won’t matter if I stay up somewhat later than usual.”

“What? What?!”

Why the need for a change of location? I wondered. And why the bedroom? All I wanted was to learn about grown-up love.

“Though I must say,” my husband murmured, looking down at me with a soft chuckle, his handsome face exceptionally alluring, “that was a rather audacious thing for you to say. If you’re capable of that, you’ve become a fine adult already.”

Oh my, how I love that blackhearted smile, with its devilishly dashing aura! The very air is filled with carnal appeal! My husband is simply the most incredible right now!

Wait. No.

“Whaaat?!”

That night, I did indeed have my fill of “adult time,” to say the least. We lost ourselves in a sweetness even richer than usual, sharing love and joy enough to send us into a frenzy.

In fact, the next morning, I struggled to even get up. I lay face down on the pillow, exhausted, still absorbed in the lingering echoes. Chouchou jumped onto my back and pawed at me as I thought about bittersweet emotions and whether I’d ever experienced any.

When I entered high society at fifteen, I was even more of a child than now. As a supremely plain girl from a mid-ranking household—a viscountcy—with no notable history or wealth, I went unnoticed by all, my face unremembered. My hair and eyes, both brown, didn’t stand out in the slightest, and I was certainly no great beauty. At a push, my glasses might have been considered a distinguishing characteristic, but I left so little impression on people that they forgot me the moment I walked away.

I was more than just a wallflower—I was the shadow cast by the wall. My name didn’t even pass people’s lips.

And, unnoticed by anyone, I watched. Gossip flowed all around me, and I gladly collected it to use as fodder for my novels.

Yes—the reason I attended social gatherings was to aid in my writing. To observe all the different patterns of human behavior and relationships. I spent those days amassing information that would allow me to produce higher quality works under my pen name, Agnès Vivier.

I put such great effort into developing the expertise of hiding my presence and blending into the background that before I knew it, I was being compared to an assassin. By this point, my infiltration and intelligence-gathering skills have even been described as equal to those of a professional spy.

And yet, Lord Simeon *did* notice me. The Demon Vice Captain, impressive as always. And, for some reason, he fell in love with me and proposed.

The dashing heir to an esteemed earldom was an odd suitor for a plain, nondescript daughter of a viscount. All of high society made a huge fuss about what a mismatched marriage it was to be. Nowadays, I look back on that point in my life with a warm nostalgia.

Our wedding was last May, meaning it would soon be a year since then. And with Lord Simeon, I'd begun a new life filled with radiance, fun, and happiness.

It would be nice to do something special for our first anniversary. Perhaps we could go somewhere that holds meaningful memories for us, or I could find a gift for him. As plans started to form in my mind, my heart raced with excitement.

To think that loving someone, and being loved in return, could be so magical. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful for my miraculous good fortune—out of all the corners of the world, we had been born in the same country, and in the same era.

In a life filled with such joy, I mused, has there been any bittersweetness at all?

Racking my brain, I grew doubtful. Lord Simeon and I had argued on occasion, and there were times when we hadn't seen eye to eye. But I wasn't sure that was quite the definition. None of it had left permanent scars on my heart that would never heal...and that was the bittersweet I was looking for. *I think, anyway.*

With no personal experience to draw from, all I could do was vaguely imagine it. And if I wrote based on such faint impressions, I could hardly stir my readers' emotions. *It's a tough one. A tough one indeed.*

Perhaps, I decided, there was nothing for it but more exposure to the concept. Only, rather than observing it in others, this seemed like something I'd need to feel for myself. *After all, this is grown-up love we're talking about, and I want to become a full-fledged adult woman.*

"Hmm..."

My cat, who had been pawing at me for some time, finally jumped down again. In her place, my husband came along, bearing a steaming teacup. Enjoying the hot drink in bed made it extra delicious.

That beautiful man was smiling in the morning sunlight. The way he looked now, just slightly more relaxed than usual, gave him unbelievable sensual appeal. When I remembered the events of last night, my heart began to pound.

I could hardly be dissatisfied with the sweet, tender life we shared, and I wouldn't welcome any bitterness forming between us. *But misfortune can't be the only cause of bitterness. I'll have to find a different avenue to explore.*

I wanted to gain more practical knowledge. To go to all different places and meet all different people. I wanted to learn from as many unique experiences as possible.

And so, I ventured out again today. Seeking new encounters and heretofore unknown sources of fangirl glee, I set forth for unfamiliar territory.

I can't wait to see what's waiting for me—out there in this radiant world of mine.

Chapter Two

As the days grew warmer and small flowers began to bloom on the ground, my heart grew light and buoyant. Spring is the season of new beginnings. Of new encounters and new phases of one's life. It is the season when constant birdsong, glorious sunshine, and budding greenery make anything seem possible.

Even in the most secluded recesses of Ventvert Palace, where the Kingdom of Lagrange's royal family resided, the excitement of spring was in the air.

"My word, what magnificent lace!" my friend Julianne cried exultantly, gently taking the bridal veil in her hands. "It's so pretty. And you'll walk down the aisle at the cathedral with this trailing behind you?"

The veil, which had taken a craftsman a whole year to produce, was long enough to reach the ground; tiny beads sewn into the pattern sparkled magnificently. One glance was enough to leave a person spellbound, and it was sure to make the bride look superlatively beautiful on her big day. Picturing the scene, my heart filled with joy.

"I can't wait to see you wearing your wedding dress, Princess Henriette," I said.

"Three months to go," Julianne agreed. "Actually, a little less now. It still seems so far away, yet it's also approaching so quickly."

We looked at the ecstatic woman sitting with us. The king and queen's youngest child, Princess Henriette, nodded at us, her innocent cheeks flushing a soft shade of red. "I know what you mean. In my mind, it's always been far off in the distance, but all of a sudden it's crept up on me!"

The princess, who was a year older than I, was to marry Prince Liberto of the neighboring Grand Duchy of Lavia in June. After that, I wouldn't be able to see her as readily as I could now, but even so, her smile of sheer delight left me feeling more excitement than sadness.

She continued, “I’m frustrated that I still have more than two months left to wait, but then I think of how quickly that wait will be over. It’s a complicated blend of feelings.”

“I can understand,” I replied.

Exactly a year ago, I’d gone through the same emotions. I recalled counting down the days to my wedding to Lord Simeon and being unable to calm my impatience. As preparations were made and wedding accoutrements were assembled, I would gaze upon it all and wait for that special day. Even the restlessness of wishing for it to hurry up had tasted of sweet happiness.

That period had, of course, been rather eventful. A crisis had emerged at the eleventh hour, and the notion of canceling the whole wedding had arisen. When I thought of the main culprit behind that incident, yet more complicated feelings stirred in me. *Are these the fabled bittersweet emotions? No, I suspect that’s still not quite correct.*

“This period of time is always going to be fraught with anxieties,” I told her. “But don’t worry—the day will come and everything will be all right. I’m sure you’ll have the most wonderful wedding in the world.”

Indeed, it’s unthinkable that the princess could be put through an ordeal the likes of the one Lord Simeon and I were subjected to.

Suddenly, the glow faded from her face somewhat. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“What’s wrong?” Julianne added at almost the same moment. The princess had a tendency to wear her heart on her sleeve, so we couldn’t help but notice her sudden change of mood.

She quickly pasted a smile on her face again. “Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. There’s just been something on my mind. Nothing dire.”

“What is it?”

Julianne and I both sat up straight. After neatly gathering the veil, Julianne handed it to one of the princess’s ladies-in-waiting.

Soon, all the arrayed accoutrements were put away. The dog that had been

sequestered in the bedroom was then allowed to join us. When the door opened, the pup, which had been a gift from Prince Liberto, ran at full speed for Princess Henriette's feet. The princess lovingly petted her small head. "It's nothing all that serious. You're aware that my uncle died recently, I'm sure?"

"Oh, yes..."

Her uncle—in other words, His Majesty the King's younger brother. The king had three younger siblings, of whom two were sisters and one was a brother, the youngest of all. His name was Stephane. He had borne the title Duke of Embourg and had lived in a castle to the west, but sadly, he'd passed away not long after the new year. He'd had a weak constitution his whole life, and had apparently been suffering from an illness that had kept him bedridden for the past several years.

"He was only forty-three years old," I said. "That's such a young age. My condolences."

"Thank you. It truly is a shame. I only met him on rare occasions, but he was such a kind and cheerful person. I had been planning to stop by and visit him on my way to Lavia...and I'd so hoped he would hold on long enough to see his daughter Anna married. I'm sure he would have wanted to see her in all her wedding finery."

The dog came over to our side of the table now, sharing affection with us. Her adorable frolicking helped lessen the slightly somber mood before it overcame us altogether.

"You're worried about his bereaved family?" I asked. Perhaps her trepidation stemmed from concern for how the duke's surviving kin might be feeling.

She nodded, a frown on her face. "Yes, exactly. I can't go flaunting my happiness in front of them when they've lost someone so important...and so recently. Of course, I'll be as considerate about that as possible, but I'm honestly wondering if it'll be seen as appropriate for the wedding to go ahead as planned."

I looked up from the dog, whose head I had been ruffling with both hands, and uttered a sound of surprise. There was no hint on Princess Henriette's face that she might be joking. She was seriously concerned that the wedding might

be postponed.

“Is that option being discussed?”

“No,” she replied, “not as far as I’ve heard. It’s only something I’ve been thinking about privately.”

“Oh, I see.” I gave a small sigh of relief. *That makes sense. I hate to say it, but it’s not as though the deceased is her own parent or sibling. Her uncle’s unfortunate passing wouldn’t normally be enough to delay such an occasion. At least, I wouldn’t say so.*

The dog left my hands behind and returned to the princess’s side. My eyes darted to the woman standing some distance away. Sophie, the princess’s head lady-in-waiting and trusted confidant, began to speak, her expression one of good sense and knowledge. “I’ve told you not to worry about it. There will have been five months between the Duke of Embourg’s passing and your wedding day. As his niece, that’s more than enough time for you to come out of mourning.”

“That’s quite right,” I said, readily agreeing with Sophie’s categorical assertion. “And if there is any issue, the king and queen will bring it up. You said you haven’t heard anything, correct? That means everything is fine.”

“You don’t think it’ll be unseemly?”

“As long as you don’t behave insensitively in front of his family, there’s absolutely no need to see it as such. The date was set last year, so no one would think it unseemly. Besides, Lavia’s needs are part of the equation as well. Delaying would be no simple matter.”

With this reinforced so firmly, the good cheer finally returned to Princess Henriette’s face. The dog was now begging for attention, front paws propped up on the princess’s skirt, so she lifted the pup onto her lap. “Thank you. I thought so myself, but I wasn’t confident enough to be certain. It reassures me to hear you say it.”

Someone as kind as the princess is always considering others rather than putting her own needs first. That is a wonderful thing in and of itself, but there’s no use fretting excessively.

In the hope of lightening the mood again, I returned the conversation to the wedding attire. Naturally, there was a vast gulf in both quality and formality between hers and mine. Faced with such immense finery, I couldn't help but sigh in wonder.

Well over fifty new dresses had been made for her. But, considering all the appearances she'd have to make and people she'd have to meet directly after the wedding, apparently even that number wouldn't be enough. Given the demands of fashion, they were unable to make them all at once (though I couldn't help thinking they'd made plenty), so they would monitor the situation and order more if needed.

Julianne sighed as well, overwhelmed. "You live in a different world. I don't know what to say."

"What are you talking about?" said the princess. "When you become my sister-in-law, Duke Silvestre's household will arrange every bit as much finery for you."

Despite the jesting tone, what she'd said was entirely accurate. Now that Julianne was a duke's adopted daughter, her bridal trousseau would naturally be impressive.

Apparently only realizing this now, Julianne's face took on a look of shock. "Oh my goodness. Me, with a trousseau this lavish?" She faltered a moment. "To say it's beyond my station is not even the start of it."

"How could it possibly be beyond your station? You're going to be crown princess."

Julianne groaned, her voice growing frail and brittle. "That's exactly what's beyond my station. Maybe I should cancel the whole thing after all..."

"Don't you dare!" came a ferocious objection from a new arrival. "After all I've been through, don't say anything so rotten!"

After overcoming her momentary shock, Princess Henriette glared angrily at the intruder. "Brother dear, don't you know how rude it is to enter without knocking?"

The interloper was a tall, dashing handsome young man sporting black hair,

dark eyes and masculine features: our land's next king, Prince Severin. This man was an object of longing and desire, not only for all the young ladies in high society, but for every girl across the whole country. He ignored his sister's objections and walked briskly over to Julianne, before whom he kneeled. His beautiful face looked up at his fiancée as he began pleading ardently. "I beg you, Julianne. Don't cruelly discard me. If I'm dumped again now after finally getting betrothed, I don't know if I'll ever recover."

It was a stirring sight in some respects, but also rather a pathetic one. In fact, a touch of exasperation appeared in Julianne's eyes. "Oh, is that so? In other words, your priority is *not being dumped*. As long as you get married, nothing else matters, right? In that case, I suppose it doesn't have to be *me* you're marrying!"

"What?! Poppycock! I didn't mean that at all!"

Even though I was sitting right next to Julianne, His Highness seemed not to register my presence in the slightest. He continued his entreaties, telling Julianne just how much he needed her. Princess Henriette merely shrugged, as if to give up on him as a hopeless case, while I and the ladies-in-waiting fought to stifle any laughter while inadvertently letting out the odd titter or two. With a subtle jab of my elbow, I cautioned Julianne not to bully the man too much.

Once order had been restored, a housemaid brought an additional cup of tea for His Highness. I gave up my seat next to Julianne and moved over to the princess's side. The chamberlain and royal guard attending the prince stood on duty by the wall. Sadly, Lord Simeon was not with them.

"So, what brought you here?" asked Princess Henriette, her tone sprouting barbs of resentment at being ignored. "Don't tell me you came here purely because you heard Julianne was visiting me. If so, might I ask that you and she kindly leave?"

Before His Highness could reply, Julianne said, "Oh, do I have to? I'm so enjoying this chitchat among girls."

"Julianne..."

"When I'm at the duke's house, I can't be nearly as free and unreserved as I am here. The duchess is very kind to me, and all the servants are lovely as well,

but I still have to be so mindful of everything I say. Not to mention that after you're married, you won't be here for me to visit anymore." She turned to Prince Severin. "Your Highness, we'll be together for our entire lives. Please don't stand in the way of the precious little time I have left with your sister."

"Julianne...!"

The prince had a reputation as a diligent, capable, and affable young man of fine character—but there was no sign of that man right now. On the verge of tears, he cried, "You've got it all wrong! I came here for a perfectly good reason! Please, I'm begging you, don't be so cruel..."

His shoulders slumped as he trailed off. Feeling too sorry for him in this visibly dejected state, I offered some words of encouragement. "Did you hear what Julianne said just now? 'We'll be together for our entire lives.' She's saying she wants to spend all her days with you."

He looked up at me with a jolt. "Oh! Yes, quite so! You're right!"

"Although it's true that you're kind of interrupting."

"Are you trying to build me up or knock me down?! Kindly pick one!"

After some more back-and-forth, he finally revealed the purpose for his call, which was an invitation to go on a trip. "I'll be visiting Castle Embourg. It seems a shame to pass up such a capital opportunity, so I was wondering if Julianne and Marielle would like to join me."

Castle Embourg—in other words, the abode of the deceased the Duke of Embourg. We ladies exchanged glances, surprised that the topic we'd just been discussing had come up again.

"You're inviting me too?" I asked.

"You're only an extra. If you don't come, it's no skin off my nose."

"Oh, is that right?"

"I'm only pulling your leg. No need for the fearsome face."

Is he trying to eke out some meager amount of revenge?

He promptly offered a fuller explanation. "As I'm sure you're aware, my uncle,

the Duke of Embourg, passed away recently. His widow got in touch to say that she'd like to discuss what happens next."

"Aunt Laetitia? Is there some sort of problem?"

His Highness answered his sister's question with a shrug. "Who can say? The letter contained few details. True, we'll have to meet with her and discuss matters at some point, but there's nothing overly urgent about it. We're more than happy for her to continue living in Castle Embourg."

The Embourg territory and its castle were property of the royal family and hadn't personally belonged to the Duke of Embourg. As such, they wouldn't be inherited upon his death. There was, however, no particular cause to ask the bereaved family to vacate the premises, and their allowance as members of the royal family would continue to be paid as before. This meant that the duchess's living arrangements would go on unchanged, with no special formalities required.

As such, this sudden request suggested some unknown reason for concern—and it seemed the king had thought so too.

"There might be some kind of problem that she couldn't put in writing," said His Highness. "I can't imagine Uncle Stephane had racked up hidden debts or some such...and Aunt Laetitia isn't that sort of person either. Still, if she's in a spot of bother, we can't leave her in the lurch. It may be short notice, but I'll be traveling there next week."

His Highness explained that he was going as the king's representative. This was merely a visit to family, not official business as such, so he'd decided it would make sense to bring us along too.

"Have either of you ever been to Embourg?"

"No," I replied, shaking my head.

"I have not," said Julianne, doing the same.

Though the town of Embourg was a flourishing trade hub, it was inland, which meant it took a little time to get there from the capital, Sans-Terre. Traveling overland in a carriage, it was about a five-day journey. It was also on the border with Lavia, hence Princess Henriette's thought of visiting on the way there after

her wedding. There wasn't usually much impetus to visit such a faraway town.

"I thought not," said His Highness with a knowing nod. "It's a beautiful place with a lot of sights to see in the surrounding area. The castle is on a hill by the River Etre and offers a clear view of the town below. Not to mention that the castle is brimming with history and well worth seeing in and of itself. So? Care to accompany me?"

It was a fine invitation indeed. Needless to say, Embourg was a famed sightseeing destination, and I didn't want to pass up this unique opportunity. Still, I hesitated to agree right away.

"Are you sure it's all right to bring us?" asked Julianne, evidently thinking the same as I. "It feels like the invitation should have come from the duchess herself."

His Highness raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You're my betrothed, not some random stranger. Besides, Aunt Laetitia is the older sister of Duke Silvestre's wife, making her your aunt as well by adoption. When she's related to you twofold, it seems a shame never to have met her even once. Now's a good chance for that."

Indeed—Duchess Laetitia, widow of the late Duke of Embourg, was the sister of Duchess Christine, who was now Julianne's adopted mother.

"I am aware of that. When the Duke of Embourg passed away, the Silvestres went there to offer condolences. However, I doubt she'd think of me as her relative."

Julianne had been born into a poor barony; it was only by becoming the adoptive daughter of a duke that she'd gained enough status to marry Prince Severin. Her background meant she'd suffered even more societal backbiting than I had. Despite her demure appearance, she could be rather scathing, so she wasn't one to back down—but that didn't mean she was immune to it.

Personally, I see bullying and malicious gossip as fuel for learning about how people work and, by the same token, nourishment for my creativity. However, this mindset is apparently unique to me—others are unable to adopt it. Even Julianne, who had been my close companion since birth and who shared both my interests and an unmatched degree of mutual understanding, had told me

she didn't truly comprehend it.

Knowing that Duchess Laetitia had been born into a distinguished family and then married a royal, Julianne couldn't help fearing a less-than-warm welcome.

"Well, no one can know what Aunt Laetitia thinks except the lady herself." His Highness clearly understood Julianne's worries; he held off from irresponsibly insisting it would be fine. "But," he added, "it would be frightful to use that as an excuse to avoid any and all contact with her. Now that you're part of the family, you should go and say hello. Then, if she'd rather send you packing, you can steer clear next time. Better not to make up your mind before you've even taken that chance."

Julianne didn't say a word; she merely lowered her gaze, her cheeks reddening. His Highness was entirely correct. While I could understand the reason for her nerves, it would be a waste to run away before even trying. After all, it's very possible to imagine you won't get along with someone, then find that your impression changes significantly after spending time with them. Letting your parents and fiancé go off to visit a bereaved relative while ignoring her yourself—was that fitting behavior for a grown woman, soon to be married?

"You're right," Julianne said at last, frank in her admission. "I'm sorry."

From her seat beside me, Princess Henriette offered cause for optimism. "I don't think you have too much to worry about. Aunt Laetitia isn't the type of person to be harsh or demanding. I can't say I know her all that well, having only met her occasionally, but if anything, I'd say she's more the quiet, timid type."

"Oh, really?"

"Really. And why not ask Duchess Christine for advice? She'll know her sister better than anyone."

"True..." Julianne conceded with a nod.

This was a good point. Who else was better placed to offer advice about how to approach the situation?

I turned my gaze from Julianne to His Highness. "Is this why you asked me to

join?”

“Oh, partly. It is for Julianne’s sake, but that’s not the sole reason. If you’re there, it’ll jolly well brighten up the place. You have a way of naturally bringing out people’s positive sides, so I think you’ll have an encouraging effect on the family.”

My eyes widened. “Oh my. Quite some words of praise there. I’m honored.”

“Uncle Stephane only just passed away, so they’re likely still grieving. Make sure you’re considerate of that. Anyway, are you able to join? Is it a convenient time?”

“Hmm.” I mused on this for a moment. My next book was still in the planning stages, with nothing set in stone except a vague release window. And *Chersie*, the newspaper that had serialized a story of mine, was currently printing one by another author, so I had plenty of time to keep writing my next work for them as well.

“There’s nothing pressing in my writing career that should get in the way, but I need to check with Lord Simeon first and make sure he approves.” A day trip might be one thing, but if I’d be away for several days in succession, I could hardly decide on my own.

However, His Highness told me there was no need for concern on that front. “I’ve already spoken to Simeon. He’ll be coming too, so I won’t have to let you run wild like an animal. This means he can keep an eye on you—and keep hold of your reins—so he kindly agreed.”

“That’s certainly one way to phrase it.” It was nice to hear that Lord Simeon had already given permission, but comparing me to an animal was awfully rude.

My sullen reaction made Princess Henriette and Julianne start laughing. *I swear. Just because he’s getting me back for earlier doesn’t mean he has to be so cocky about it. I’m nine years his junior—and a woman! How immature.*

The week following that conversation, we arrived in the town of Embourg. Rather than by carriage, we journeyed by boat, going upriver from the sea. If measured purely in terms of distance, the river route was actually longer than

the land one, but traveling with steam power let us make that distance in half the time. We encountered plenty of other steamers too, as smaller varieties had been developed nowadays and were being used for river transportation.

Apparently, a lot of people used boats to visit the historic sites along the Etre valley. I hoped to be among them—a leisurely sightseeing tour sounded excellent.

Waiting for us when we docked was a young woman with beautifully soft, wavy hair a shade of chestnut brown. “It’s a pleasure to see you, Your Highness. I truly appreciate you coming all this way.” She bowed politely, a radiant smile on her face.

This person, about the same age as Julianne and me, was probably the late duke’s daughter, Lady Anna. Though clad in black clothes to indicate mourning, there was otherwise nothing gloomy about her. The gaze she directed at Prince Severin was filled with familiarity and warmth.

“Good to see you after all this time, Anna. You’ve grown.”

“I’m sad to say that I’m not the slightest bit taller than when we last met. You’ve turned into that typical older relative who says the same thing every time they see you.”

“Ngh!”

Quite a brutal way to greet him, though perhaps this was the familiarity they shared as cousins. Julianne and I laughed furtively.

His Highness cleared his throat and started again. “Well, anyway, I know you’ve been through a lot. I daresay it’ll have taken its toll on you.”

In response, Lady Anna’s smile deepened further, and she nodded. “Thank you. Don’t worry, though—it’s been two months already. Once the initial shock passed, life settled down again.”

“Oh, right... I’m sorry that I’ve come to offer my condolences so late. And that my mother and father aren’t here when they really should be.”

“That’s all right. I understand that you and His Majesty can’t both vacate the palace at the same time. Would you come and put some flowers on my father’s

grave later?”

“Of course, I fully intend to do that. Though I’m sure he’ll be disgruntled at his heartless nephew *finally* paying him a visit.”

“He’ll be overjoyed, I know.”

I could tell how relieved His Highness was by her good cheer. I’d pictured her being more sad and despondent, so this upbeat reception was something of a surprise, but not an unpleasant one.

Maybe her spirits have been uplifted by the chance to welcome visitors and see her cousin after so long. That’s certainly a way to distract from your sorrows. It doesn’t seem like she’s forcing herself, rather that she really is recovering from her grief.

Lady Anna’s gaze swept across the rest of us too, landing on Lord Simeon. “You must be Major Flaubert. Nice to see you again. I remember you came here accompanying His Highness before.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness.” He gave a sharp, soldierly bow.

His Highness interjected to correct her. “He’s a lieutenant colonel, not a major. Oh, of course... He must have been a major last time.”

“Goodness, promoted again. My apologies.”

“Not at all,” Lord Simeon replied.

She stepped closer to him. “I’m told you got married last year. Congratulations! I also heard your wife would be joining you on this visit, and I’m so excited to meet her.” Her sparkling eyes, full of expectation and curiosity, turned to Julianne and me. “Which one is she?”

Hmm. Won’t it be rude if I’m introduced first? Julianne should take pride of place here. I gave His Highness a signal with my eyes to prompt him.

Recognizing this, His Highness put a hand on Julianne’s back and ushered her forward. “Allow me to introduce this young lady first of all. This is my fiancée, Miss Julianne.”

Julianne curtsied, her face frozen stiff. Lady Anna returned the curtsy.

“As you’ve likely heard, she was adopted by Duke Silvestre. That makes her your adoptive cousin, no?”

“Yes, my Aunt Christine told me all about your engagement in a letter. We’re now cousins on both my father’s side and my mother’s, in fact. It’s lovely to meet you, Lady Julianne. I’m Anna. I can’t wait to get to know you better.”

“I-I feel just the same,” Julianne replied, struggling to keep her voice from faltering. “I’m Julianne Sore—no, S-Silvestre! I’m awfully sorry to hear about your noble father’s passing. I deeply appreciate your kindness in calling me a cousin, and I only hope I can live up to such an honor. I shall do my most very level best...”



Julianne's nerves had led her to formulate her sentence in a slightly odd way, prompting Lady Anna to laugh pleasantly. "No need to be so apprehensive. Even if we're not tied by blood, we're related on both sides of my family, which makes us rather close kin. We're similar ages too. Feel free to relax and treat me as a friend."

Well now. By the looks of things, her amiability isn't merely on the surface. Lady Anna really is happy to welcome and accept Julianne. What a cheerful, openhearted, and outgoing person.

This was an inherited trait from her royal bloodline, perhaps—one she shared with both of Prince Severin's sisters, Henriette and Lucienne.

Julianne's expression visibly softened. If the daughter was like this, she could expect a similar welcome from the mother. His Highness's active encouragement that she join him on this trip seemed to make sense.

After that, I was introduced, and we exchanged greetings. Lady Anna showed me plenty of cheerful warmth as well, and my fondness for her only grew. *What a lovely person.*

While we traded introductions, our luggage was unloaded and moved into the waiting carriage. Once word came that this was finished, we all boarded the carriage and set off.

The guards that had escorted Lady Anna led the way, while royal guards on horseback formed an impenetrable wall around the carriage. To allow for this, the horses had come on the boat as well, which had actually been quite an ordeal.

Riding at the knights' vanguard was Lord Simeon. Onlookers by the roadside, young women especially, clustered together, eager to catch sight of him. *Tee hee. Isn't he beautiful, dashing, magnificent? I only wish I could see him from where I'm sitting. Ugh, what a pain!*

My attempt to peer out and look forward was met by chiding from His Highness. "Stop leaning out of the window. It's unbecoming."

"It's not fair," I replied. "I want to see him too!"

“What are you talking about? You see him every day. What difference does it make?”

“Oh no, how sad for you, Julianne! Your fiancé thinks that once you live together, there’s no need to see each other anymore!”

“Hmm,” she replied. “Then perhaps our married life will involve separate bedrooms.”

“Gah! That’s not what I meant!”

Watching our typical banter, Lady Anna, sitting next to me, let out a soft giggle. Though it was too late at this point, I suddenly put a hand over my mouth. *Oops. I let my guard down too much.* Merry though she seemed, she *had* lost her father recently. I needed to show more consideration.

“I’m being far too boisterous. Please excuse me,” I apologized.

“Not at all,” she said. “I find it very entertaining. I’ve heard that His Highness and Major...rather, Lieutenant Colonel Flaubert have been friends since boyhood. It looks as though you’ve become part of the family as well.”

“Oh, well... You see, actually, Julianne and I are also related, and we’ve been close since birth.”

Hearing this, Lady Anna’s eyes widened. “Ah, no wonder. I thought you seemed oddly in sync. Seeing the two of you reminds me of Princess Henriette and Princess Lucienne. As I recall, they don’t hold back when talking to their brother either.”

It sounded as though the royal siblings’ silly quarrels went back years and years. With a look of delight, Lady Anna regaled us with one such story. When he saw Julianne and me looking right at him, His Highness sullenly turned away.

Though we treated His Highness rather rudely given his status, the wider populace saw him as noble and precious (which, I’d like to mention, I *do* agree with). People had even gathered by the roadside along the route, cheering as they eagerly hoped to catch a single glimpse of him. For those living here, so far from the capital, a visit from His Highness the Crown Prince was no doubt a major event. The chance to see the splendid Royal Order of Knights was surely nothing to sniff at either.

To give the people what they wanted, His Highness opened the window and waved. Though this was supposed to be a personal visit, it looked likely to include quite a dose of official duties anyway. *The life of a royal really is tough. Even when he goes out incognito in Sans-Terre, he sometimes gets spotted and reported on in the newspapers.*

“Anna, why don’t we drive around Embourg a little bit rather than heading straight for the castle? It would be a waste to pass straight through after coming all this way.”

What a kind prince, I thought. Proposing an otherwise unnecessary detour just to make the townspeople happy.

“Are you sure? You must be tired.”

“Not excessively. Julianne, you’re still fighting as well, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And Marielle has *too* much energy. Getting a bit worn out would be good for the little blighter.”

“What’s with the difference in attitude?” I complained.

Thus, our party’s plans changed, and we embarked on a scenic tour of the town en route to the castle. Along the way, Lady Anna told us about the places we passed. Being such a historic city, it had noteworthy landmarks here and there, but in fact, plenty of modern buildings stood right alongside them.

At one point, the road had a residential district on one side and warehouses on the other. “This area seems quite crowded,” I remarked.

Where one side featured large brick buildings lined up in an orderly fashion, the opposite side was a jumble of dwellings arranged with no rhyme or reason. The narrow roads snaking between them looked complex to navigate; one wrong step, and I could imagine easily getting lost.

Most likely, I thought, the old roads had been left intact while more and more buildings had been constructed around them. Starting over with more intentional planning was probably not practical. This did tend to happen when the population kept growing in a historic area. It matched my expected image of

Embourg.

“For years, there’s been talk that it should be rebuilt for aesthetics and fire safety, but the discussions never go anywhere. We’d have to make all the residents leave, so it would be far from straightforward.”

“Yes, I see what you mean,” remarked Prince Severin. “We’re talking about more than just ten or twenty buildings.”

The people lining the roadside didn’t look especially affluent. This appeared to be an area where laborers lived.

“The large-scale reconstruction in Sans-Terre only happened after the great fire razed the city,” His Highness explained as he waved out the window with a smile. “Turving out the current residents to demolish the buildings would also require paying quite a large compensation. Even if the state led the effort, it would be an enormous challenge.”

The late Duke of Embourg was probably involved in discussions about that sort of thing. I wonder who’ll take over now that he’s gone?

“I must say,” I commented, changing the subject, “wherever you go, there’s a warm welcome.” There was no end to the people watching by the side of the road, and the sheer passion of this reception seemed overwhelming. “You’re so popular, Your Highness.”

What I’d meant as a teasing remark was met with an unexpectedly placid tone. “It’s my uncle’s popularity. Such a cheerful, good-natured man. When he was in good health, he used to walk around the town and interact with the citizens directly. He had such a close relationship with the townspeople. I’m merely the beneficiary of his renown. That’s all.”

“Don’t be silly,” Lady Anna protested with a smile. “Of course people will come running when they hear the crown prince is here. Since this is a personal visit, nothing was publicized beforehand. The news can only have traveled by word of mouth from people who saw you at the dock, so I’m amazed how quickly it spread. That’s how eager they are to see you.”

“How was it when my parents visited?”

“That was announced in advance, of course. And yet, there wasn’t nearly this

degree of frenzied excitement.”

The king and queen had come to pay their respects shortly after the Duke of Embourg’s passing. The townspeople must have had mixed sentiments, wanting to show them a warm welcome but feeling that too much clamor might be inappropriate.

“I’m glad the mood has grown more cheery,” Lady Anna whispered, gazing out at the people. Her eyes were full of love for Embourg, which had returned to normal by now.

Having finished its circuitous route, the carriage rejoined the road to the castle. We eventually left the modern parts of town behind, and sweet little brick houses with triangular roofs grew more frequent. I could see many places where the old buildings had been left intact. As the cobblestones made us bounce and clatter, the castle came into view atop a hill surrounded by plant life.

The white walls and blue rooftops that blended in with the sky were absolutely stunning. The only barrier separating the castle grounds from the surrounding land seemed to be a gatepost with no gate, and from there, a gentle slope continued upward. Once we ascended some distance, past the rows of trees, a vast garden unfurled before our eyes.

This was unlike the elaborately planned gardens at Ventvert Palace. Here, the landscape was closer to nature. Lush grass and tall trees with tiny flowers blooming around their roots... It was like a fairy tale come to life. As was the castle standing proud beyond it.

My eyes were drawn straight to a pair of round towers. They had such presence, bordering either side of the entrance as if scowling down at visitors. From the number of windows, they looked to be three stories each, and they were topped with conical roofs the same color as all the others.

There was no outer castle wall; rather, the towers formed part of the building itself. With very few ornate carvings or other such decorations, the castle’s overall appearance was refined, yet understated. Every moment I gazed upon it, I couldn’t help but think of old folk stories.

The entryway was rather narrow, allowing only a single carriage to pass at a

time. A drawbridge had been lowered over the moat, which had no water in it. Looking at the towers to the left and right, I could see bretèches and thin slits that appeared to be crenellations lining their upper reaches.

“It’s quite imposing,” I remarked.

“It was originally a fortress for defending against enemy attacks,” His Highness explained. “This area used to be a battlefield.”

I had some knowledge of this, as I’d read a book about it. The castle had first been built about eight hundred years ago, before there was even a nation called Lagrange. Power struggles had been common in that era, with frequent battles not only between countries, but between reigning figures.

Over time, the castle’s role had changed from a battle fortress to a residence, which had accordingly involved numerous reconstruction projects. It had also changed hands a number of times, until eventually the whole territory, castle and all, belonged to the royal family. Such a historic castle couldn’t entirely shed its roots as a stronghold, no matter how beautifully it was reenvisioned and reworked. At the center was a square courtyard, surrounded by the building itself, which had towers at each of its four corners. The entrance was at the northwestern corner, while a steep slope right below the southern wing looked down over the River Etre and the town.

The carriage proceeded through an archway, entering the courtyard through a corner of the building, before stopping. After getting out, I looked up at the castle from this inner area. Though the exterior had been something out of a fairy tale, the courtyard had the appearance of a modern-style chateau. The lower floor windows were surrounded by elaborate ornamentation, and windows even protruded from the roofs. *Quite a contrast from the outside!*

The building’s entrance was not far. The center of the north wing had large double doors, which were opened to receive visitors. In front of them, an array of servants had lined up to await our arrival.

Standing in front of them all was a noblewoman dressed in black, aged around forty judging by her appearance. I knew without even being told that this was Lady Laetitia, wife of the late Duke of Embourg. She was rather tall, and her hair was hidden under a black veil. Seen up close, her face resembled that

of Lady Anna's, with neat, refined features. But her face was too pale, and she looked gaunt. Overall, she gave an impression of being worn down and lacking in vitality.

Exactly the opposite of her sprightly daughter.

Even as she greeted us with a smile, her eyes remained dark and sunken. The optimism I'd been harboring began to feel like naive fancy.

Chapter Three

After some cursory words of greeting, the duchess said, “My apologies for summoning you to such a faraway place. You must be awfully tired, so I’ll show you to your rooms. You’ll be able to rest until dinner.”

Her tone lacked the vigor expected of a joyful reunion after many years; it merely expressed a polite welcome to her guests. Julianne even worked hard to introduce herself in the appropriate manner, but she received no fitting response, only standard courteousness.

The duchess’s first impression was not exactly *cold*, but rather, she seemed terribly exhausted. It had been just two months since her husband’s passing after all, so perhaps she still hadn’t recovered. That said, she also seemed somewhat relieved. This visit had been requested by her in the first place, so it made sense that she’d be pleased to finally see us.

His Highness said nothing at this moment either. As bidden, we went inside the building.

The tiled hallway had a door on the immediate right, apparently leading to a room. To the left, a corridor extended; we walked along it, effectively going back in the direction we had come from. At the end was another door, which we opened to reveal a small space no larger than a staircase landing, with no furniture to speak of. Then came another door, beyond which was neither a room nor a corridor, but a stairwell.

The spiral staircase, made from white stone and plaster, was decorated with engravings that gave it a modest yet opulent air. After going clockwise up two stories, we encountered more doors. Two, in fact—likely the entrances to the western and northern wings. The stairs continued upward, but we remained on this level and entered the north wing.

This door led not into a corridor, but to a full-fledged hall. We passed straight through, proceeding from room to room. As we did so, the duchess told us what each space had been used for originally, be it a guardroom, a meeting

space, or similar. Tapestries and other antique items depicted brave soldiers. The walls themselves, and the ceilings, were also finely decorated. The bare roof beams were visible, as was often the case in such old buildings, but flowers and arabesque patterns had been painted on them, crafting an elegant ambience.

We proceeded all the way to the far corner, taking in the sights along the way. Past this point, there was the east wing; the route leading to the south wing was a full corridor, albeit a narrow one.

“I must apologize for making you walk so far,” said the duchess. “The southern entrance would have led you straight there, but it didn’t seem appropriate to ask His Highness to use a service entrance.”

“Pish posh,” he replied. “Don’t give it a second thought. It’s a pleasure to spend time here after so long. The castle has been left just as it was long ago, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. That was as Lord Stephane wished. He felt it a shame not to preserve what we could in such a historic building.”

As the two of them conversed at the head of our column, we streamed along the east wing corridor. I was strongly in agreement with His Highness’s view that this was an enjoyable experience. The building’s interior was full of surprises, with nothing quite how I expected it to be. It was rather unlike any castles I was familiar with. Looking out into the courtyard from the corridor’s windows, I could see the west wing on the opposite side.

“Marielle,” Lord Simeon cautioned in a whisper. Perhaps I’d been looking around too eagerly.

Unbecoming? Maybe. But I couldn’t contain my excitement. A thrill ran through me as I thought about the lord of the castle and his knights living here centuries ago. *What were their lives like? I wish I could travel back to their time and see.*

“Watch where you’re walking or you’ll trip and fall.”

Lord Simeon put a hand on my head and forcibly turned me to face forward. Someone nearby let out a furtive chuckle. *Was that one of his subordinates*

walking behind us? Bah.

This time, we didn't go all the way to the corner, but stopped a little bit before it.

"Julianne, Mrs. Flaubert, these will be your accommodations."

She directed us toward a pair of neighboring rooms. The doors were opened, and I peered inside. The rooms, surprisingly narrow and compact, had beds with canopies. Both were virtually identical, with only the wallpaper and other decorative elements having different designs.

Lady Anna poked her head in beside me. "You must think it's awfully small. People from the capital are always shocked, but I'm afraid all the rooms are like this."

Behind her, His Highness nodded. "Has the floor plan been left untouched?"

"Yes," Lady Anna replied. "Well, strictly speaking, the original building was destroyed, so the current structure is the rebuilt castle from about four hundred years ago. His Highness said it was perfectly fine to remodel if the space was proving impractical, but my father wasn't keen on that. He only ever touched the interior design."

"Fair."

The late Duke of Embourg seemed to have had a great appreciation of history. In his view, historical fidelity had been worth a measure of inconvenience.

When I stole a glance at the duchess, she appeared to be only vaguely listening to our discussion. Her mind seemed elsewhere—likely thinking of her husband.

Julianne and I had brought lady's maids with us. Mine was Joanna, of course, while Julianne was accompanied by a slightly younger girl called Caron. A room had been arranged for them right alongside ours. The royal guards' rooms were on the opposite side—a pair of them led into the corner—and beyond that, another door stood.

"That will be His Highness's room," said the duchess.

From the corridor, it looked just like all the others. But I knew better. This was

the second story of one of the towers, so I wondered if the room might be round. However, when I peered inside from behind the others, it turned out to be typically rectangular. *Perhaps a round room would have been too awkward.*

“Weren’t the towers used for observation and defense?” I murmured.

Laughing, His Highness turned to me. “Only in the era when it was first constructed. But it was rebuilt as a residential castle, and since then, the towers have all been residential as well.”

“But what about the bretèches and crenellations?” I’d seen such provisions on the third floor, which was perhaps an attic level. The higher parts of the towers had looked like they were still furnished for battle.

However, he flatly replied, “Those are decorative.”

“Decorative?”

“Yes,” said His Highness. “The bretèches are just empty holes that only *look* like real ones. The crenellations are there, but I doubt they’ve ever been used.”

“Oh, really?”

I couldn’t help being a little disappointed. *And I was so enthralled by the prospect of doing in-person research into a building from the age of knights—I’ve only read about that sort of architecture in books.*

Leaving His Highness and the other men for now, Julianne and I returned to our assigned rooms. At that moment, our lady’s maids arrived, led there by members of the castle staff and bringing our luggage with them.

Julianne took the southern of the two rooms, and I the northern, and we asked for our luggage to be placed accordingly. In the meantime, I took the chance to peek inside the maids’ room too. As expected, neither the size nor the interior design differed from ours. In all likelihood, every room in this wing was used to house guests. Ordinarily, they wouldn’t be given to servants, but special consideration was no doubt being shown to high-class servants who’d come with honored guests. The bed was sufficiently large for both women to sleep there comfortably.

“You have to share, but the room itself is nice,” I observed. “And it’s so

practical to have you right next to us.”

“Yes,” Joanna agreed. “For servants, it’s positively the lap of luxury.”

Caron expressed the same sentiment. “I actually think it’s better for us to be sharing. Oh, but only if it doesn’t bother you, Joanna! I think I’d find it a bit ominous sleeping alone in an old castle like this. I’d be too scared.”

“It doesn’t bother me. Being here in an entirely unfamiliar household, it’s reassuring to have someone to share the experience with. But I won’t be much help if any ghosts turn up. I’ll be cowering right alongside you.”

“What? Don’t say that! Do you really think this place is haunted?!”

“You’re the one who suggested it!” said Julianne, poking fun at her lady’s maid, who’d been shaken by Joanna’s teasing.

Haunted, you say? Are there any stories about this castle being haunted? I thought for a moment, digging through my memories.

“Supernatural tales are a mainstay of old castles,” Julianne pointed out.

“Please stop!” Caron exclaimed. “I can’t bear this!”

“Didn’t His Highness say there was a former battlefield right outside? The spirits of knights who died in combat must be roaming these halls.”

“My lady! Please!”

Then, to all of our surprise, a voice interjected. “Such stories do exist, but the most famous one is about the ghost of a young lady who met an untimely death.” When we turned and looked, Lady Anna was walking toward us, a smile on her face.

“Goodness, Your Highness,” I remarked.

“Oh, feel free to call me by name—and I’d like it if I could use yours too.”

“Yes, by all means.”

She had apparently returned rather quickly after showing His Highness to his room. Still bearing the same beaming face as earlier, she came over and joined our group.

“Aren’t you going in?” she asked. “How come you’re chatting out here in the

corridor?”

“We were just taking a little look at our maids’ room,” I told her. “By the way, what was it you were saying just now?”

Julianne and Joanna rolled their eyes at my immediate eagerness to learn more, while Caron literally put her hands over her ears.

Lady Anna laughed merrily. “You’d like to know about the spirits haunting this castle? Many tales have been passed down through the years. If you’re not too tired already, why don’t I give you a tour and tell you about some of them?”

“You really wouldn’t mind?” I asked. If permitted, I definitely wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to see more of the building. *Perhaps I’ll even find a chance to learn about some bittersweet grown-up romance. Or maybe, something I can fangirl over hard enough to spark my imagination?*

And even if not, I wanted to see the castle for its own sake. A tour from Lady Anna was a very appealing prospect indeed. Still, I knew that expressing too much vigorous enthusiasm wasn’t appropriate. We were here to extend condolences, so I had to restrain myself.

Lady Anna appeared to sense my conflicting feelings, so she waved her hand as if to ward off any concern. “I really don’t mind. Ever since my father’s condition worsened, the whole place has had such a gloomy atmosphere, and I’ve had enough of it. The more life you can bring to the castle and share with me, the better.”

Such a delicate topic, and yet she’d brought it up without one iota of hesitation. Seeing the face I made as I struggled to find a reply, a wry smile formed on her lips. “I’m sure seeing my mother’s state worried you all. But personally, I’m fine. Come on, follow me. I’ll show you the chapel.”

Her flat insistence really didn’t give the impression that she was putting on a brave face. Had her youth made it easier for her to overcome the grief?

So, accepting the invitation, Julianne and I went with her on a tour of the castle.

Not far at all from His Highness’s room was the entrance to another stairwell. Here, there was another spiral staircase, though this one was far narrower and

darker than the north wing's had been. The small windows were few and far between, and the surrounding wall was unadorned stone. I could see why Lady Laetitia had decided not to bring us this way—it did seem a touch unbecoming of His Highness the Crown Prince.

And yet, the cramped dimness gave me a thrill of excitement. This was the kind of atmosphere that got my blood pumping.

We returned to the first floor with a sense that we were descending into an abyss. Once there, we passed through the south wing on our way to the west wing. The first floor of the south wing was a kind of gallery with windows to both the left and right, affording a view of the courtyard on one side and the slope leading down from the other. Sculptures and potted plants decorated the light-filled passageway, and benches had been placed there too, allowing it to be used for relaxation as well as transit. Warm rays of sunlight shone in from the southern side. This was the coziest place I'd seen so far.

When we reached the corner to the west, we found the entrance to the tower. This was both more spacious and more lavishly outfitted than the others—which was only to be expected, as the southwestern tower served as the chapel.

The chapel was an atrium extending right up to the top floor, with three vivid stained-glass windows reaching almost to the ceiling. According to Lady Anna, the scenes they depicted were from the castle's history. There weren't many pews, but there were some. After offering a prayer to God, we all sat down to talk.

"The fine details are lost to time," Lady Anna explained, "but apparently, when the castle was originally built as a stronghold, another small building sat where the courtyard is now."

"That was quite a common structure for old castles," I replied. "Was it where the lord of the castle lived?"

"Apparently, yes. And a story has been passed down about his daughter."

"She's the ghost from the tales?"

"Precisely," Lady Anna replied with a smile. "This story takes place roughly

seven hundred years ago. One day, the girl went to play in the forest, where she met a young man. The two quickly fell in love and had many secret rendezvous.”

“Goodness.”

“Her father, the lord, was at war with the neighboring fiefdom. This was before the era when the surrounding land was united under one king.”

“Well, it was seven hundred years ago. I suppose there would be no king. Was the lord fighting a conflict over territory?”

“That’s right. But the opposing sides were equally matched in strength and had fought countless times without any resolution. Amid that, the two lovers met—and in fact, the young man was the son of the enemy lord.”

“The very picture of forbidden love!”

“Surely not,” Julianne interjected, deadpan. “The man must have seduced her on purpose to get closer to the lord.”

I swear! Where is her sense of romanticism? Would it really hurt to see it in a romantic light?

But she wasn’t exactly wrong, as Lady Anna explained. “He did approach her, all the while knowing that she was the lord’s daughter, and it’s true that he meant to take advantage of the situation. However, his goal was to end the war. He wished to marry the girl, and even persuaded his father. An accord was reached with Embourg’s lord, and the two were to marry, bringing peace and harmony.”

“But they didn’t?”

“Sadly not. During the ceremony, with both lords present, the castle was attacked. The assault was led by the young man’s older brother. On no one’s authority but his own, he mobilized the soldiers and killed the Embourg lord, the lord’s family, and his own brother.”

“My word...”

This was far from the only example in history in which the head of the family approved of something, but another blood relative was dissatisfied and

attacked anyway. It had been an era when people were prepared to kill their own parents and siblings.

“So the story goes, the young bridegroom protected the girl and fought to the very last. The attacking brother took out his own father too, seizing both fiefdoms for himself. In theory, he was the sole victor in this situation. But his luck soon ran out; just a few months after the battle, he caught a fever and died.”

“Well, that was abrupt. Or short-lived, at least.”

“Indeed! Not only that, but his children died of the same illness one after the other, leaving him no heirs at all. Some said it was a curse from the murdered girl’s family or his brother.”

“An understandable belief given the circumstances.”

It must have been an infectious disease that struck at an inopportune moment—but all those years ago, blaming a curse would have been natural.

“After that, the castle changed hands several times, then was destroyed and rebuilt in its new form as a manor house. But even if the castle and those who dwell here have changed, some things remain. Here in this chapel, a young lady appears wearing clothes from long ago. If you see her, they say it means tragedy will befall the castle.”

“So the lord’s daughter appears as a harbinger of misfortune?” Julianne asked. Though she wasn’t one to take fright easily, she did appear slightly shaken by the prospect of a ghost appearing right where we were standing. We both took a nervous peek at the surrounding chapel.

“That’s what they say,” replied Lady Anna. “Or as a warning of impending danger. There’s a story that a castle lord once saw her and took it as an omen, so he canceled an excursion and narrowly avoided disaster.”

“Is it known who exactly she was?”

“Hmm. There are records of an attack occurring while a wedding ceremony was underway, but they don’t include the bride’s name. Only that she was the daughter of Tristan II, Earl of Caplet.”

“So it’s clear that she really did exist.”

“Yes. But to be honest with you, I think the story about her meeting the young man in the woods and falling in love was made up by later generations. In those days, it would have been too dangerous to heedlessly go out into the forest. Especially for the lord’s daughter—it would never have been allowed. The marriage was probably negotiated by their fathers from the start.”

With a nonchalant smile, Lady Anna concluded the story thus. Despite how compelling it had been, in the end, she didn’t mince words. True, given the norms and customs of those days, she was likely correct—but that didn’t mean there was no romance at all, did it? Perhaps it *had* been an arranged marriage, but upon introduction, the two had fallen in love at first sight anyway. I decided I’d adhere to that theory.

“Have you ever seen the young lady’s ghost?” Julianne asked.

Lady Anna shook her head. “I’m afraid not. She didn’t even appear when my father died. Maybe because everyone already knew without any need for warning.”

Again, she spoke so casually about it. Unsure of whether it was appropriate to smile at her somewhat joking comment, I kept my face vague and noncommittal.

Of course, she picked up on this immediately. “You really don’t need to worry. As I told you, I’m fine. I knew he didn’t have long left, and I’ve already made my peace with it.”

After a hesitant pause, I replied, “Still, it must have been painful.”

She cocked her head, offering a heavyhearted smile. “I suppose so. I was sad, and I felt lonely, but part of me was relieved as well. All my sleepless nights worrying and fretting about my father’s condition were over. By the end, he couldn’t even eat properly and was getting weaker and weaker. Seeing him like that was unbearable. So, when he passed away, it came as a relief.” She paused a moment. “I’m a terrible daughter, aren’t I?”

These fierce sentiments were unexpected coming from someone of her sweet nature. For me, it was hard to imagine ever being relieved about my father’s

death.

She must have spent her days so anxious about his welfare. I suppose when someone passes away, their loved ones feel more than just sadness and loneliness. More complex feelings have parts to play as well.

“There’s nothing terrible about it,” I answered. “As you said, you were overcome with concern for your father. It wasn’t just you who was freed from a painful life—your father was as well, no? He no longer has to suffer from his illness, but can sleep in peace. That thought understandably brought you great comfort.”

Lady Anna’s eyes grew slightly moist. Rather than crying, however, she nodded with a smile. “Yes. That’s exactly right. For him, dying wasn’t a misfortune—it was a release. That’s why we can’t stay mired in sorrow forever. We must return to everyday life. Being nothing but sad is painting Father as merely a poor victim.”

I sensed that Lady Anna’s words were directed as much at herself as at us. It was a conclusion she’d come to after worrying, suffering, and finding a way to overcome it all.

“When he was still in good health, Father and I used to go out and play together. The times I practiced dancing, he would always be my partner. When I think of him, I want to remember him like that, and if I talk about him, I want to speak of happy memories. His life was far more than that of a man suffering from illness.”

Despite being physically younger than us at just eighteen years old, she seemed far more mature on the inside. No doubt there were thoughts and feelings she didn’t let show—she couldn’t be this strong all the time. Still, seeing her stand and fight with such determination was highly admirable.

After we left the chapel, Lady Anna was kind enough to show us a variety of other locations in the castle. The first floor was where people tended to gather, and these areas included dining rooms, parlors, and game rooms. The kitchens where the servants worked were underground, as were the storehouses.

“Even though the building above them was completely destroyed and replaced, the original cellars are still in use, though they have been expanded.”

“Oh my. So these passageways and workshops are eight hundred years old?”

In sharp contrast to the splendid floors above, here underground, we were surrounded by naked stone walls. Yet even in the cellars, there were some windows to allow light to stream in; the castle was surrounded by a dry moat, so they presumably faced that. During the day, the staff could work without candles or lamps.

“They are indeed that old, though not in their original form, of course. They’ve all been renovated.” She paused for a second. “Although...” As if worried about the servants nearby hearing what she was about to say, Lady Anna brought her face closer to ours and whispered, “They say the jail where prisoners were once housed is still here. And the torture chamber.”

“Torture chamber?”

“Ghastly things were done there, I hear. Some ghost stories involve wails and moans coming from the cellars at night.”

Julianne clung to my back. “That’s even scarier than the girl in the chapel!”

“Since when are you so easily frightened?” I remarked.

“Look where we are. I can’t help but be scared!”

“Oh, really?” I replied. “But it’s so full of atmosphere. Doesn’t it fill you with excitement?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No one but you would be that odd.”

“Goodness, Marielle,” said Lady Anna. “You really are a brave one.”

As the three of us whispered to one another in a tight group, a stout maid in her middle years walked over with a package wrapped in paper. “This is no place for a princess to be wandering. Come on, take these and eat them with your friends.”

Then she pushed the package into Lady Anna’s hands. I wondered what was inside—some sweets, perhaps?

She accepted it with a smile. “Thank you. Sorry for being underfoot.”

As we started on our way back to the surface, the maids’ gazes carried a

mixture of admonishment and amusement—they smiled as one might when witnessing a child’s prank. *They’ve probably worked here since Lady Anna was a little girl and watched her grow up. I’m sure they have warm feelings for her. Instead of treating her like an employer’s daughter or a member of the royal family, perhaps the bond they feel is more like family.*

Halfway up the stairs, Lady Anna began laughing to herself.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m just a little amused is all. ‘Friends,’ she said.” It seemed she was laughing at the maid’s choice of words.

“I suppose they wouldn’t know the exact details of our relationship,” I offered.

“Oh.” My reply made her amused smile lose its vigor somewhat. “That’s not quite it.”

Oh dear. Had I said something wrong?

“I’m sorry,” she quickly added. “I had a rather presumptuous thought is all. Friends really are people you have fun with like this, aren’t they? Overly bold, I know.”

Unsure of how to respond, I let her continue.

“Ever since I was a child, I’ve hardly had anyone my own age around. There were people I’d speak to at societal functions, but we’d only meet on occasion, and I wouldn’t say I was especially close to them. Hmm... I wish I could call them friends, but I doubt they’d see it that way.”

Julianne and I exchanged a glance.

“I suppose I let my enthusiasm get the better of me,” she concluded. “My apologies.”

“Well, if you’re happy to be our friend, that makes us very happy as well.”

As we climbed the stairs, we were surrounded by the bright light from outside. With a hint of playfulness, Julianne and I curtsied to Lady Anna.

“Allow me to introduce myself again. I’m Marielle.”

“And I’m Julianne. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, well, I...”

Seeing her confusion over how to respond, we burst out into soft laughter.

“You don’t need to look at it so seriously,” said Julianne. “Friendships come in all shapes and sizes. I think you can call someone your friend even if you only speak to them once in a while.”

“True, it might not be the deepest relationship,” I agreed. “But if you can enjoy conversing with someone, that means you have positive feelings for one another, no? There’s nothing bad about that.” I took Lady Anna by the hand. “Most people will be like that. But from among them, you’ll meet those with whom you feel a special connection or understanding, and from there, you can develop a closer relationship. Now that we’ve had the chance to meet you here, that’s the start of getting to know you, Lady Anna. So please, be our friend.”

Lady Anna blinked in surprise, and her cheeks flushed just slightly. She nodded, and the bashfulness on her face was too adorable. When I started trembling in a fangirl frenzy, Julianne prodded me in the side.

I wouldn’t describe her as “bittersweet,” but she’s certainly had a youth full of joys and sorrows. And she’s an eighteen-year-old princess. It all gives her a quality that’s as precious as anything else.

The sun was still high overhead when we went out into the courtyard. We opened the package over by a well in the corner; inside were lovely-looking meringues. They rolled around in your palm, then dissolved straightaway when you popped one in your mouth. *I love the texture of them. Such straightforward sweetness from sugar and egg whites alone.*

When I happened to look up, I saw a figure in a second-story window. I gave a big wave. Though Lord Simeon was too far away for me to make out his expression, I was quite sure it was a similar look to that of the maids earlier.

He turned around as someone else came to the window. The black-haired man looked down at us.

That reminds me—I wonder where Lady Laetitia is now? I had no idea where she’d gone after showing His Highness to his room. Had she returned to her

own chambers, or was she still with the crown prince?

Noticing the two men on the second floor, Lady Anna waved gently as well. However, she stopped short when I asked, "Lady Anna, do you know what your mother wanted to consult with His Highness about?"

She looked back at me again.

"Is there some sort of problem?" I added.

In our time together, she'd always been so animated, but her face suddenly clouded over. A hint of cynicism now laced her features, and that attitude seemed at odds with her usual charming persona.

"Mother wants to move back to Sans-Terre."

She wants to leave this incredible castle? I quickly chided myself for that reflexive thought. Someone who had lived here for so many years wouldn't see it the same way as a visitor seeing it for the first time. However old and storied it was, it no doubt made life inconvenient in all sorts of ways. Furthermore, she had grown up in the capital. Left alone with her daughter after her husband's passing, it was only natural that she'd feel forlorn. Why wouldn't she want to return to a more familiar environment?

"Oh, I see," I replied. "Does that mean you'd also return to Sans-Terre?"

"I was born and raised here, so I don't think of Sans-Terre as a place I'd be 'returning' to. It's merely somewhere I've visited on occasion."

"Right. Of course."

After finishing the last meringue, Lady Anna crumpled the paper into a little ball. Leaning against the well, she looked up at the castle's roof. "I understand Mother wanting to go back. She struggles with socializing, so even after living here a long time, she doesn't feel at home. Sans-Terre, where all her family and acquaintances live, would be far more comfortable. I don't exactly want to oppose her, but I myself am a little conflicted. I have so many memories of Father here, and I don't want to leave my own acquaintances behind, or the servants."

The well had a cover and a hand pump, so leaning against it presented no fear

of falling in. I followed her example and leaned against it. “Could you stay behind without her?” I asked.

“No,” she said, a bitter smile on her lips. “I don’t think Mother would allow that.”

Lady Anna had no firm suitor yet. Given the need to find one, moving to the capital did seem prudent. Though the queen and her mother’s family would no doubt lend what support they could, being in a distant region would inevitably make the search more difficult.

Of course, all this was merely my own perspective as a pure outsider. It would be decided by Lady Anna and Lady Laetitia in discussions with Prince Severin. I decided not to express any of those thoughts; it simply wasn’t my place.

Not long after that, His Highness and Lady Laetitia came down into the courtyard. After hearing that they were off to visit the Duke of Embourg’s grave, we joined them.

The grave was in a corner of the gardens we’d crossed upon arrival. *If they move to the capital, it’ll mean leaving this grave behind as well. I expect that’s one of the details playing on Lady Anna’s mind.* When I took a subtle look at the duchess, her grief-stricken face was staring directly at the gravestone. It was clear that, unlike her daughter, she still needed more time to recover. *Wouldn’t that make her even less eager to leave his final resting place behind? Or does being here bring up too many painful memories? Is that why she wants to leave?*

Her pale profile was marked by fatigue. I couldn’t know what she was thinking and feeling, but I could tell that she was likely in need of help.

Eventually, dinner was prepared, and we all came together again in the dining room. Over dinner, we engaged in perfectly normal, pleasant conversation. Lady Laetitia didn’t play an overly active role, preferring to listen to His Highness. As he told her about how the royal family and her own family were doing, she smiled, looking nostalgic.

Though the duchess did have more vigor than when we’d first met her, she didn’t seem to have much of an appetite. Her hands barely moved.

Then, after dinner, the stage was set for her to have the long-awaited discussion with His Highness. I wasn't invited, of course; I was an outsider, brought along to accompany my friend. Along with Julianne, I said my goodbyes and left the others behind. Julianne and I chatted in her room for a while, but it grew late with no sign of His Highness and Lord Simeon returning, so I eventually went back to my own.

One of the castle servants had brought hot water for me. After removing my makeup, I asked her to help me take off my dress, meaning to wash my body as well. However, she was rather clumsy, constantly getting distracted and dropping things.

"Thank you very much," Joanna said at last, taking over. "I'll handle the rest, so you can feel free to leave." Once we were alone, she gave a scathing assessment of the castle's servants. "This is a royal residence. How can the work ethic be so poor? They even keep stopping altogether to chat."

"Do they?"

Joanna tied up my hair and undid the laces on my corset. Though it was getting warmer, it was still too early in the year to dress lightly. The nights, in particular, were quite cold. Clad in nothing but my drawers now, I ended up sitting close to the fireplace.

"Yes. Not out in the open, but they don't find especially inconspicuous hiding places either. I saw a man and woman getting awfully close and friendly, you know. It was a rendezvous if I've ever seen one."

"A rendezvous, you say?"

"She wasn't wearing a uniform, so she must be a lady's maid rather than a housemaid. Probably Her Highness Lady Anna's, since she was on the young side. The man was wearing a guard's livery. Neither are on the lowest rungs, but their behavior is still beyond the pale for a respectable manor."

"Well, I suppose so."

There were plenty of households that forbade any romantic interaction between staff, but as long as it didn't interfere with their work duties, I saw nothing wrong with a little leniency. It was only natural for love to bloom

between young men and women. In fact, I was most intrigued to know more about their conversation.

But when I suggested as much, Joanna said, “They were shirking their duties to engage in a tryst! It *is* interfering with their duties. Of course, we’re outsiders and it’s their business, so it doesn’t really matter. Though, if I had to be honest, the tone between them seemed more serious than fun.”

“Were they breaking up, do you think?”

“I couldn’t tell you that specifically. I only saw them from a distance.”

Did the servants know about Lady Laetitia’s plan to leave the castle and move back to the capital? Maybe they were upset about it and concerned for their own futures.

What will happen to the castle if those two leave, I wonder? Maybe I’ll have a chance to ask His Highness about it tomorrow.

After washing, I changed into my nightclothes and let Joanna retire. She was undoubtedly exhausted as well after the journey from Sans-Terre. I told her that I wouldn’t call on her tonight—she could rest—and I sent her back to her room next door. Listening closely to the sounds in the corridor, I made sure I heard Joanna’s door open and close. Then, I slipped on a robe and wrapped a shawl around my shoulders.

As carefully as possible to avoid making a sound, I opened my door and ventured a step into the hallway. In the dim light, I looked toward His Highness’s room. Unsure whether he was back by now, I quietly snuck out.

Well, why shouldn’t I? Since getting off the boat, I’ve barely had a chance to talk to Lord Simeon! He’s spent every moment attending to His Highness, and they’ve often been off in a separate group. True, I’ve also been preoccupied with looking around the castle...but since we’re in different rooms, if I don’t take matters into my own hands, we’ll each go straight to sleep without seeing each other until morning. And then, the same pattern will repeat tomorrow.

All of this meant that saying good night to him was absolutely essential. I didn’t think I could go to sleep without hearing his voice.

I kept my footsteps as stealthy as possible and made my way along the

corridor. Suppressing my presence in more or less my usual fashion, I headed for the tower's entrance under cover of darkness.

Just then, the very door I was aiming for swung open, and light flooded the hallway. So, His Highness was indeed back already. After a brief exchange of voices, a tall man stepped out.

Ah, I knew it. Lovers really are connected by the ties of fate. Even though we hadn't made any prior arrangement, Lord Simeon had emerged at exactly the right time. My heart pounded with joy.

Lord Simeon noticed me a moment later. He froze in motion, his hand about to grasp the saber at his waist. Then, after a beat, he cradled his head and heaved a heavy sigh. "What in the world are you doing?"

"I wanted to come and say good night to you."

"Why does that require creeping along the wall?! You can just walk normally. I thought you might be an intruder!"

Even though this was the first time we'd been alone together all day, his first act was to chide me. I had indeed been moving like a shadow with my back to the wall—and my husband was apparently not overjoyed to see me.

Disappointed, I pouted.

Chapter Four

Upon hearing our voices, royal guards peered out of the antechamber, and His Highness from behind Lord Simeon. Then, after rolling their eyes, they all returned just as quickly.

Now that we were alone again, Lord Simeon came closer, wearing a sour look. “Go back to your room. If you wander about dressed like that, you’ll catch a cold.”

With a hand on my back, he turned me to face the other way. He then proceeded to walk along with me, so I nestled against his body. “Have you finished working?”

“I won’t finish working until His Highness returns to Ventvert Palace, but he told me I could rest for tonight. I’ll leave the remaining tasks to the guards on duty.”

I nodded. This was just the kind of answer I’d expected. “Then you can talk to me for a while, can’t you? Or are you so tired that you have to go to bed right away?”

“No, not really. But what is it you want to talk about?”

“Anything. I don’t mind. Only, you’ve been clinging so closely to His Highness all day that I’ve barely seen your face, let alone spoken to you. I thought we might at least eat dinner together, but then you were standing guard outside the room!”

“Of course I was. I’m here as a royal guard, not as a guest.”

“But that’s *boring*! I’m so *lonely*!”

“Honestly, stop making such a fuss.”

But even as he admonished me, Lord Simeon’s voice was gentle. When I clung to his arm, he didn’t shake me off. *It’s safe to say that he’s happy we can spend this time together too, no?* While I had the opportunity, I took in as much of his

large body's reassuring warmth as I could.

We soon reached my door, where I invited him inside. I suggested that we could stay together and sleep alongside each other all night. But alas, he told me couldn't.

He did, however, sit beside me on the bed. "Her Highness Lady Anna spent the afternoon showing you around the castle, didn't she? Did you collect any good material?"

My husband knew me so well. I replied with a large nod. "Yes! I got all kinds of inspiration. She told me some interesting stories too."

"About the castle, you mean? Did it include the haunting in the chapel?"

"Oh, you know the story too?"

"It's relatively famous. Besides, I've come here quite a few times."

That made sense. He'd have heard it already. *Such a shame—I was hoping to tell him a tale of romance from long ago.*

But when I said as much, Lord Simeon laughed softly. "Romance? Hmm, I'm afraid that's all a fabrication from later in history. In such a brutal era, a woman wouldn't be able to go walking on her own, even if her territory wasn't at war."

"Lady Anna said the same thing. Still, people have been falling in love since time immemorial! It's possible that two people met and developed affection for one another in the midst of war. No one can say for certain that it *didn't* happen."

"Well, I suppose. But if so, that only makes it all the more tragic."

A breath caught in my throat. "That's true."

Fate drew them together, then just as they were about to be wedded in God's presence, they were mercilessly attacked and lost their lives. A dramatic turn of events to be sure, but a tragedy.

Despondent, I leaned against Lord Simeon's shoulder. "It goes beyond merely bittersweet, doesn't it? I wonder what's keeping her bound to this land?"

"Well, I must say, I'm highly skeptical about the entire matter..." Seeing the

protest in my gaze, he swiftly changed tack. “But, assuming there *is* a ghost, she’s supposed to appear before misfortunes occur, so perhaps she’s watching over the castle?”

I knew he wasn’t the type to believe in supernatural tales.

“For her to do so all this time—even after the building and all its inhabitants have changed—she’d need to have an awfully strong emotional attachment. Or perhaps, some sort of regret. It would have to be very strong for her to remain here for seven hundred years, but we don’t have any records of the girl herself. Not even her name remains. Only that the poor thing was to be married under her father’s orders, then lost her life during the wedding. There were countless such people in those days, so I’m sure the entire ghost story was a fabrication...or rather, a dream of those who want to believe.”

Even when going along with me on this subject, in the end, he couldn’t help denying it. My mouth twisted sullenly.

Seeing my reaction, Lord Simeon adopted a wry smile. “Isn’t that the better alternative? I’d feel sorry for someone confined to these grounds for hundreds of years, unable to pass on. Far better for her to have ascended to heaven and found release.”

“That’s true,” I was forced to concede after a moment.

Even if they stemmed from a lack of belief in ghosts, his words were full of compassion for the departed girl. *True, even if a ghost haunting the castle makes for a more exciting story, Lord Simeon is quite right that the girl deserves peace. Even if his stubbornly serious nature makes him a stickler for reason and logic, he is a thoroughly kind person at his core.*

I wrapped my arms around him. Quickly following suit, Lord Simeon drew his face closer. We kissed gently enough that our glasses didn’t clash too hard, but that wasn’t enough. Moving apart for a moment, we each removed our glasses, then locked our lips again. His strong arms embraced me, also gently stroking my head and back. The more we touched, the more I wanted—needed. When I let myself fall backward onto the bed, Lord Simeon followed suit, landing on top of me.

But then, despite my ecstatic rapture, he immediately pulled away. “No...we

can't." With a somewhat panicked motion, he got up again. His beautiful face was slightly flushed.

"I'm working. In fact, I'm on duty until we go back to Sans-Terre. I may be on a break right now, but I need to be ready to spring back into action at any moment."

He muttered all this in one continuous stream, seemingly more to himself than to me, and put his glasses back on. Disappointed though I was, there was clearly no changing his mind, so I sat up as well.

We hadn't even been talking for very long, but Lord Simeon hurriedly stood and started toward the door. If I didn't say anything, I knew he'd be gone before I could blink, so I grabbed the sleeve of his uniform and pulled him to a halt. "Stop, please."

"Go to sleep for tonight. You must be tired as well, surely."

"Do you really have to run off in such a hurry?"

"If I don't, it will prove...infelicitous."

"Infelicitous? In what sense?"

"Well, you see..." He put a hand over his mouth and turned his face away.

Honestly, what a waste of our only chance to speak properly all day.

"Just tell me one thing," I said. "The topic the duchess wanted to bring up—was it about the fact that she wants to move back to Sans-Terre?"

All abashment vanished from Lord Simeon's face, which turned serious. He looked down at me with a touch of surprise. "How do you know about that?"

"Lady Anna told me."

"Ah..." He nodded, readily accepting this explanation. From his response, I knew the answer without him having to tell me. *So it was about that.*

"Lady Anna seems reluctant to leave the castle where she was born and raised," I said.

Lord Simeon forestalled me with a caution. "That's all a matter for after we've reported to His Majesty. Just because Her Highness Lady Anna filled you in

doesn't mean you should be speaking too much about it."

Being chided so flatly, I ducked my head down. "I wasn't going to spread it around to all and sundry."

"Good. Ultimately, it's a matter for another house, so outsiders shouldn't poke their noses in. I think you understand that, but please don't step in out of undue concern."

When I fell silent for a moment, Lord Simeon urged me with a firm look. "Marielle?"

He's not going to let me avoid giving a clear answer. Reluctantly, I nodded. "I don't intend to intrude where I'm not wanted or needed. I understand that I'm an outsider." I paused. "Still, if a friend has worries on her mind, there's nothing wrong with giving advice, is there? If it comes to that, I can't turn a blind eye and stay silent. Please accept that I *might* say something, should the situation call for it."

"She's your friend even though you only met her today?" His tone was a little weary, and he shrugged his shoulders. "That is your forte, I suppose."

However, he didn't press the subject any further, so it seemed he'd more or less accepted my point of view. He opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

At that moment, a bell rang somewhere nearby. Lord Simeon and I both raised our heads at once, our ears pricking up. It sounded several times before the ringing ceased.

"Who could that be?" I wondered aloud. "Summoning the servants at this hour... Has something happened?"

"Hmm... I doubt it's His Highness, but I'd better check just in case."

Reluctant to let him go, I tried to follow.

However, he turned and said, "Now, didn't I say you'll catch a cold dressed like that? You should go to bed." Then he quickly kissed me—but just as my heart leaped with excitement, he slammed the door shut right in front of me.

I swear!



His footsteps quickly faded into the distance. Sulking, I turned to face the bed again.

I wish I could go on another trip with Lord Simeon, one that isn't part of his work. I'd gladly visit Enciel Island again, and traveling to a foreign country one day would be nice too. Maybe we could even journey the world and see places like Shulk, to the south, and the golden lands in the far east. I want to go to towns with diverse cultures inhabited by people with different skin tones—to see it all with my own eyes. What scents would these places have? Just imagining it is tantalizing.

With House Flaubert's financial means, it was a wish that could be fulfilled at any time. The only problem was finding the time. My husband was always lacking in that resource.

“Oh well.”

With a sigh, I sat down on the bed. A lot of nobles lived a life of luxury, but Lord Simeon was always busy with his military duties and family business matters. I'd married him knowing that, and had no intention of making selfish demands...but couldn't he find *some* time for rest and relaxation once in a while?

The fire had largely died down by now. Deciding it would be better to go to sleep rather than add more firewood, I put a hand on the duvet. Though the room was very old, the bedding was brand new. The soft, fluffy feather duvet had flannel sheets beneath, and they'd been warmed up, making them perfectly comfortable and not chilly at all.

I was about to take off my robe when I suddenly felt something off. *That bell just now...where did it ring from?* It was the kind for calling servants, so if there was a bell, it should be in a room where servants worked. In other words, the cellars. But, I shouldn't have been able to hear it so clearly up here on the second floor, where the family's rooms and guest rooms were located.

It certainly didn't sound like it was coming from downstairs. I'm sure it was on this floor...wasn't it?

Just as I was puzzling over this, there came a subdued knock at my door.

When I answered it, I was met with the face of Joanna, who I had expected to be in bed by now. She had clearly been intending to sleep, as she'd let her hair down and changed into her nightclothes.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, my lady, but I heard a summoning bell, and it made me wonder if you were calling for me. Apparently not, it seems."

Ah, I see, I thought, my eyes flicking to the table. A summoning bell sat there as well, of the diminutive kind that could be shaken with a flick of the wrist. Of course she thought I'd used it and that the sound just now had come from me.

"Thank you. It wasn't me, though. It rang from one of the other rooms."

"Oh, really?"

Through the open door, I could hear a similar exchange from the neighboring room. Julianne's lady's maid was evidently asking the same question.

Joanna glanced in that direction. "Seemingly, it wasn't Lady Julianne either."

Hmm. Then who was it? His Highness, perhaps, or a member of the late duke's family?

"My apologies for bothering you."

"Not at all. I appreciate you going to the effort. You must be tired though. Please, get some rest now."

"Thank you, my lady. Good night."

After dismissing Joanna, I got into my bed. I'd feared that the excitement of staying in an old castle would have set my mind racing too quickly to fall asleep, but drowsiness overcame me in no time flat. The day's journeying and subsequent touring of the castle had clearly taken a toll. The soft, high-quality bedding helped lull me to sleep as well. I was drawn into the world of dreams so quickly that I had no time to savor the castle's nighttime atmosphere.

The next day, I was to eat breakfast privately in my room, so I asked Joanna to fetch it. In the meantime, I intended to linger sedately in my bed. *I wonder if I'll be able to go into the town today? I'd love to buy souvenirs for my family and friends.*

However, after lying in bed mulling over such thoughts for a while, I grew worried that Joanna still hadn't returned, so I got up. After donning my gown and running my fingers through my hair, I went over to the door and poked my head out to scan the corridor. As it happened, this turned out to be the very moment that Joanna returned.

"My lady, you are in no fit state to be leaving your room," she scolded.

"I wasn't going to leave. Only, you took so long, and I was wondering if something had happened."

She quickened her pace and hurried closer. "My apologies. The servants here were in such a state of disorder that no one was giving me the time of day."

"It sounds as though something *has* happened."

"Yes." Joanna nodded, her face clouding over. She sat me down in front of the fire and picked up a brush. As she explained the situation, she began to work on my hair.

"One young maid was making an awful fuss, declaring that she didn't want to work here anymore, that she wanted to quit."

"Oh dear, that sounds like quite a commotion. Has there been some sort of disagreement among the servants?"

"No, a rather different sort of incident..."

Apparently, Joanna had asked about the reason behind the outcry. When I urged her on with my gaze, she hesitated a moment, but then continued. "I don't know if it's actually true or not. But...they're saying a ghost appeared."

"Did the maid see it?!"

"Why did that make your eyes light up?"

"Oh, tell me," I urged fervently, "which ghost was it?" I thought back on the tales I'd heard only yesterday, then turned my head to continue my line of questioning. "Was it the young lady in the chapel, perhaps? Or a tortured enemy captive?"

With a gasp, I realized I needed my notebook and set about looking for it. Joanna retrieved it for me, her expression indicative of a headache. I opened it,

my pen at the ready, and asked her to go on.

“I’d refrain from such shamelessness...such *intrepidity*, rather, in front of the maid concerned. She was crying and trembling in fear.”

“Goodness! Was it such a horrifying sight?”

“I’m sure not to you, my lady,” Joanna replied. “You’d be more than a match for any ghost.” She shrugged, clearly indicating that there was no need to worry about *my* nerves, before sharing further details. “You heard the summoning bell last night, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. I remember it well.”

“Afterward, I did think it was somewhat strange. It sounded different than a tabletop bell, and if it didn’t come from you or Lady Julianne, I shouldn’t have been able to hear it so clearly.”

I pondered for a second. “That’s true, now that you mention it.”

I picked up the bell on the table and shook it. The sound it made was dainty and tinkling. *Now, what did the bell from last night sound like? I recall it being slightly lower-pitched.*

“Hold on,” I said. “You’re not suggesting a ghost rang the bell, are you?”

“That does indeed seem to be the case.”

The castle’s servants had not given Joanna, an interloper, a detailed explanation. Rather, she had gleaned a rough understanding based on overheard snippets of their conversations. According to the gossip, it was apparently believed that the summoning bell had been rung by the late Duke of Embourg.

“Oh? Not a ghost from times past, but the recently deceased duke?”

“That’s what the servants said. And it wasn’t just the young maid who was in an awful tizzy—the others were too. They were certain that the sound had come from the master’s bedroom...which nobody is using at the moment. It’s been left empty. Hearing a summoning bell ringing from there has left all of them frightened.”

“My word,” I replied after a moment. This was getting more intriguing by the

second. My pen raced across the page.

“It rings every night, they say. The young maid was crying and insisting she couldn’t bear it any longer. But we don’t know if it’s an actual ghost. Only that a great fuss has been made, with many suggesting a supernatural culprit. Frankly, making such a brouhaha about ‘the Duke of Embourg’s ghost’ with his grieving family so near strikes me as awfully indiscreet and rude. My lady, please be careful about what you say and do.”

“Yes, I know. I will. I wouldn’t dream of behaving insensitively toward Lady Anna or the duchess. Still, it is quite fascinating. I shall have to inform His Highness and investigate in more detail!”

She paused before saying, “I suspect a ghost wouldn’t appear in front of a person like that.”

After our conversation, I changed into a dress and wolfed down the breakfast Joanna had brought me, all the while urging her to complete my morning routine with haste. My first port of call was Julianne—I wanted to invite her to join me, but she was in the middle of getting dressed and shooed me away, saying, “I don’t quite follow, but anyway, go on your own.” With no choice but to do just that, I advanced to His Highness’s room alone.

I asked the knight standing guard to pass on my message, then waited impatiently before I was finally permitted to enter the tower room. His Highness was still wearing his nightclothes; he said he wanted to enjoy his first day in some time with no official business to attend to.

“What brings you here at the crack of dawn? I daresay charging into a man’s room isn’t exactly ladylike behavior.”

“That’s quite all right. Seeing you in your pajamas doesn’t stir anything in me.”

“Nor would I want it to, but such a categorical statement is hardly flattering!”

“Oh, in that case, would you mind me sketching a picture? Now that I consider it, there is something uniquely precious about seeing a prince dressed for bed. It gives you an atypically *normal* air... My, you even have stubble!”

“Whatever this *is* stirring in you, I want no part of it! If you came here purely

to treat me like an exhibition to be studied, then kindly piss off.”

As I drew closer to His Highness, who was squirming and trying to hide like a shy maiden, I suddenly felt a conk on my head from behind. Having heard the racket we were making, Lord Simeon had entered.

“Marielle...” The glare of his light blue eyes made me shrink into myself just a touch. *Was I being too boisterous?* After casting a sharp glance at the laughing royal guards, Lord Simeon grabbed me by the collar. Then he lowered his head before his master. “My deepest apologies. I’ll be sure to give her a thorough scolding.”

He started trying to drag me away, but I resisted most fiercely. “Wait! I have an important matter to discuss. The bell that rang last night... Lord Simeon, you heard it too. I have vital information about it that His Highness needs to be aware of!”

“What on earth are you—?”

“Yes, all right, jolly good!” His Highness interrupted, holding Lord Simeon and his rebuke at bay. “I’ll listen to whatever you have to say, only, please let me get dressed first.”

For the moment, I was made to leave the room and wait. The icy chill of anger emanating from my husband was remarkable indeed. “Regardless of the familiarity His Highness shows you, that was beyond discourteous! Not to mention entirely lacking in modesty. You ought to feel ashamed of yourself.”

“I’m sorry... I do have the greatest respect for His Highness the Crown Prince, of course, but whenever I talk to him, he feels so much like a brother. That’s why the sight of him in his nightclothes inflames no untoward feelings in me at all. He is so thoroughly fresh-faced that—inadvertently or otherwise—he exudes not a hint of a sensual appeal that might cause my eyes to fixate on him, nor any aura that might tempt me to immorality. He’s the sort of man who shines most in the sun’s rays. Seeing him in a disheveled state made me feel nothing except a sense that he must have overslept.”

Amid my string of justifications, His Highness’s voice of protest called out from inside the room. “You know, I can still hear you!”

Lord Simeon pressed his fingers to his forehead, his expression somber.

“Hmm, I wonder if he *would* be able to exude sensual appeal if he tried to?”

“Marielle,” my husband growled.

“Oh, I must go and fetch Julianne!”

Making a speedy exit from the continuing lecture that was sure to follow, I ran back along the corridor. I burst into Julianne’s room, and while she was eating her breakfast, I told her all about the ghostly goings-on.

Though her lady’s maid turned pale beside her, Julianne just cocked her head dubiously. “I certainly did hear the bell, but...a ghost? I wonder. Surely it’s no more than a spooky story. Old castles are breeding grounds for those sorts of tales.”

“But the ringing of the bell is undeniable truth. There’s still a need to get to the bottom of it.”

“True, it is rather mysterious.”

Having finished her breakfast, Julianne accompanied me as I made my way to His Highness’s room once more. We found him dressed, styled, and clean-shaven, presenting the dashing and dignified image of a prince that we were used to.

The four of us—His Highness, Lord Simeon, Julianne, and I—sat down together, and I relayed the story from the beginning. This came as no surprise, but Lord Simeon was even more scathing than Julianne had been. “After all that fuss, you spout such trivial nonsense. You really barged in here for no greater reason?”

“It’s far too early to be certain of whether it’s ‘trivial nonsense,’” I shot back, put out by his excessive vitriol. “At the very least, we know for certain that a summoning bell rang under unexplained circumstances—and that it has struck fear in the servants’ hearts. For all we know, Her Highness the Duchess and Lady Anna are scared as well. Was this mentioned at all in your discussion last night?”

I directed that last question at His Highness...only to come to a sudden

realization when I turned to look at him.

“Your Highness? You don’t look well.”

“What?! B-B-Balderdash! I’m just sitting here listening to you. I-I say, I’m feeling very comfortable indeed.”

A momentary silence descended. His response had been remarkably transparent; all the dignity he’d fought to regain was gone in a flash. All of us eyed him, waiting for him to continue.

“Wh-Wh-What are all those frosty looks for? I told you, there’s nothing wrong!”

His words stood in sharp contrast to his restless hands and inability to meet our eyes. But I wondered—would needling him about it be disrespectful? I glanced at Lord Simeon, who averted his gaze, looking somewhat distressed.

“I-It’s not how it looks! Julianne, please, don’t draw the wrong conclusion! I am absolutely *not* quaking in fear!”

“It’s no skin off my nose if you are,” she replied, meeting his desperate denials with coolness. “There are people who can’t stand insects and spiders. Why should I look down on you for feeling the same about ghosts? If someone’s afraid of something, they can’t exactly do anything about it. What matters is how you comport yourself when the fear arises.”

His Highness seemed to despondently shrink in on himself, like a child chided by a parent. “Oh, well, yes...”

Julianne definitely reminds me of Her Majesty the Queen right now. This must be the benefit of the training she’s undergoing.

Clearing his throat, Lord Simeon turned to me again. “So, what do you have in mind?”

“Naturally, I’d like to suss out the truth of the matter. Before that, however... Your Highness, what sort of discussion did you and the duchess have last night?”

I asked the question calmly, aiming to hint that the two matters may have somehow been connected. Certainly, I hadn’t accepted it as an outright fact

that a ghost had materialized and was haunting the castle. However, the rumor *did* exist, and it was seriously troubling the castle's occupants. It didn't seem an option for His Highness to simply ignore it.

Returning to his usual demeanor, His Highness folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Aunt Laetitia certainly didn't mention anything supernatural. To sum up, she wants to move back to the capital. She has a great many apprehensions about remaining here and would rather be back on familiar ground. Anna is also reaching marriageable age, and keeping her secluded in this castle would make it difficult to find a suitable match."

That was exactly what I'd already heard yesterday. And, just as I had, His Highness found it to be an entirely natural request.

"There's nothing unusual about the idea," he continued, "nor is there any reason to refuse it. I'm sure when I inform His Majesty, he'll readily accept it." He paused. "Only, it is weighing on me that she's in such a blasted hurry."

"Oh, is she?"

Nodding, His Highness adopted a focused frown as he recalled his meeting with the duchess. "Not only does she want to go back, but she seems to want to divest herself entirely of this castle and its territory posthaste. Though her position isn't the strongest, it's not impossible that Anna could inherit and become the Duchess of Embourg in her own right. However, my aunt would strongly prefer to relinquish it altogether."

I looked around at Lord Simeon and Julianne, then cocked my head quizzically. "Does it go without saying that Lady Anna *must* go with her?"

"She's her only child," said Julianne. "It is the most natural course of action."

I nodded in agreement, but something about it still didn't quite make sense to me. His Highness wore a conflicted expression, and I surmised that it was likely for the same reason. The duchess's request was a perfectly sensible one, but it felt off nonetheless.

"What if it's because of the ghost after all?" I whispered at last. His Highness turned a sickly shade once more.

Unable to look on in silence, Lord Simeon interjected, "We can't make that

assumption. I doubt she'd make such a life-altering decision for a reason like that."

"Not *entirely* for that reason, perhaps, but it might have played a role. Having said that, if she does believe it's a real spirit, then it's the Duke of Embourg's ghost—in other words, her late husband's, no? I wonder if she really needs to run away from it. If you died before me, Lord Simeon, I'd want to see you again, even in ghostly form."

This left my husband silent. As I glared ardently at him, his countenance shifted. The eyes looking back at me from behind his glasses were piercingly sharp, yet beautiful too; they could burn with roaring flame or chill like a frigid tundra, only to be a gentle spring sky the next moment. Every change left my heart aflutter. Though he could be excessively serious and a master at finding fault, his lectures were always for my benefit. My husband adored me more than anyone else.

Being forced to part with him seemed unthinkable. If one of us did pass away before the other, how could I help but wish for at least his spirit to remain?

"*Must* you start flirting at the drop of a hat?!" His Highness angrily exclaimed. Without realizing it, Lord Simeon and I had apparently drawn rather close to one another. "Julianne, I don't ever want to be apart from you either, just for the record!"

"Really? I'm not sure I'd want to be a ghost and have you following me around everywhere..."

Alas, his attempt at matching our tone was met with a flat rejection.

Clearing his throat again, Lord Simeon swiftly changed the subject. "In any case, it seems prudent to talk to Her Highness the Duchess again."

His Highness agreed, his shoulders slumping. "Yes, indeed. Shall we inquire after her now?"

Quite some time had passed while we were talking, so the duchess was probably finished with her morning preparations and her breakfast. We sent a messenger to ask, and she agreed to meet right away. We streamed out of the room and made our way to the south wing.

“Good morning,” said the duchess, who had stepped into the corridor to wait for us. Lady Anna was not present. “I hope you all slept well and recovered somewhat.”

The shadow clouding her amicable smile was just as it had been the day before. Was this due to the grief and exhaustion of her husband’s passing, or was it because...

I looked farther along the passageway. This array of rooms in the south wing constituted the private chambers of the castle’s lord and his family. From what I had heard, the westernmost of them, next to the chapel tower, had been the late duke’s.

Right now, the atmosphere in the sunlit corridor implied nothing eerie at all. Was a ghost—the spirit of the Duke of Embourg—really wandering these halls? My current view gave me no indication of that whatsoever.

Chapter Five

The duchess invited us to come to the westerly wing, suggesting it would be a more comfortable place to talk.

“Sorry for calling on you so suddenly,” said His Highness. “If you’re otherwise engaged, we don’t mind meeting you later.”

“No, it’s quite all right. I’m expecting visitors in the afternoon, in fact, so now is more convenient.”

Since the castle’s layout was a square, moving through it was a straightforward trek along the sides. We walked past various rooms in the south wing, heading westward. I couldn’t help being very conscious of the late duke’s room as we passed it. When I stole a glance at His Highness, I saw that his handsome features had stiffened.

The door at the hallway’s end led to the upper level of the chapel. Small chairs looked down into the central shaft, while a passage led out in a western direction. Beyond that was another door, and after going through that, we finally entered the west wing.

“Rather a hassle, isn’t it?” The duchess chuckled, looking back at us over her shoulder. “Despite how small the castle is, going to a different room means either going all the way around the outside, or going downstairs and then up again. I wish the man who’d rebuilt it had thought a little more about the practicalities.”

“Rumors say that man was quite the debaucher,” His Highness remarked.

“Yes. He wrote about it in his own memoirs. All his pleasure-seeking and womanizing made his wife rather angry. He poured money into his obsession with rebuilding the castle in an old-fashioned style, then lived only a few years in it before passing away.”

Oho, so that’s the sort of man he was. I made a mental note of it all as I listened to the pair’s conversation. *In that era, the castle would’ve still been his*

private property, not that of the royal family. I bet it would be interesting to learn the history of all the weird and wonderful owners this castle has had over the years.

The west wing didn't appear to have a corridor; we first entered a small room, the purpose of which was unknown to me, then passed through to a larger room. This appeared to be some kind of lounge. The floor was covered in finely detailed tiles, and upon it were chairs, tables, and a large bookcase by the wall. Though the number of books was meager, the items themselves appeared to be valuable indeed. I peered through the locked glass panel, and the books' spines all looked very old.

Perhaps these are the memoirs the duchess mentioned. As an avid reader, I'm extremely curious. I wonder—if I ask later, will she let me look at them?

At the duchess's urging, we each took a seat. His Highness sat directly across from her, of course. "Apologies again for the trouble," he said. "I'd like to ask a follow-up question after our discussion yesterday."

"I should be the one apologizing for taking up your valuable time, Your Highness. Feel free to ask whatever you like."

"Honestly, I'm glad for the chance to get away from my duties and relax. It's been a while."

His Highness spoke with a smile on his face, giving no hint of the misgivings he'd discussed earlier. Presumably, he didn't want to make the duchess feel ill at ease.

With a quick glance at us, he added, "You might be concerned about outsiders being present, but allow me to reassure you. They are my trusted confidants—this man and his wife are both dear and reputable friends of mine. And Julianne here was asked by Duchess Silvestre to see how you were doing. They might be able to provide some assistance with this topic. That is, if you don't mind, of course."

Julianne had a particular reason to be there, but I thought the duchess might bristle at my and Lord Simeon's attendance. However, no displeasure appeared on her face. Having said that, she wasn't overly welcoming either; rather, she consented with a vaguely absent look about her. My impression was less that

she was happy for anyone to be there, and more that she didn't particularly care.

Hmm. I've been worried about the duchess since yesterday, and this only adds to my concerns. More than just fatigued, she looks mentally precarious. Even though she's able to converse normally, I can't help but feel that something's amiss.

"Not at all," replied the duchess. "I used to socialize with Earl and Countess Flaubert, and I'm sure Christine has been worried about me."

A normal enough response...but her heart wasn't in it. The words sounded like mere formality. Or was I imagining things?

His Highness replied with a quick thank-you, then frowned as he considered how to broach the topic.

The door leading to the smaller room then opened, and two maids entered with tea. One of them looked to be not yet twenty, though from her calm demeanor, I doubted she was the one who'd made such a fuss in the cellars.

His Highness picked up the cup placed in front of him and sipped it while talking. "I understand that you wish to relinquish this castle and territory and return to the capital, but I'd like a little more detail about your reasons. I've heard some chatter that's struck me as slightly odd. I'm not saying I take it as truth, of course, but it doesn't sound like an especially amusing situation for the residents here."

She only stared back at him, so he went on.

"More specifically...I'm wondering if...you might be concerned about the rumored ghost."

An ugly clatter echoed in my ears. This discourtesy had come from the young maid. The cup she'd been about to place in front of me slammed down instead, spilling tea into the saucer.

"F-Forgive us," her older companion said without a second's delay. "We're terribly sorry." She lifted the cup again as the younger maid hurried to wipe up the tea that had splashed onto the table.

Our attention, which had been distracted by the maids, returned to the duchess. That was when I saw it—her face, which had been pallid to begin with, had drained of color even further. She looked like a ghost herself.

The absent smile that had been affixed to her face visibly stiffened now. She was straining to stay calm, but her slender fingers and her shoulders were clearly trembling.

“Aunt Laetitia?” His Highness asked, concern in his voice.

With a gasp, she looked up at him and hurriedly shook her head. “No, no! I’m not concerned with such...silly gossip. Yes, gossip—that’s all it is. I’m embarrassed that you heard about it. Don’t give it another thought. These rumors are always cropping up. This is just one of many.”

“Aunt Laetitia, that’s not what—”

“There’s no such thing as ghosts. I’ve lived in this castle for twenty years and have never seen one. Not even the young lady who’s supposed to appear in the chapel. If there were such a thing, wouldn’t my dear Lord Stephane’s ghost have appeared when he died?”

The duchess’s sudden volley of rapid explanations made her sound like a different person. Her attitude was, honestly, that of a confession. Discomfiture appeared on all our faces; what could or should we do for her? Even the maids, when I looked at them, had lowered their gazes uneasily.

“Aunt Laetitia, please calm down.”

“I’m perfectly calm, I tell you. I simply—”

“It’s all right. I didn’t come here to complain or make accusations. I promise you, I’ll talk to my father and arrange for your request to be set into motion, so don’t worry.”

As she went quiet, His Highness stood and moved closer to her. Kneeling down, he put his hands on her trembling arm. “I’m only asking because I want to truly understand your concerns. I want to be able to assure you that the arrangements we make don’t misinterpret your needs. So please, tell me... Why do you want to leave so quickly?”

The duchess's breath had become so ragged that she was practically gasping for air. Eventually, she buried her head in her hands. Small sobs emerged from between her fingers. His Highness stood and put a comforting hand on her black-clad back.

"I'm so sorry..." she whimpered. "I thought if I spoke to you about it, you'd never take the castle back..."

"Either way, it belongs to the royal family," said His Highness. "Whatever problems there may be, responsibility for resolving them rests with me and my father. We would never foist them upon you or treat these issues as none of our business."

I wished I could say something to the weeping woman, who had lost all pretense of concealing her anguish. However, speaking now wouldn't be appropriate. To keep from intruding, I stayed silent.

Thanks to His Highness's gentle reassurances, the duchess finally regained her composure. Though she was still in tears, she lowered her hands and began, haltingly, to explain. "You have every right to laugh at me—to call me foolish or delusional—but...this castle *is* haunted. I may not have ever *seen* a ghost, but there is one here, without a shadow of a doubt."

"Wh-What makes you so sure?" His Highness asked. "Has it anything to do with the summoning bell we heard last night?"

This time, *he* was the one turning deathly pale. *Hold it together, Your Highness! Don't lose all presence of mind in front of the duchess.*

"Yes," she replied after a moment's hesitation. "Lord Stephane...my late husband...is the one ringing it."

"But that's impossible."

"I can't find any other explanation! No one ever goes into that room anymore. It's locked, so even a prankster wouldn't be able to get inside, and yet it rings. The same bell, every night, from that room."

His Highness looked at the maids as if seeking assistance. This caused the pair to become shocked and flustered for a different reason. A prince was seeking their input! In the end, they both remained silent and averted their gazes. And,

in turn, this only made His Highness's face grow even tighter.

At this juncture, Lord Simeon cut in, having evidently decided he could sit and watch no longer. "Forgive me for interjecting, but there's something about this bell from last night that I'm struggling to make sense of. It was supposedly rung below our rooms, so we shouldn't have been able to hear it so clearly on the second floor. Is it possible we heard a different bell, not the one in the castle lord's room?"

I'd thought the same thing, actually. Silently, I nodded my agreement.

But the duchess shook her head. "No, it was most definitely the one in his room. By the end, we knew that my husband's condition could take a turn for the worse at a moment's notice, so we stationed additional attendants on the second floor. To ensure that they would be alerted, and that we would hear as well, we set up a system by which the bell would ring in both locations."

"Has anyone actually seen the bell while it was ringing?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and trembled violently. "Yes," she admitted at last. As His Highness continued to soothe her, she turned to the servants and asked, "Would you be able to explain?"

The older of the two looked at her mistress. "What? O-Oh, yes, erm..." Then, hesitantly, due to the nature of the topic, she began to tell the story. "At first, we thought it was someone playing a joke. We were all annoyed that anyone would be thoughtless enough to desecrate the master's memory. In an effort to catch the perpetrator, some of us kept watch in secret, including the butler, Danton. If anyone had approached the lord's bedroom, or the extra attendants' waiting room, we'd have known straightaway. Only...no one came. We watched and watched, but the rooms were absolutely clear. There was definitely no one in there. And yet, the bell continued to ring."

A shiver ran through her, but the maid soldiered on.

"The only possible conclusion was that the bell was ringing from inside that room. And yet, we can state categorically that no one entered—it was wholly deserted."

"After the bell rang, did you check inside the room?" Lord Simeon asked.

The maid gave a resolute nod. “Danton went in with some of the men. I stood watch outside in the meantime. If someone had been present, they wouldn’t have been able to run away, and I’d have seen them if they tried. There really, truly was no one in there.”

His Highness’s face was quivering by now as well. Julianne was watching him with equal parts concern and quiet exasperation. I had no doubt that she wanted to stand up and offer her fiancé some encouragement, but doing so in front of the duchess would have made him lose face. I understood why she’d decided that pretending to ignore it was the kinder option.

Cocking my head, I thought hard. *I can definitely see why the circumstances would give rise to suspicions of supernatural activity. Still...how should I put this? It seems like a rather attention-seeking ghost. It would be one thing just to make an occasional appearance, but ringing a bell every night suggests some clear intention.*

Unable to hold back at this stage, I finally spoke up. “If...those are all the details, how can you be sure that the ghost is the Duke of Embourg?” Lord Simeon’s eyes did dart toward me, but no words of reproach accompanied them. Taking this as permission, I continued. “This castle supposedly has a great number of ghosts. Isn’t there a high chance it’s a different one?”

His Highness’s voice morphed into a high-pitched croak. “A g-great number? I-I-I doubt that!”

Honestly, do you have to be quite so scared?

“Given the castle’s long history, it’s apparently teeming with them.”

“Teeming?!”

“Marielle,” Lord Simeon cautioned in a whisper.

I wasn’t saying it to torment His Highness!

Turning back to the duchess, I said, “It’s surely the work of another ghost, isn’t it?”

“What other ghosts? There are no other ghosts!”

“Be quiet, Your Highness. The Duke of Embourg would never want to torment

his beloved wife, would he? He'd want to watch over you and make sure you're safe. It must be another ghost playing a simple prank. There's no need to be afraid. After all, if there was some sort of fearsome evil spirit around, surely the castle would be cursed, and terrible things would have happened."

Telling the duchess that she was mistaken, that she was imagining it all, would do nothing to calm her nerves. She was firmly convinced that the culprit was indeed a ghost, and that notion had left her fraught. Denying the possibility altogether would only add to her despair because she'd feel as though no one understood her. That was why I'd decided to speak up, to tell her that, even if it *was* true, there was nothing to be afraid of. *Let's entertain the idea that it's a tricky, troublesome ghost that likes making a spectacle of itself. If you look at it that way, the spirit actually sounds rather cute. Maybe the duchess will be able to laugh the whole thing off.*

But both this sentiment and my bright, breezy tone were met with a shake of the head. "There *is* a curse," the duchess stated flatly. "This castle is cursed."

Reflexively, we all looked at each other.

"What are you saying, Aunt Laetitia? I've never heard of any such thing."

"It's true!" the duchess insisted. "For generation after generation, the lord of the castle has always died young. Not a single one has lived to the age of fifty!"

The bloodcurdling look on her face made me flinch. This was no matter to smile about after all. *Is it true? A curse like that, on this castle?*

"When I started living here and heard the castle's history, I learned that the lord always died young. Lord Stephane said it was just a series of coincidences, but he passed away too, just like the rest—he became lord of the castle, then died at a young age. In the unlikely event that Anna becomes the Duchess of Embourg in her own right... No, even if she doesn't, living here is enough to make her the lady of the castle. The curse will fall on her! I couldn't bear it if she died too."

"Please, try to calm down," Lord Simeon said in a levelheaded tone as the duchess rapidly grew more agitated. "You talk about all the lords of this castle dying young, but in the annals of history, there would have been nothing unusual about only living to one's thirties or forties. In centuries prior, the

average life span was shorter.”

Meanwhile, His Highness tried to reassure her too, repeatedly stroking her back and shoulders.

“The rumors of a curse are a modern phenomenon, which tells us that in the past, no one questioned the events as supernatural,” Lord Simeon continued. “They simply accepted death as the natural course of events. His Highness Lord Stephane happened to have a weak constitution and was sadly taken from us at a young age, but I’d suggest those are shaky grounds on which to conclude that there is a long-standing curse.”

My husband’s cogent logic and matter-of-fact tone had such a persuasive effect that I thought this might finally make the duchess reconsider, at least slightly. However, she once again shook her head. “This isn’t merely my own flight of fancy. Yes, it’s true that Lord Stephane was long prone to illness. He said himself that he probably wouldn’t live into old age. I tried so hard to convince myself that it was mere coincidence.” Her face faltered again. “But as soon as he was gone, that bell started ringing.”

Ah, so this is how it all ties together. The mysterious phenomenon occurring every night reinforced her suspicions. What had seemed imaginary before has a basis in fact now.

“That bell is a warning from my husband. Lord Stephane is urging me to get Anna away from here. What else could it be? Just as your wife said, he would never play a trick to torment me. He’s telling me to run away from the danger.” She turned to His Highness now and began to plead with him. “So, please... The quicker the better!”

“All right,” His Highness replied. “Don’t worry.”

The duchess had been previously hiding all of this out of fear that His Highness would never take back the castle if she told the truth. But now, she seemed to have forgotten that she’d been concealing it. Watching her, I felt even more strongly now that the larger concern was not a curse, but her mental condition.

“I understand your feelings, Aunt Laetitia,” said His Highness. “I promise I’ll set the process in motion as speedily as possible. So I’d ask you to please stay

calm if you can. I'm sure the curse isn't going to strike immediately. Even Uncle Stephane lived here for twenty years. There's no need to panic."

She looked at him, gaze full of uncertainty.

"Also, Uncle Stephane's passing was still very recent, and a number of formalities were put off until later. As such, he's still the lord of the castle—not you or Anna. It's all right."

The idea that the curse would take our formal processes into account was somewhat questionable when considered logically, but it did serve its purpose in providing some reassurance to the duchess. Her expression went blank again, and with a jolt, her body began to waver precariously. It was as though a wave of exhaustion from all her furor had hit her at once. His Highness held her steady and leaned her against the back of the chair.

As he did so, he asked the maids to summon the duchess's lady's maid. The latter, a woman in her middle years, came running straightaway; His Highness told her to take the duchess to her room so she could rest. Supported on both sides by her lady's maid and the older of the two housemaids, the duchess took her leave.

The tea, which no one had been drinking, had grown cold by now. The remaining maid, the young woman, took it away, telling us she'd come back with a fresh pot.

Sitting back in his own chair, His Highness said, "Well? Any thoughts?" He directed the question at no one in particular. His face suggested that even he, with his fear of ghosts, found the story difficult to believe.

The first to answer was, of course, Lord Simeon. "I think we should call a doctor."

I glared at him, narrowing my eyes. *Do you have to put it so bluntly?*

Noticing my reaction, Lord Simeon adjusted his glasses and expanded on his point. "Her mental state appears to be unstable, and it's impacting her physical health as well. She probably hasn't been sleeping much, and she barely ate a thing at dinner last night. It's clear at a glance that she's reached a point where she needs medical care. The best medicine would be to fulfill her request as

quickly as possible, but I believe we should arrange treatment for her as well.”

“You could have said that from the start,” I remarked. “I’m entirely in favor of her receiving medical attention, but unless the actual cause is dealt with, the fundamental problem will surely remain. What about asking the priest to do an exorcism? To ward off any demons?”

“Demons?!” After finally regaining his poise, His Highness was once again shrieking in terror.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Lord Simeon. “There’s no such thing as ghosts *or* demons.”

“We can’t say that for certain,” I insisted.

“Not so. You even said it yourself: if they existed, there would be a curse on the castle. But think not only of this castle, but of the country as a whole. Our history has been a succession of wars, not to mention the spread of the Black Death—in Lagrange alone, how many people lost their lives due to that? Beyond those, consider the witch trials, during which high numbers of innocent people were tortured and executed. We are here now, standing atop all that history. It’s as though every corpse is buried in the ground beneath our feet. Blaming any of it on a curse is completely unnecessary.”

His Highness lifted his foot off the ground. “S-Simeon, stop it. You’re making me *more* scared.”

Julianne sighed, but this time, she went over to her betrothed.



“Still,” I protested, “there is an unexplained phenomenon going on at this castle. That much is true—and if that’s what has made the duchess so unstable, we need to do something about it.”

“What would you suggest?” my husband asked.

“Step one would be examining the scene. We need to investigate the late duke’s room.”

Lord Simeon agreed with my assertion, though he looked ready to roll his eyes. We both turned to His Highness, who had taken Julianne by the hand and was making puppy dog eyes at her amid all his frantic restlessness.

He quickly straightened his face. “Oh, well, yes, I suppose that would be best.”

Not wanting to be outdone, I offered my hand to my husband. “Lord Simeon, why don’t you take my hand too?”

Alas, I was rebuffed. “We don’t need to copy what they’re doing.”

How disappointing!

Julianne brushed off His Highness’s grasp as well and returned to her seat. Just as the prince and I were sulking, the maid returned.

“You wish to go into the lord’s room?” she replied to Lord Simeon’s question, startled. “Well, it’s locked at the moment. Danton is in charge of the key.”

That name had come up earlier as well. I recalled seeing a steadfast-looking butler nearing old age the day before. When we asked the maid to fetch him, he came straightaway.

His Highness explained the situation. “Sorry for the bother, but we’d like to inspect the lord’s room. Would you be able to open it for us?”

To avoid any risk of further upsetting the duchess, seeking the butler’s permission instead of hers seemed prudent. Being well aware of the circumstances, Danton readily agreed. “Certainly, Your Highness. Would you like to go there right now?”

“Please.”

As such, we made our way back to the south wing, and we soon found

ourselves standing outside the room in question. It did seem a little odd that the lord's room was at the end of the corridor like this, but it was also right next to the chapel. Most likely, that indicated that this room was a place of honor.

The butler produced the key and opened the door. Lord Simeon entered first, then the rest of us followed.

As expected, it was another compact room, though I had a vague sense that it might have been slightly larger than the others. A rug was spread out across the mosaic floor. As we stepped across the threshold, two windows greeted us on the opposite wall. The left wall separated this room from the neighboring one, while the right wall was adjacent to the chapel. The canopied bed was situated in front of a window, the headboard touching the left wall.

Perhaps owing to the lack of space, there was no writing desk to be seen. Only shelves lined the walls, bearing books and display items. The chapel side had a fireplace, with a comfortable chair placed in front of it. While he was alive, the Duke of Embourg had no doubt sat there and relaxed by the fire.

No chandelier hung from the ceiling. The only light fixtures were a number of candelabras on the walls and a table lamp. *It's probably quite dark at night. Maybe that's unavoidable for such an old castle, but the gloom must be awkward sometimes.* I paused to consider this a moment. *He probably went to bed early for the sake of his health, I suppose.*

When the butler went over to the windows and opened the curtains, the dark room suddenly grew brighter.

Both windows were taller than they were wide, and ultimately rather narrow. They were also embedded in the stone wall, making it somewhat difficult for light to enter. Was this another precaution against enemy attacks? *Well, the current castle is a reconstruction, so it must have been part of an effort to restore it to the original fortresslike state. These defenses won't have actually been used.*

However, thanks to the windows' south-facing position, plenty of sun reached them. Walking over to the glass, I was afforded a clear view of Embourg town and the River Etre. I could picture generations of castle lords looking out over their territory from these very windows. There was no balcony outside, and this

side of the castle stood above a steep slope, so looking down was a little scary.

The daylight made this room seem all the more cozy and comfortable. It was hard to see any connection to ghosts or curses, and even His Highness quickly let the tension he'd entered with drain from his face.

I stood in the middle and looked in all directions. "At first glance, nothing stands out as odd."

His Highness and Julianne came and joined me. Pointing at a string hanging not far from the pillows on the bed, Julianne asked, "Is that the cord for the summoning bell?" Even for someone confined to bed by illness, it would be convenient and easy to reach. "If so," she continued, "then is the ghost pulling on it?"

"It looks that way," I replied. "Quite an adorable image, really!"

His Highness scoffed. "There is nothing 'adorable' about it."

I went over to the bed and took a closer look at this cord. Nothing stood out in particular; its form and function looked entirely normal. Directly behind it, a lever was affixed to the wall. Inside the walls, wires and pulleys would connect from here to the servants' quarters. The lever itself had a bell attached as well, though this was visibly a more recent addition, just as the duchess had mentioned.

"They'd have to either be pulling this, or ringing the bell in the attendants' waiting room," I murmured to myself. "I doubt someone could have gotten inside the walls or ceilings."

"That would be impossible under most circumstances," the butler said. "When repairs and renovations are needed, they're handled by professional craftsmen. No amateurs would be able to interfere."

"That makes sense. So it must have been rung from inside this room after all."

"But they confirmed there was no one in here, didn't they?" Julianne pointed out. "So perhaps it really is a ghost."

"It's too early to assume that," His Highness interjected. "I reckon there are other possibilities."

Both Julianne and I turned to look at him. “Such as?” I asked.

He flinched. “Well, I don’t know. That’s to puzzle out when we start investigating. Don’t you agree, Sime—” Seeking assistance, he turned to his trusted friend. However, he found him not nearby but standing in front of the display shelves. “Simeon? What are you doing?”

“Just having a look.”

The shelves were home to a number of small figurines. He appeared to be gazing at these. *Honestly, he could at least pretend to be interested in the task at hand. He didn’t seem eager to investigate earlier either.*

I went over and joined him. The figurines were small birds carved out of wood. A glossy, amber-colored owl stood alongside a dainty canary and robin. *Was the duke a fan of birds?*

Both the figurines and the shelves were covered in a thin layer of dust—a sad sign that the room’s inhabitant was now gone. That they hadn’t been cleaned yet was probably due to a desire to leave the room just as it had been. Careful not to disturb anything more than I had to, I examined all the furnishings and decorations.

I briefly wondered if Lord Simeon’s choice to only look and not touch was born out of the same consideration. However, wherever he looked in the room, the time he spent was so brief that it couldn’t be described as “examining” at all.

His attitude was so indifferent that it sapped a great deal of my enthusiasm as well. I felt somewhat disenchanted. “It doesn’t feel like a ghost is going to jump out,” I remarked.

“A person is the better alternative, isn’t it?” said Julianne. “If the culprit is a living human being, we can arrest them and be done with it.”

“True. If it’s a ghost, even catching sight of it won’t help.”

The atmosphere was so far from spooky that Julianne and I were now chatting about it in an entirely listless and nonchalant manner. As we did so, I casually cast my eyes around the room—only to notice that something was odd about the butler’s expression. The man, of an age somewhere between those of

my father and grandfather, had worry etched into his genteel face.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

He looked up in surprise. “Nothing at all. My apologies.”

“If you’re concerned about something, would you mind telling us? Is it related to your mistress’s troubles?”

“Well, no, I... I wouldn’t exactly...”

Under the gazes of His Highness and now Julianne as well, the butler faltered, clearly unsure as to how forthright he could be with outsiders, even if they were related to his employers’ family.

In the end, however, he opened up to us. The castle’s servants had been unable to solve the problem—they’d been merely trembling in fear—so he no doubt wanted to try consulting someone new. “I’m not the type to believe in ghost stories either. Only, however I look at it, the circumstances make it impossible for a living person to be doing it.”

So, we were back on the subject of ghosts again. His Highness winced, while I retrieved my notebook and pen from my pocket.

“You were involved in keeping a lookout on the room, weren’t you?” I asked. “Can you tell us about that in more detail?”

“Certainly.” He spent a moment considering where to begin. “First of all,” he said, “the bell rings in two places: this room and the attendants’ waiting area. The latter is a small room beside the staircase at the end of the corridor. It’s right next to the tower being used by His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“O-Oh...” That very crown prince twisted his face into a grimace.

“We confirmed that both rooms were empty, then locked them and had people keep watch outside. As you already know, both bells rang regardless. Since none of us had been waiting inside the room at the time, our next effort was to do just that. The servants were too scared, however, so I asked the guardsmen for help and left them to keep vigil inside this room.”

“What about the waiting room?”

“I went inside there while others kept watch outside.”

“And it rang anyway?”

The butler nodded. “The time it rings is always about the same. Just as I was thinking the time was nigh, sure enough, it rang.”

“Was anything unusual happening in the room at the time?”

“Not at all. I came running here to look straightaway, but nothing stood out as worthy of note. The guards here were just as surprised; they hadn’t rung the bell themselves.”

“So it moved without anyone touching it?”

“Yes,” the butler said at last. “That’s what happened.”

Each of us took on a contemplative look. *I can see why a ghost story emerged from these events. But if some sort of trickery was involved...how might it have worked?*

As I gave voice to that thought, I took a look at Lord Simeon. This time, his gaze was directed at a candelabra next to the fireplace. I couldn’t tell if he was listening or not.

“The windows. Could they have come in through... No, that’s clearly impossible.”

I’d ruled out this idea before I could finish saying it. There was no need to even check—we were on the second floor, and there was no balcony. Sneaking in through a window was inconceivable. Not to mention that the room was locked from the inside and had guards stationed in it. They’d have noticed straightaway if a window was opened.

“Oh! Of course!” said His Highness suddenly, pointing at the spotlessly clean fireplace. “The chimney! They must have climbed down the chimney, surely!”

I stuck my head into the fireplace for a moment and looked upward. “I don’t think it’s wide enough for a person to fit.”

“W-Well, some people are much thinner than others... Maybe a child? Wait, I know! They taught a monkey to do it!”

“What an amusing idea,” I said. “I’ll borrow it for my writing, if you don’t mind.”

“I wasn’t trying to suggest a plot point...”

Ignoring his assertion, Julianne suggested something else. “There’s another possibility. The people keeping watch... Could one or more of them be the real culprits?”

That certainly was a more realistic explanation. A hardworking monkey was an intriguing image, but it would have been a bit too convenient.

The butler considered it a moment, then nodded. “Yes. They all denied it, but it’s entirely plausible. That was why I made sure the room was empty and locked it again.”

“But it still kept ringing?”

He sighed. “It did indeed.”

Whether there were people in the room or not, the bell rang. Even if it was locked up tight. *It does seem impossible for the perpetrator to be a flesh and blood human being.*

No further theories were offered. Nor did looking around the room for a while longer turn up any more clues. We were at a loss.

And yet, there was something thoroughly odious about the cool, detached manner in which Lord Simeon looked at us all.

Chapter Six

Leaving the lord's room with nothing to show for it, we temporarily split into separate parties, with noon fast approaching. I watched His Highness return to his room, then joined Julianne in hers. We asked Joanna and Caron to join in on the discussion, thus assembling a girls-only meeting.

"What kind of trick would allow someone to ring a bell inside a locked room?" I wondered aloud, resting my elbow on my knee and my chin in my hand.

"Could the servants all be conspiring together?" Julianne replied. "I'm sure I've seen that in a mystery novel. What if the butler and the housemaids are all accomplices and only pretending to be so shaken?"

I responded with a drawn-out hum. *If they'd all arranged it beforehand, there would be no need for such an elaborate show. In fact, there would be no locked room in the first place. That would explain the entire puzzle, but I have a feeling it can't be that simple.*

As I mused over this, Joanna interjected, "If you don't mind me saying so, while there is some sense to Lady Julianne's suggestion, it is hard to believe that *all* of them are behind it."

We looked at her. Because we'd wanted everyone to be able to sit, including our lady's maids, Julianne and I had set ourselves down on the bed and granted the chairs to Joanna and Caron. Unlike Joanna, who was sitting upright with her back straight, Caron was clutching a cushion and had curled around it. She'd been trembling with fear ever since the ghost story had come to light.

"Please," she mewled, "enough is enough. Can't we just say they all did it together and draw a line under it? Either way, the culprit is human. It has to be!"

"I don't deny that *someone* must be behind it," Joanna replied sensibly, "but I don't believe it is a grand conspiracy. You've seen the servants, just as I have. Do they strike you as capable of crafting an elaborate fiction and keeping it

straight among all of them?”

This left Caron silent for a moment. “Joanna,” I interrupted, “could I ask you for more details about that?”

Joanna turned to look at me again. “As I mentioned this morning, there was an awful fuss going on when I went down to fetch your breakfast. That one maid in particular certainly did not look like she was acting. Even if we assume she’s simply very skilled at putting on a realistic performance, the others’ reactions still felt out of place.”

Joanna explained that she hadn’t entered right away, instead peering in from outside to keep from inserting herself in the middle of the commotion. At the time, no one had been present other than servants, and they had been gathered in various spots, whispering among themselves. Joanna’s arrival had made them immediately cease their furtive conversations and get back to work. It was hard to imagine they’d intentionally staged all that so others would see.

“It’s tough to put into words,” she added, “but that just wasn’t the impression I got.”

“Hmm...”

Joanna was not only an excellent lady’s maid, but also an exceedingly keen observer. If she said it hadn’t come across that way, I could be fairly certain she was right.

“In the end, it’s actually quite tough for a large number of people to conspire together,” I said. “The more people involved, the harder it is to spread the information to everyone and unify their actions.”

Having said that, I was curious to know exactly how the servants felt about this matter. *Maybe that should be my next port of call while investigating. Private conversations among the servants might hold useful information.* My usual method of infiltration came to mind, and after eating lunch with Julianne, I went to ask Lord Simeon’s permission; it was all but certain that he’d lecture me if I acted without notifying him.

Assuming he’d likely be with His Highness, I made my way to the same tower room I’d visited that morning. However, when I asked one of the knights

standing guard outside to summon Lord Simeon, I received an apologetic refusal. “The Vice Captain is inside, but he’s involved in a bit of a thorny discussion at the moment.”

“Is it about all this ghostly business?”

“No. Well, sort of...”

Apparently, they had been ordered to turn away any visitors. *If even I’m not allowed to enter, I wonder what it could be about. Something to do with the duchess’s request, perhaps?*

Left with little recourse, I had just decided to leave a message and be on my way when the door opened and Lord Simeon’s face appeared. “What is it?”

Eek. His hearing really is sharp.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you while you’re busy. I only wanted to have a quick word.”

Reluctant to speak too loudly about this particular topic, I gestured for Lord Simeon to lean closer. My husband complied and brought his ear toward me. The moment he did so, I happened to glance beyond his broad shoulders and catch a glimpse of the inside of the room.

Someone else was there in addition to His Highness. Unable to see more than half their body, the most I could ascertain was that it was a man. His clothes weren’t that of the royal guard. Nor was it Danton, the butler. *Who could it be?*

While whispering into Lord Simeon’s ear, I surreptitiously tried to catch a closer look. But the mystery man soon moved to an obscured position that put him in a blind spot.

“You still want to keep investigating? I told you, there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“No, there’s a ghost all right. The bell really did ring, after all. And I want to gather intelligence so we can pin down who became a ghost and for what purpose.”

“Why go to those lengths? All we need to do is secure the culprit and question them. Then it’ll be over.”

“Do you have any idea who it is?”

He paused. “No, not yet.”

“Well, in that case,” I said obstinately, shifting my gaze back to him, “what’s wrong with collecting some information? I might even find a clue that helps solve the case. I doubt it will cause any hindrance.”

Reluctant though he looked, this was enough for Lord Simeon to give his consent. “But don’t forget that you’re visiting another household. Exercise the requisite amount of respect and caution.”

“Of course. I won’t do anything inappropriate.”

“Stay away from anywhere too deserted, and don’t put yourself in danger. If you see anyone suspicious, don’t approach them or follow them. You *must* inform me rather than trying to take care of it on your own.”

“Yes, all right.” I was getting slightly fed up with his tedious lecturing. *He gives me the same warnings every single day. Well...I suppose it’s because I give him the same worries every day. I suppose maybe it’s my fault after all? I swear, I don’t seek out these situations... Most of them find me!*

Sulking, I returned to my room and changed into the clothes I’d brought along for this purpose—an unadorned black dress with an apron over the top. I tied up my hair and covered it in a kerchief, and now my preparations were complete. Anyone who saw me would think I was a typical maid and nothing more.

When Joanna realized I’d secretly brought these additional items, she asked, with a hint of exasperation, “When did you pack those?”

“I’ve learned from experience. Whenever I’m going anywhere, I make sure I’ll have access to practical clothes that I can put on by myself.”

“Well, I could see the argument if you were talking about the dress alone,” she replied, lifting up the garment I’d brought. Not only was it easy to put on and move around in, but it was also made of sturdy wool that I could soil without a second thought. “However, the apron and kerchief make it pretty clear that you were planning to dress up as a maid all along.”

“Sometimes necessity compels it. Like now, for instance.”

“What is the young mistress of the esteemed House Flaubert doing dressing up in disguises at all?”

Here came another telling-off. If I stayed to listen, she might never stop talking, so I fled into the corridor with great haste.

First, I want to listen in on the servants' conversations. And the cellars are the most likely place to find them in large numbers.

The kitchens were underneath the north wing. After briefly considering my options—to head straight to the north wing and descend the large staircase, or else use the one neighboring the tower—I quickly opted for the closer of the two and turned to walk south. Once more, I passed by His Highness's room, this time giving a curtsy to the men standing guard. They gave no reaction. In fact, they didn't even appear to notice me; they just kept staring straight ahead.

Are they just being polite? I wondered. Or do they not realize it's me, even though we only just spoke to one another? Is changing my outfit and slightly suppressing my presence really enough to make me unrecognizable? For a civilian not to notice would be one thing, but for a royal guard, that's not ideal.

No, they must be purposely pretending they don't know. That's surely it.

Diminishing my presence even further, I opened the door to the stairwell and quietly slipped through it. As soon as I did, I heard footsteps from below. Someone had apparently entered the stairwell before I had. Wondering if it was Lord Simeon, I scurried down.

When I exited through the first-floor doorway, I could hear the footsteps going left, in the direction of the hallway with windows on both sides. This straight path gave an uninterrupted view of two people walking side by side away from me. One wore the white uniform of a royal guard, while the other wore ordinary civilian clothing.

The knight wasn't Lord Simeon, but one of his subordinates, and the man accompanying him was likely the one I'd just seen in His Highness's room. The color of his jacket was the same, which practically confirmed it. *But who is it? He doesn't look like a castle servant. A visitor, perhaps? Maybe the royal guard*

is showing him out now that his business is finished.

They entered the west wing, disappearing from view. Despite feeling somewhat intrigued, I shook off the thought, telling myself this wasn't what I needed to be investigating right now. I turned on my heel.

Then, I halted with a fright. Close by, at the entrance to the east wing, stood two women in dresses. It was Lady Anna and someone of about her age.

Oh, that startled me. I had no idea they were there. I suppose I was too distracted by the two men and their footsteps.

The women hadn't noticed me; their gazes remained fixed on the east wing. Lady Anna's companion wasn't dressed in a maid's uniform, but she was most likely her lady's maid. The pair of them were simply standing together and looking in the direction of the east wing, not saying a word.

I was less than twenty paces from them, so at this distance, I'd be immediately recognized if they caught a glimpse of my face. Intent on escaping before that happened, I started to move—but then stopped in my tracks upon noticing Lady Anna's exceptionally severe expression. With eyes so fierce they were close to a glower, she was staring in a direction that I knew held a dining hall and a parlor. From where we were standing, the parlor would be closer, with the dining hall farther away.

Pricking up my ears, I could hear a faint voice. A man's. *Who could it be? His Highness is upstairs, so not him. Now that I recall, the duchess did say she was expecting company this afternoon. Perhaps this is one of her visitors. If so, she must be in the parlor with him.*

We were here visiting as well. Could it be that Lady Anna wasn't very happy about her mother's divided attention?

Whatever the reason, the atmosphere was somehow uneasy, and I couldn't help being intrigued.

Still, it would be no good if I lingered and got caught. I took a furtive glance at my surroundings. There were two doors nearby: one that opened to the courtyard and one leading out of the castle on the opposite side. If I crossed the corridor to reach the courtyard door, the pair of ladies would likely notice me.

And so, making myself as inconspicuous as possible, I proceeded to the opposite door.

The grounds beyond the door were not what I'd describe as a garden. Just ten paces away from the building's walls, the ground fell away in a steep slope. *Ah, now I remember—this is the lay of the land on the castle's southern side.* It was a little scary, a sudden drop with not so much as a fence. I definitely had no desire to approach the edge.

Does this count as a dangerous place? Maybe I've broken my promise to Lord Simeon already. But if I stay by the wall, maybe it's all right.

Figuring that there might be another way into the castle if I went to the opposite end, I started walking west, toward the corner containing the chapel tower. Unfortunately, I found no door there, but a thought suddenly occurred to me, and I looked up at the second floor. Right now, I was directly below the late duke's bedroom windows. So, while I was outside, it seemed prudent to try and confirm some details.

Here, the attic room windows protruded from the deep blue roof, just as they did elsewhere. They were lined up with those on the second floor. It didn't look impossible to hang a rope from above and use it to descend. However, it would be exceptionally dangerous; only a trained individual could do so. *Is there really anyone at the castle with such soldierlike skills? Someone who could ring the bell, then vanish without a trace in the minuscule amount of time before anyone came to look?*

The wall had nothing in the way of footholds or helpful ornamentation, so climbing up from below would be impossible without a ladder. However, reliance on a ladder would make the escape rather challenging.

As suspected, the windows were starting to feel like a dead end. If nothing else, how could they lock them again after escaping? They were definitely locked—that had been established. However I looked at it, this route just wasn't practical.

Surveying the surrounding walls also turned up nothing unusual. No clues to speak of. *Although...actually, something does feel off.* Unable to put my finger on it, I took another look at the wall and roof. *What is it that's rubbing me the*

wrong way? I still don't see anything out of place. Hmm, maybe I'm imagining it.

However hard I stared, I still saw nothing, so I gave up and turned back in the direction I'd come from. The tower at the other end similarly offered no way inside, and if I walked past there, I'd only encounter the moat. There was nothing for it but to go back into the hallway I'd left.

Keeping my footsteps as silent as possible, I opened the door just a crack and peered inside, looking for signs of life. Lady Anna and the woman who'd been with her were no longer there. They must have gone somewhere else. Relieved, I opened the door wider and stepped back inside the building.

I could still hear voices from the salon. As a servant, I couldn't go through there, so this time I opted for the courtyard. Since any effort to look stealthy would only draw *more* attention, I strode nonchalantly, like a perfectly ordinary maid sent on an errand.

As I did so, I took the opportunity to peek in through the parlor windows. As predicted, the duchess was inside. She looked calmer now; she was sitting up straight and even had a smile on her face. In fact, she looked healthier than when we'd sat with her this morning. Her guest was facing away from the window, so all I could see was their dark blond hair.



A friend of hers, perhaps? In any case, if she's feeling better, that's welcome news indeed. I'm more concerned about Lady Anna and the face she was pulling. She's such a charming young lady, always boasting a spirited smile, but as she glared toward the parlor, she looked like a different person altogether. What could be the reason for such a grim visage? Is this an uninvited guest? Based on the duchess's demeanor, it doesn't appear so. Maybe I'll have a chance to ask Lady Anna about it later.

Since I couldn't exactly keep my face glued to the window, I kept walking. The net result was that I'd taken quite a long way around, but I did finally reach the north wing and went down into the cellars.

I already knew the route to follow thanks to Lady Anna's guided tour the previous day. I proceeded confidently, sneaking into not only the kitchens, but also the storehouses, wine cellar, and more—wherever there were servants on whom I could eavesdrop. Of course, a change of clothes alone wasn't enough to keep from being recognized as an outsider if they caught a clear glimpse of my face. The number of maids here was rather low, so it was difficult to covertly blend in with the daily hustle and bustle. Making myself as unassuming as possible, I moved about with the conscious sense of one only passing through.

Along the way, I kept my ears peeled for whatever the servants might be discussing. However, I heard only idle chatter and discussions of work. Despite all the commotion this morning, they were apparently no longer very concerned with it. Either that, or the butler had warned them to hold their tongues. After all, they didn't really want us, the castle's guests, hearing about this internal affair. It was plausible that they'd been given strict instructions to make sure no more word of it reached our ears.

Since I couldn't stay in any one place for too long, I didn't hear a single scrap of information that sounded promising. I knew that loitering with no clear purpose would make me look suspicious, so in the end, I was forced to go back upstairs.

When I exited the small room in front of the stairwell, I saw figures in the entrance hall. It was the duchess and her lady's maid, the butler, and another fellow who didn't look to be a servant. The guest was leaving now, it seemed.

By the look of things, the man was refusing some kind of offer. Peering outside, I wondered if it might be the offer of a carriage; there wasn't one in the courtyard.

They exchanged goodbyes and the man went outside, where he walked on foot, taking a route that brought him closer to where I stood. No doubt he was heading for the gate in the northwestern corner, and from there, he planned to walk home.

When he walked past the window near me, I finally got a clear glimpse of his face. The man was around the same age as the duchess. He was attractive and neatly dressed, but his clothes weren't especially fine. Considering he'd walked here rather than bringing a carriage, it was virtually certain that he was a commoner.

One of the townspeople, perhaps? It seems unlikely that a man of his station would be the duchess's personal friend. Maybe she has some business dealing with him—he could be a lawyer, for example, since there are some formalities to handle regarding the inheritance. Only, wouldn't she have the castle staff manage all that? Maybe he is just a friend after all.

"Has the scholar finally left?"

The voice close behind me shook me out of my thoughts, and I barely kept myself from jumping in fright. A housemaid had emerged from downstairs. I briefly feared she was talking to me, but such was not the case. Her attention was directed outside through the window, and another maid appeared behind her. Neither was especially young; I'd have put them past forty.

After confirming that the duchess and those accompanying her had left the entrance hall and gone back toward the east wing, the two maids began talking, disapproval evident in their voices.

"Such brazenness to show his face here in broad daylight. The master only just passed away!"

"It's especially bold-faced while His Highness the Crown Prince and his friend are here. I can't imagine what the mistress is thinking. Has she given no consideration to what she'll do if they're caught?"

“She’ll have some excuse at the ready. Claiming she’s helping with his research into the castle’s history or some such.”

This was disquieting talk indeed. I couldn’t brush it off as merely idle chatter.

“That’s her story for us as well, but what could he possibly be researching? At first, he used to go looking all around the castle, but now he only spends time with the mistress.”

“It smelled fishy to me from the start. My late grandpa always said never to trust anyone who calls himself a scholar—it’s an old trick pulled by people trying to look respectable when they don’t have a real job. After all, anyone can *claim* to be a scholar. Then you can just laze around at home and call it ‘research.’ Apologies to any *real* academics, but it’s definitely nothing like normal work, is it?”

Oh my. This could be rather key information. Internally, I clutched my hand into a fist of victory. At last, I’d overheard a potential clue! At the same time, I did all I could to suppress my presence and draw none of the pair’s attention. If they realized I wasn’t supposed to be here, it would all be over for me. *Now’s the time to unleash my full potential! To blend into the background as only I can!*

At the same time, this had gone in a rather different direction than I’d expected. Their gossiping suggested that the duchess might be having an affair—specifically, with the man I’d just seen. Had he really come across as that sort of person, though? I wasn’t sure it aligned with the atmosphere I’d observed between them.

“How cruel of the mistress, though, letting him waltz in and out of the castle even while the master was still alive. Her own husband was in his sickbed, and there she was, carrying on with another man under the same roof. They could at least have gone somewhere else. Absolutely shameless, if you ask me.”

Although I was technically visible to them by now, they took me as no more than a housemaid like them, and continued their increasingly indiscreet chatter. *In other words, the other maids know about this too.*

Hold on a moment. Does Lady Anna also think he’s the duchess’s lover?

“She must have decided that she wouldn’t get caught since the master couldn’t leave his bed. And that if he did find out, it didn’t exactly matter, since he wasn’t long for this world anyway.”

“Imagine... Playing the perfect wife while in his eyeline, then doing *that* behind his back. It’s far from unheard of, I know, but it still makes me feel awfully sorry for the poor master. And for Lady Anna, of course.”

“You know, a thought’s been playing on my mind for ages now. When the master died...could those two have—”

“Shh!” The hushed voice was immediately silenced. I realized they were both looking in my direction.

Even without hearing the rest, I knew what she had been getting at. Evidently, despite their general impropriety, this theory was a little too excessive to speak aloud.

As much as I longed to put on a nonchalant face and join in their conversation, they would surely clock me as an outsider. Instead, I walked past them, pretending not to have heard a thing, and opened the door leading back to the stairs. I descended, intentionally making sure my footsteps were loud enough to be audible.

Then, once I thought they were suitably convinced of my departure, I secretly came back up and put my ear against the door. Believing me now gone, they resumed their rumormongering.

“After the summoning bell started ringing, the mistress has looked more and more haggard—but I bet the reason she’s scared is that she knows it’s not a curse, but a grudge against her specifically.”

“Exactly. This castle has all kinds of ghost stories, but I’ve never heard of any curse.”

“Plenty of tales of dead prisoners whose malice still lingers, even today... That sort of thing. If there really was a curse, *far* more people would have died, yes? Right now, no one in this castle has earned such a grudge except the mistress.”

“It’s why she wants to run away, I bet. Because she knows that full well.”

Their footsteps and voices grew more distant and harder to make out. They were evidently on the move. Once I was certain they were gone altogether, I emerged again.

So...the duchess and an illicit lover. I hadn't expected to hear anything remotely along those lines. *Is that truly the type of relationship this man has with the duchess?*

I'd only glimpsed them together briefly in passing, so I couldn't tell. However, they had been sitting facing one another, separated by a sensible distance. It had come across as a normal interaction with a visitor, with no hint that they might have been romantically entangled. Not to mention that if a specific man had become a frequent visitor and was friendly with the duchess, such rumors were inevitable.

Frankly, everyone is always gossiping about other people's love lives. I definitely had no intention of taking what I'd heard at face value. Rather, it was just one small piece to consider as part of the bigger picture. On a personal level, I found the "lovers" theory questionable—but it was *very* plausible that this was why Lady Anna had been glaring toward the parlor with such anger in her eyes.

And...is this actually connected to the ghostly mystery? The summoning bell had started to ring after the Duke of Embourg's passing. Based on the maids' conversation, that man had started coming to the castle before that.

I folded my arms. "Hmm..." *I need to go somewhere quiet and organize my thoughts...and I'd rather go for a walk and think than return to my room.* Figuring that the northern gardens would be suitably free of people, I went outside.

Directly beside the gate, which was carved into a portion of the building, stood a guardhouse. Similar to the royal palace, those stationed here kept watch of everyone who entered or left. When I passed through, however, no one said a word. Unchallenged, I crossed the drawbridge and made my way to the gardens.

These were nothing like typical Lagrangian gardens. They were more in the Easdalian style, with wide open lawns that contained trees and shrubbery. They

covered an area that spread far beyond the castle itself, with forestlike sections that looked easy to get lost in if you went too deep inside. There were no neatly arranged flower beds; rather, perennial plants were being grown in a more natural manner. Once the weather got warmer, the garden would likely be lush with flowers blooming in abundance. Now, with the leaves having only recently returned, it looked a touch desolate.

As I walked slowly and mulled over all that I'd seen and heard, I formed a tentative theory and tried to consider whether the evidence supported it. I delved into my memories, recalling not only the day's investigations but everything that had happened since my arrival.

After walking for a while, I stopped and turned back toward the castle. What had started life many centuries ago as a fortress had been reborn as a beautiful residence. It was as lovely as any you'd see in a storybook illustration. The white walls contrasted so strikingly with the blue of the—

Oh, how interesting. There are no attic windows set into the roof on this side.

I hadn't noticed it before. From here, I could see the western and northern wings, which had windows only on the first and second floors. Was this the source of my gnawing feeling when I'd looked up at the south wing? *Now that I think back, the roof windows I looked up and saw when I first got to the castle were on the inside—I was looking up from the courtyard. It must mean there's a corridor on the outside, with rooms on the inside, looking down on the courtyard. Given the castle's origins as a site of battle, the corridor must be meant as a route for guards to patrol.* As evidence of this, there were small, entirely unassuming windows *below* the roof.

Only the south wing had been built in the opposite fashion. Perhaps because that side faced the cliff, the architects had decided there was no need for guards to patrol there. *Though I must remember that it's no longer a real fortress, and it was only rebuilt to echo those sorts of design choices. There's no actual need to stay vigilant of enemy attacks.*

The relevant rooms were directly above the lord's room, so there would likely be no servants sleeping there. At most, they would be used for storage, in which case aligning the corridor with the one on the second floor might have

proven more convenient.

I paused to consider this further. There was nothing especially odd about this arrangement. The entire castle didn't have to be constructed in exactly the same way. Indeed, it was quite normal for there to be variation between the different parts.

Still, something about it didn't feel quite right. Could it be the key to solving the mystery of the summoning bell?

I tried combining it with the theory I'd been considering moments ago. In doing so, a possibility occurred to me.

Aha. That could be why Lord Simeon hasn't made any effort to investigate. He did say that when the culprit is caught, that would be the end of it. Putting the specifics aside, he likely saw the nature of the trick from the beginning.

Well, he is the sort of person to figure it out straightaway. Only, I wish he'd told me! I bet I know why he didn't, though. He'll say it's because he didn't have any solid proof yet!

I had half a mind to march straight back to him and point an accusatory finger, but I thought better of it. If I went charging in, I'd only get his back up. *Knowing Lord Simeon, he has no intention of leaving this matter unresolved. I can guarantee he's laying plans to catch the criminal.*

I could happily leave that aspect to him. What concerned me most were the circumstances surrounding it. *I wonder if I can uncover a little more information.*

At that, I set off walking again, wondering if I might find anyone in the stables. They were in a large, impressive building beyond a thicket-like cluster of trees. However, the structure had a different quality to it than the rest of the castle, having likely been built long afterward. The red brick walls were topped by a charcoal gray roof.

Not only the horses but also the carriages were kept here, so the entrance was immense. I peered in through the open doorway. The interior was just as splendid—horses were lined up in fancy-looking stalls, while all manner of horse tack was hung on the walls. A large open space housed the carriage we'd arrived in, along with an uncovered two-seater and a small carriage likely

designed for women.

At first it seemed quiet, with no stable boys in sight. However, I then heard a faint murmuring of voices from the far end. Clearly, someone *was* there.

I furtively entered and took a look, only to spy a well-dressed woman who looked entirely out of place in a stable. It was Lady Anna's lady's maid—I couldn't forget someone I'd seen so recently. Talking to her was not a stable boy, but a uniformed young man. *Judging from his attire, he must be one of the castle guards. I'd expect to find him in the stables more so than a lady's maid...but this can't be part of his work duties. Not if my romance novelist's instincts have anything to say about it. Two people, meeting in secret, intentionally avoiding prying eyes... They must be secret lovers! What else could it be?*

To be fair, I was really only recalling the story Joanna had told me. She had said she'd spotted a guard and a woman who looked like a lady's maid meeting for a secret rendezvous. It seemed I was now witnessing exactly the same sight.

Just as Joanna had suggested, the mood between them seemed rather serious. *Perhaps they're discussing Lady Anna. When I saw this lady's maid earlier, she was watching Lady Anna with quite a bit of concern on her face.*

Keeping myself hidden, I tried to move close enough to make out their words. *If anyone sees this from the outside, I'll look incredibly suspicious. I had better make sure there's no one else here, just in case.*

The pair at the far end hadn't seen me. However, the horses did start to notice my presence. Friendly ones stuck their heads out, angling for attention; others grew restless. Perhaps it was almost snack time, and they were hoping I'd feed them. One way or another, they looked expectant. *I'm sorry, but I don't have anything!*

It was no use. The horses were making too much noise. If I stayed there, the murmuring duo were sure to notice me. Before that happened, I made myself scarce.

Ugh, what a shame. But...could I listen to them from the outside? Alas, the sturdy brick wall soon put paid to that idea.

If anyone saw me loitering and questioned it, I'd be in trouble. So, I let go of my lingering attachment and went back to the castle.

I must say, that might just be a clue as well. Equally, it could be an unrelated lovers' rendezvous...but if we assume it isn't, it could be one more detail to bolster my theory.

I decided I should return to the second floor for now and report my findings to His Highness and Lord Simeon. At the very least, they needed to hear that a rumor of the duchess having an affair was rife.

Proceeding straight up to the second floor, I headed south from the north wing, passing through the west wing. There was no sign of any servants; it apparently wasn't cleaning time. Going via the chapel's second-floor gallery, I entered the south wing.

As soon as I emerged into the corridor, I saw Lord Simeon standing nearby. "Oh!"

He turned to look at me with his light blue eyes.

"What are you up to?" I asked him.

"I should ask you the same question. Your investigations don't justify prowling about anywhere you please. Remember that you're visiting another household."

This light caution was no doubt because I'd come from the direction of the parlors and drawing rooms. Instead of responding to it, I simply closed the door. Then, feeling slightly self-conscious, I walked over to Lord Simeon, who was near the entrance to the late duke's bedroom.

"I came back here to report my findings. Would I be able to see His Highness?"

Though he subtly raised his eyebrows, he agreed, and we walked along the corridor side by side. "Did you find information worth reporting?"

"Yes. I'm also wondering if you'd mind sharing your thoughts with me at this stage, Lord Simeon."

"About what?"

I glared at him. “Don’t feign ignorance. You’ve worked everything out already, haven’t you?”

With a composed expression and not a moment’s hesitation, my husband replied, “I’m only at the stage of conjecture. I don’t yet have enough proof to share my theory.”

I knew it! I swear, why must this man be so difficult?

Pouting, I looked away from him. Though, in a way, it actually made me happy that my supposition had been so correct.

The knights standing guard seemed puzzled for a moment when they saw me standing next to Lord Simeon. Then, with a sudden look of realization, they hurriedly said, “Well done for your efforts!” and such. *Oh, so they had no idea it was me. They truly had no idea.*

For some reason, Lord Simeon’s stunned look was directed not at his subordinates, but at me. He remained unconvinced.

Thus, a day filled with enigmas drew to a close, and it was now time for dinner. The duchess’s condition, which had so worried me that morning, looked markedly improved. She stood tall and proud as she entered the dining room and apologized for getting so upset earlier. Perhaps having bared her soul about her reasons had taken a weight off her shoulders. Not only had her request for a move been accepted, but she’d also been promised that preparations would proceed. That must have come as quite a relief.

And then there was her afternoon visitor. Whether he’s a friend or indeed her paramour, he’s very likely someone she feels close to. Speaking to a trusted confidant might have had a positive effect too.

When I looked at Lady Anna, she’d regained her usual cheerfulness as well. Her attitude toward her mother appeared entirely normal. The difference was so stark that I almost wondered if I’d imagined the whole scene earlier.

The duchess’s “affair” must be mere gossip. It can’t actually be true, can it?

Earlier, when I’d told His Highness about my findings, he had cocked his head, puzzled. “If the servants are chin-wagging about the idea, we can’t ignore it altogether...but really? My aunt?”

“You find it hard to believe?”

“Hmm...” He frowned. “I can’t speak with great authority since we’ve never had a close relationship. We only see each other very occasionally. Still, I always thought she and my uncle were a happy couple. At any rate, they must have married for love. A match like theirs would never have occurred otherwise. Given Uncle Stephane’s constitution, it was very likely he’d have remained single for life.”

Julianne, who had come to His Highness’s room before I’d gotten there, lent her weight to his assessment. “I heard much the same from my adoptive mother. She told me they were overjoyed to be married. After that, their relationship remained strong, and she was more concerned about the Duke of Embourg’s health than anyone else. For that reason, my adoptive mother grew very concerned about her sister after the duke passed away. Unusually for her, she *insisted* to Duke Silvestre that they visit to express their condolences as soon as possible.”

It was quite amusing to picture Duke Silvestre, a veritable force of nature, being harried by his wife. *I wish I could have seen it for myself. Actually, no, I don’t... I can only imagine that somehow, I would’ve been caught up in it, and that’s a terrifying prospect.* As his gray eyes appeared in my mind’s eye, I hurriedly shooed them away.

At any rate, it was clearly hard for Duchess Laetitia’s relatives to accept the idea that she might’ve been having an affair while her husband was deathly ill. *And...well, I have to agree. The impression she’s given off is not one of someone who would do that.*

When Anna sat down at the dinner table, I covertly took in her expression. What exactly had her earlier anger been directed at?

“By the way,” the duchess said as soon as dinner had begun, “do you have any particular plans for tomorrow?”

Our return to Sans-Terre was scheduled for the day after tomorrow, which meant we had an entire day before that. When I’d first arrived, I’d wanted to stroll around the town—but given how events had unfolded, I was no longer so sure.

“None specifically,” His Highness replied. Then, in a kind tone that suggested an effort to put his aunt’s mind somewhat at ease, he added, “If you need me for anything, I’m very happy to help.”

In response, the duchess’s expression grew conflicted. “It’s not for me, exactly. Actually, the mayor asked me to offer you an invitation.”

“The mayor?”

“Yes. He says he’s throwing a party at his home tomorrow afternoon, and he’d love for you to come.”

This wasn’t to be a concert or a tea party, but a pure gathering of people. Furthermore, it was being held not at night, but during the day. That in itself essentially gave away the mayor’s true motive.

Under the weight of our gazes, the duchess offered an apologetic half-smile. “He and his wife have always been fond of that sort of thing. They often invited Lord Stephane and me. He’s a good mayor. Only, well...he is a little lacking in reserve.”

The duke’s family apparently enjoyed a close relationship with the townspeople, and they’d had plenty of opportunities to interact with the mayor, who acted as the residents’ representative. The late duke had been near and dear to the people’s hearts in a way that went beyond merely his status as the king’s younger brother.

This connection was a fine thing, in my opinion. I think it’s far better for people to forge close ties without separating themselves into categories like “royalty” and “commoner.” Nevertheless, I found this invitation rather crass.

“When he heard about your visit, Your Highness, he hastily made plans. He even complained that I hadn’t told him sooner.”

I thought back to our arrival in Embourg. The vast number of people lining the road to welcome His Highness had essentially formed an impromptu parade.

Yet, since this was an entirely personal trip to visit a relative on private business, no announcement had been made. Those who had seen the carriage waiting by the dock would have never guessed that His Highness the Crown Prince was coming. I recalled Lady Anna mentioning that, until we arrived, even

she'd been kept mostly in the dark about the visit.

Then, out of nowhere, a stunning group had arrived, to the shock of Embourg's residents. In the blink of an eye, word had spread throughout the town, causing an entirely unexpected festival to spring to life.

The town's prominent personages, including the mayor, had suddenly been abuzz with excitement. They'd come to the duchess insisting that they couldn't let this unparalleled opportunity pass them by—that they *must* have a chance to interact with His Highness.

"I told them you didn't have much time, but they wouldn't accept it and refused to back down. Embourg is not like Sans-Terre—people who live out here in the countryside seldom have any opportunity to see you. I can understand their strong desire. I'm so sorry to impede on the little relaxation time you have, but would you mind showing your face, even if only briefly?"

She spoke as contritely as her words suggested. I watched and waited for His Highness's reaction.

It would discomfit anyone to receive an invitation from a person they'd never met, but to put the crown prince in that position, and for the event to be the very next day, was awfully impolite. Knowing that the duchess was His Highness's aunt had probably given them the confidence to dig in their heels. They must have decided that he couldn't refuse a request coming from her, even one he wouldn't normally accept.

I felt sorriest for the duchess for being bullied into asking him. It was an invitation that deserved to be turned down, but if it were, she'd bear the brunt of the malcontent. She was truly caught between a rock and a hard place.

Likely perceiving just that, His Highness readily accepted. "Jolly good. Tell them I'll be glad to come."

Visible relief swept across the duchess's face.

"Let's treat it not as accepting a personal invitation, but attending to interact with the townspeople. You can tell them that I felt it only right to take some time for my subjects since I've come all the way here. That should smooth over any issues."

Given his position, accepting such an invitation wasn't straightforward, but this allowed him to quietly ignore the mayor's rudeness. Effectively, he was sidestepping the problem by presenting it as official business rather than special treatment for the mayor personally.

While protecting his aunt, he also provided an excuse that will shield the mayor from any criticism. And he did all this on the fly, adapting to the situation at a moment's notice. Such a kind and capable prince!

Which only makes it all the more charming that he's so afraid of ghosts...

"Thank you so much," said the duchess. Lady Anna thanked him for his thoughtfulness as well.

Since this decision meant making more specific plans, a quick discussion was held then and there. Due to the duchess's physical condition, it was decided that Lady Anna would be sent in her stead. Given that they were in mourning, the family could have declined to attend altogether, but it might have seemed rude to send their guests and make no effort themselves, I supposed. Julianne was to join as well, of course, being His Highness's fiancée.

I was the only question mark. Since Lord Simeon would certainly be going, I didn't want to be left on my own—it would be awfully boring. So I ventured to ask His Highness, who approved without putting up any resistance.

We three girls started to fervidly chat about what we would wear, and the rest of dinner had a buoyant atmosphere. Seeing her only daughter in such high spirits, the duchess appeared more at ease than I'd seen her so far. It looked very much like she had been telling the truth—that her fear really was about a curse potentially befalling Lady Anna. *I didn't think she seemed the type to commit adultery.*

That night, members of the Royal Order of Knights kept a lookout in front of the late duke's bedroom. Once again, the room was checked thoroughly before being locked tight, and a pair of them guarded the door. In the waiting room with the other bell, one more knight was stationed, and one even stood outside to watch for anyone sneaking in through the window.

Even if it really was a conspiracy among the entire staff, they wouldn't be able to act tonight. Not with all this security. It was impossible for the bell to ring.

Or rather, it *should* have been.

Deep in the night, the noise echoed through the castle's corridors once more. The cord was pulled in the empty room, and the bell shook.

When the guards unlocked the door and charged into the room, they found no one there, just as anticipated.

Chapter Seven

Though His Highness looked weary from lack of sleep the next morning, he instantly regained his sense of dignified grandeur once we arrived at the mayor's house, showing a pleasant smile to those who welcomed him.

"What a wonderful day this is," said the mayor, a large, portly man in his middle years. "The honor of hosting His Highness the Crown Prince in my own home has me in seventh heaven. I shall remember it until the day I die. No, it will be remembered for generations! Thank you so very, very much."

He certainly seemed to be in a good mood. His belly, large enough to rival my father's, seemed full to bursting from all this joy.

"Oh, not at all," His Highness replied. "I'm grateful that you've offered me a forum to meet and exchange words with the townspeople. It's an excellent opportunity that I wouldn't normally be granted. Thank you for arranging it."

Though his words made implicit that this was indeed purely an opportunity to interact with the locals, he maintained an outwardly placid and openhearted expression. However inconvenient the scenario, however insufficient his sleep, and however much he was afraid of ghosts, His Highness was ever the perfect prince, showing no signs of any discomfort on the surface. Given his gloomy mood up to and including the moment before he stepped out of the carriage, it was quite a miraculous transformation.

I surreptitiously asked Lord Simeon, "Have you not spoken to His Highness at all?"

My uniformed husband was here on guard duty; even when I walked by his side, he didn't embrace me and draw me closer. It wasn't appropriate while he was working. Though it did make me feel a touch of sadness, the kindness in his light blue eyes as he gazed down gave me the strength to hold on.

"Surely you could tell him about your theory. The room with the summoning bell is so close to the tower he's staying in. He must spend all night trembling

with fear.”

“I’ve said all along that it’s not a ghost,” he replied with a composed expression. “There’s nothing for him to be afraid of.”

Isn’t it worse to be so dismissive? His Highness is Lord Simeon’s dear friend, not to mention his liege lord. I’m surprised he’s being so callous, especially when he’s attentive to me to the point of being overprotective. Perhaps it’s different between two men? My, this is a marvelous taste of Lord Simeon’s brutal side.

The eyes of every lady in the room kept flicking toward him. Yes, he’s most handsome, isn’t he? One can’t help fangirling over his blackhearted appeal! But despite appearances, on the inside, he’s adorably sweet!

“I wonder if it’ll ring again tonight,” I asked.

“Most likely. We’ll draw an end to it then.”

Our stay in Embourg was only planned to last until around noon tomorrow, and it sounded as though Lord Simeon had every intention of pinning down the perpetrator well before then. *That’s all well and good, but will catching them really be enough to resolve the matter? I have the sense that the surrounding circumstances—the reason the culprit decided to become a ghost—will prove to be the more complicated part of the equation.*

We stood some distance from His Highness and Julianne, who were surrounded by an increasingly dense crowd. Then, from a different direction, someone asked me a question.

“Excuse me, but are you the future crown princess’s lady’s maid?”

I turned to look with a “Hmm?” and saw I’d been approached by a group of relatively young wives. Before I had time to reply, they all started talking at once.

“What a lovely dress. Is that the trend in the capital these days?”

“I suppose when she’s a lady in a duke’s house, even her servants will be dressed in finery. And those jewels! Are those real rubies in your brooch?”

“Is your pay as a lady’s maid really enough to afford all of that? Oh, of course—House Silvestre must have lent everything to you. The young lady couldn’t

have her retinue looking shabby.”

“Still, it must be wonderful to dress in such attire, even if it *is* borrowed. I shall have to tell my husband so. He hardly ever buys me anything new, so I’m always wearing the same old clothes. Seeing even a servant dressed better than I is a little disheartening.”

“You must put it into perspective. There are lady’s maids and there are *lady’s maids*. House Silvestre is no average house, you realize.”

Even though I had not said a word, they had firmly decided among themselves that I was in Julianne’s employ. I hadn’t wanted to outshine her, so I’d chosen a relatively subdued dress. Consequently, when I stood at a distance next to a royal guard, I supposed it would look that way.

That’s fine, though. I don’t have to make any particular effort to impress the local social circles, so it’s no issue if I leave their misunderstanding uncorrected. Ignoring a look from Lord Simeon that spoke volumes, I smiled and listened to their chatter, which reminded me of the twittering of small birds. It wasn’t me they were interested in, but my clothing and accessories—no answer was required. One of them even reached out and touched my dress with her finger. They truly seemed eager to know about the capital’s current fashions. Somewhat unnecessary, given that there was nothing outmoded about their own apparel. Embourg wasn’t some disconnected backwater, after all; it was a focal point of its region, with people, goods, and information constantly passing through. However, perhaps that was exactly the reason. They were highly conscious of being even slightly behind the times.

Then, an even more cheerful voice spoke up from behind the crowd of women. “Mrs. Flaubert, I’m so sorry to have left you behind.” Owing to the nature of the event, Lady Anna had discarded her mourning clothes in favor of a mature, deep blue dress. She pushed her way toward me somewhat forcefully. “I’ve finally run out of people to say hello to. I can only apologize for being so late in introducing you, Mrs. Flaubert.”

Her intention in referring to me not by name, but as “Mrs. Flaubert,” was quite clear: she must have overheard the women’s error and come running to my rescue.

“My apologies to you all,” she continued, addressing the group. “Allow me to introduce my friend here. This is Marielle Flaubert, wife of the heir to House Flaubert.”

“Wha...”

All their faces stiffened at once. *Telling them now, after all that chatter, is only going to cause embarrassment. Still, I’m grateful to Lady Anna for going to the effort.*

“My apologies as well,” I added. “I wasn’t sure when to jump in and respond. I’m Marielle Flaubert. This is my husband, Simeon.”

Maintaining his guard posture, Lord Simeon merely gave a light nod. The ladies responded with hasty curtsies.

“Oh, indeed, how rude of us...”

“Terribly sorry.”

“Don’t give it another thought,” I insisted. “I came here to accompany Julianne, so you might say I’m something like a lady’s maid. Not to mention that I have worked as a lady-in-waiting, which is much the same. The circumstances behind that are convoluted, but I was a sort of trainee.”

“Well, my word, is that so?”

“I suppose a noblewoman’s wife might serve in such a role.”

“How unexpected!” Uncomfortable laughter followed.

We all smiled awkwardly at each other, hoping the matter had been brushed under the carpet without too much loss of face. Clearly eager to change the subject right away, one of the women said to Lady Anna, “We were hoping to see the lady duchess today, especially as it’s been such a long time. What a shame that she couldn’t make it.”

Lady Anna’s smile grew even more strained. “I’m afraid she’s quite indisposed at the moment. The stress and exhaustion of these past months have taken their toll.”

“Oh dear, that’s quite concerning.”

“She’s been in poor health for quite some time, I suppose. I’m trying to recall the last time I saw her.”

“Yes, she’s gone unseen for a long while. These days, she often sends you, Lady Anna, as her representative on matters of official business. It’s as though she’s secluding herself in the castle.”

Though these words were delivered with superficial good cheer, they held an undercurrent of scorn. I didn’t let it show, but my curiosity was piqued. Lord Simeon, too, stole a quick glance at the ladies.

“I had thought she might at least attend *this* function, since His Highness the Crown Prince is here.”

“Exactly. If there’s any party she could pull herself together for...”

Lady Anna stayed silent, not letting her smile drop. She was very clearly hiding her feelings, and I got the impression that this wasn’t the first time she’d endured this. *It might well be that she doesn’t have a very good relationship with these ladies.* I wished I could do something to warm the frosty atmosphere, but with my rudimentary understanding of the situation, it was better not to interject where I might do more harm than good.

“It must be awfully hard on you as well, Lady Anna,” one of the women added. “At just the time you’d want to rely on your dear mother, she’s relying on you instead.”

“I’m not a child anymore, so I wouldn’t want to rely on her and give nothing back,” Lady Anna replied. “I mean to support Mother enough to make up for Father’s absence, and for the two of us to bolster one another. The servants are giving a great deal of aid as well, not to mention that my aunt and uncle have shown their concern. Indeed, this visit also stemmed from His Highness’s generosity—he traveled straight to Embourg as soon as we told him we had a matter to discuss. In the process, I’ve even made a new friend or two. So it’s quite all right.” She turned her head to look at me, and I beamed back at her.

I covertly elbowed the man beside me, urging him to contribute. After clearing his throat, Lord Simeon said, “It’s just as Her Highness the Lady Anna says. The entire royal family supports them, including His and Her Majesty, as well as House Silvestre and Her Highness the Duchess’s family, House Balladur.

If I may be presumptuous enough to say so, my own house has a relationship with the duke and duchess as well; in particular, my mother was once close to Her Highness the Duchess.” He turned to Lady Anna. “If there’s a way in which I or we may be of service, please reach out any time. We’ll gladly hasten to attend you.”

He had listed a series of preeminent names, one after the other, emphatically underlining just how much backing the family had. The ladies looked visibly daunted.

Thinking properly about their social status, Lady Anna and the duchess certainly aren’t a mother and daughter forced to struggle alone. The death of a husband and father is saddening, certainly, and I’m sure it’s left them feeling forlorn. Nevertheless, they have a great number of relations they can count on. Frankly, the kingdom itself could never abandon the family of the king’s younger brother. And though I mean no rudeness, they certainly don’t need pity from commoners with little more than local importance.

The attitude displayed by these ladies was honestly rather too discourteous considering the royal status of the one they were addressing. If it was making *me* uncomfortable, I could only imagine how enraged Lord Simeon was under the surface. If anyone needed a stern lecture about not making inappropriate remarks, it was them!

Thoroughly slapped down, the ladies were lost for words. They exchanged furtive glances, the mood even more uneasy than before. Just as I was thinking of giving some flimsy pretext to leave, a plump, middle-aged woman came and joined us. “Oh, Lady Anna, there you are. Sorry to interrupt your conversation, but there’s a gentleman I simply *must* introduce you to. Could I ask you to join me just for a moment?”

It was the mayor’s wife, speaking in a melodious tone that didn’t betray whether she’d noticed the awkward mood lingering in the air. Her build was akin to her husband’s, as were her jovial smile and her slightly overbearing manner. All in all, she didn’t give an unpleasant impression.

“A gentleman?” Lady Anna replied. “Forgive me, but right now I’m not looking for...”

“I’m not trying to set you up with him. He’s from another country, and he said he’d like to meet you while he has the chance. I would be able to keep an eye on you in such a small space, but if it makes you feel better, I can stay by your side the whole time. Please?”

The mayor’s wife drew closer, as if ready to grab Lady Anna and frog-march her straight to this man. *This must be the same sort of technique they used on the duchess.* Dealing with this pair for too long seemed like it would quickly grow tiring, but in this instance, it served as a convenient excuse to escape an unwelcome social situation.

Perhaps thinking the same, Lady Anna agreed, though with a hint of reluctance on her face. “Very well. Please excuse me, everyone. I’ll see you later.”

With that, she let herself be led away. The assembled ladies also hurriedly took their leave, so Lord Simeon and I were once again alone.

“Lord Simeon,” I began after a moment’s hesitation.

“Which group first?” he interrupted. Though his eyes continued to focus on His Highness and Julianne, he had already predicted my next course of action.

“Those disagreeable women first. After that, I’ll go after Lady Anna.”

Even knowing that the mayor’s wife was accompanying her, I was concerned about Lady Anna being forcibly introduced to a stranger. It seemed like just the situation in which I could act as a substitute lady’s maid after all.

However, before that, I wanted to acquire some information. If I never saw that group again, it would feel incomplete, as though there was a lingering thread I’d never followed. I had to find out why they’d been acting that way toward Lady Anna.

Lord Simeon gave a slight nod. “I’ll leave it in your hands. Their behavior seemed curious to me as well. It might have some connection to Her Highness the Duchess’s unstable mental condition.”

“That’s true. I’ve heard she struggles with socializing, so it might also have been a burden on her in that sense.”

For the briefest moment, his gaze met mine. Those light blue eyes conveyed trust. I smiled back at him, then quietly started to move. I blended in among the throngs of people engaged in lighthearted chatter, suppressed my presence, and went after those women. The room wasn't especially large, and most guests were much older than I, making it challenging to blend in—but I'd developed these skills over many years, and it was time to put them to use. I slipped through the crowds like a shadow, unnoticed by anyone.

The door to the adjoining room had been propped open, and small platters of food were available within. The women had taken up position on a couch, so I remained standing by the door, where they'd have a hard time seeing me, and listened carefully.

As expected, they were expressing their discontent.

"Hmph. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say. No wonder she made friends with them. They're all the same."

"You're right about that! Typical nobles, looking down on us as always. They see themselves as the chosen ones, and they're happy to let us know it."

"Reeling off the names of His Majesty, Duke Silvestre and so on... Nothing but trying to make himself sound more important than he really is! At the end of the day, he's just a glorified bodyguard."

"I don't care how pretty he is when he has *that* kind of personality. Nobles are no good, and that's that."

They were really quite annoyed. From their words alone, anyone would have thought *we* were the ones who'd shown a lack of decorum. *We didn't though, did we? All we did was remind them of their rudeness toward Lady Anna and the duchess. Is it really our noble arrogance that made us conscious of that? Hmm... Regardless of the social status of everyone involved, I still don't think it's very nice to bad-mouth someone who isn't present.*

Even though this was a daytime gathering, alcohol was still being served. The tables had been furnished not only with wine but also with various other drinks. They each took a glass and gulped them down with gusto, then continued their malicious gossiping. Apparently, they hadn't yet gotten their fill.

“But I still can’t believe the duchess didn’t attend when His Highness the Crown Prince is here. Surely that’s the time to put on a brave face, no? Not to mention that it would have been a good opportunity to make us keenly aware of her ties to the royal family.”

“I bet she just didn’t want to come to a party hosted by commoners.”

“No, I think she was too *scared* to come.”

They reached out, not only for drinks, but for food as well. All the talking and eating was keeping their mouths rather busy. *The snacks look delicious, honestly. I’m getting hungry too.*

“Considering how much she looks down on other people, she’s such a coward. The slightest pushback, and she turns into an emotional mess. She knows how much she’s hated and what people will say to her, so she’s afraid to come here no matter how many sympathizers she brings.”

“Right! That’s just the kind of person she is. She’s always treated us country folk with such contempt, but the moment we show any backbone in return, she always plays the victim. Ugh, every part of it makes me so irritated.”

Hold on... Are they really talking about the duchess? The picture they painted was so unlike the impression I’d gotten of the lady in question that I momentarily thought they *must* have been referring to someone else. To these ladies, the duchess was quite an ogre. I wondered what had made them feel that way. Was the duchess hiding a side of herself that we didn’t know about?

“At every opportunity, she starts bragging about how in the capital, it’s like *this*. So odious. I reckon too many people got fed up with her. When no one would indulge her anymore, she decided to start hiding away instead of showing her face. I don’t particularly want to see her anyway, but surely her ilk have public business to handle? How convenient that they can avoid doing it just because they don’t feel like it! They get to live in luxury even if they don’t do any work. It’s all right for some.”

“I blame the mayor and his wife too. They still treat her like she wants and expects to be treated when they should’ve made her face some home truths long ago. She’s taking advantage of their good nature.”

Their ranting kept going. However, it seemed they had limited material when it came to the duchess, as they hadn't actually seen her in a long time. As such, the topic soon switched to other figures that had earned their ire. I left, deciding I wouldn't gain anything further from listening. After enjoying a meat pie from a nearby table and moistening my dry throat with some cider, I went to look for Lady Anna.

While walking, I considered how this situation might have arisen. The information I had was too incomplete to be certain, but I suspected there had been something of a misunderstanding. No doubt, there were valid reasons the duchess was so disliked. The accusations hadn't sounded entirely like baseless slander. However, the idea that she was truly as malicious as they'd suggested seemed implausible to me. More likely, she'd made them uncomfortable without meaning to, through a lack of awareness. I just found it hard to believe that she was truly a bad person.

After all, if she was indeed the sort of self-important noble who looked down on commoners, she would have reacted more strongly to Julianne. She'd have been offended at having to treat a poor baron's daughter, one far lower-ranked than herself, as her niece—at having to accept “that sort” into her family. At a time in her life when the duchess was already racked with fear and unease, she'd inevitably have let her displeasure show.

And yet, despite her intense fear of the curse and the deep exhaustion it had brought about, she had done all she could to put on a brave face and offer a warm welcome. I could only imagine it being even warmer had the duchess been in better health. Prince Severin and Princess Henriette had vouched for her good character as well, and I'd never heard any unflattering rumors about her in society.

And then there was Lady Anna. Looking at her was enough to give some idea of her parents' nature.

To be honest, those women's accusations applied more to themselves than anyone else. Occasional grumbles were one thing, but the sheer enthusiasm with which they'd bad-mouthed the duchess, going on and on about it, made them seem *far* from admirable.

Either way, the duchess and the townspeople weren't on good terms. That much appeared to be true. Could that be one of her concerns, as Lord Simeon had suggested? If she was hated and a constant target of insults, no wonder she'd want to leave Embourg and return to Sans-Terre. *And perhaps that's why she was so reluctant to refuse the mayor's request. Under these circumstances, he must be a valuable ally.*

But...what about that scholar she was rumored to be having an affair with? How did he fit into all this? *Hated by the town, the duchess has shut herself away. Meanwhile, a man frequently comes to visit her.* Their connection was growing all the more intriguing.

The ghost scare had been only the beginning, with more problems unfurling from there. I was growing worried that they wouldn't all be resolved by tomorrow. Was there really enough time? *Maybe we could extend our stay? Probably not, though... I can imagine that would be difficult for His Highness.*

As I puzzled over what to do, I swept my eyes across the assembled guests in search of Lady Anna. Finding her was something of a struggle, as so many people were crammed into this relatively small space that my view was obscured. However, I soon spied her standing by the window in a corner of the room.

Beside her was the mayor's wife. As promised, she had stayed by Lady Anna's side. And the man she was being introduced to... I craned my neck to see, and as soon as I did, I reflexively froze in place.

He was a young man, and that alone made him stand out in this environment. Everyone around him was middle-aged or older, while he was the only one who appeared to be in his twenties. He was tall and had dark hair, while his pale skin struck a stark contrast. It didn't make him look feeble, however; he wore a proud expression and had an air of arrogance about him, yet seemed elegant and charming nonetheless.

This young man, who exuded the aura of one who looked down his nose at others, was not a stranger to me. I had seen him before—only a few months prior, in fact. We'd met briefly several times, then parted, and I'd thought that was it. *Didn't he leave the country? Why would I run into him again here?*

I was certain I wasn't confusing him for someone else. The man with whom Lady Anna was conversing was a visitor from a country far to the north: a Slavian who went by the name Yeremei Yugin.

In actuality, his name was Leonid Georgievic Pimenov, and he was part of the Slavian imperial family.

Chapter Eight

The Slavian Empire, which spanned from the continent's northern reaches all the way to the east, had a delicate relationship with Lagrange and the other Western countries. Last year, when the Republic of Orta's military government had started a war, Slavia had been quietly backing them—that was a commonly known fact. However, after seeing that the odds weren't in their favor, they had quickly pulled out. Slavia had tried to use Orta to expand their influence westward, but when Orta had become more a hindrance than a help, they'd been discarded without a second thought.

There was no doubt that Slavia harbored sinister ambitions, so every land kept its guard up while dealing with them. And at the end of last year, I had met a visitor from that land.

He had appeared in high society purporting to be a distant relation of his country's ambassador to Lagrange—the guise he'd adopted was one of a carefree youngster traveling abroad for his studies who would stay in one place only briefly and then head for other lands. His involvement in the incident that had happened around that time was still unclear. He'd certainly seemed to possess some inside knowledge, but he had never revealed his true motives, only behaved in a way that hinted at some deeper meaning.

After he'd left, I had learned that he was in fact a member of the Slavian imperial family, and potentially even the next emperor. As surprising as this was, I can't say I'd ever expected to meet him again. And yet...

What is he doing in Lagrange?! Did he lie about leaving the country and stay after all? And why is he specifically here, at this party? Why is he trying to get close to Lady Anna? What is he planning this time?!

My legs, which had momentarily paused, started moving again apace. As I rapidly approached, he became aware of my presence as well, turning his eyes toward me. That young face smiled fearlessly. He exuded a commanding gravity that was almost overwhelming—though perhaps I should have expected no less

from a member of an imperial family. But right next to him was Lady Anna. I couldn't let myself turn tail and run.

"Lady Anna," I interjected, forcing my face into a smile.

She turned. "Marielle?"

The mayor's wife, who turned to look as well, appeared less than pleased. Despite having insisted she wasn't trying to matchmake, it seemed clear she was hoping to do just that. *I can tell how much she wants me to stop interfering, but I'm sorry, this man is no good for Lady Anna.* Ignoring her silent ire, I walked right up to them.

"Apologies for intruding, but I was so surprised to see a face I recognized. Would you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," Lady Anna replied, looking at the man. "You two know each other, then?"

In response, Mr. Yugin—or should I call him Prince Leonid?—put on an affable smile and greeted me. "Good to see you again, Mrs. Flaubert. I didn't expect to meet you here."

"Good day, Lord Yugin. I could hardly believe my eyes either. I heard from the ambassador that you were on your way to Easdale, so I never expected to run into you again. Did you stay in Lagrange after all?"

"No, I went to Easdale. And Lavia too. I only got a brief look at them, though, before coming back."

"My, you've been busy. It hasn't even been three months. Don't you want to stay anywhere for a longer period?"

"Very much so, but I have to go back to my own country sooner or later. Before I do, I'm keeping to a strict schedule so I can see as many countries as possible."

"Well done—that sounds like hard work. And did your travels abroad bear much fruit?"

"I saw all kinds of interesting things. But of everywhere I've been, Lagrange is the most interesting of all. Because of the people, you see."

Prince Leonid and I exchanged a grin. To an outside observer, this probably looked like a friendly conversation among close friends. The mayor's wife, who knew nothing of the hidden meaning behind our innocent words, spoke up rather intrusively. "Goodness, what a coincidence that you're already acquainted. I'm sure you're quite eager to talk with him, Mrs. Flaubert, but could I ask you to wait just a moment? I was about to introduce Lady Anna to —"

"Oh, I remember now," I interrupted, pretending I had missed the obvious social cue. "You see, all of this is giving me a sense of *déjà vu*. When I first met you, you asked Ambassador Nigel to introduce me in much the same manner, no?"

"Well, a man can't exactly approach a woman he's never met before. It would be sad if a lady thought ill of me and was put on guard, so I have to follow the proper procedures."

"Do you try to get close to women everywhere you go, then?"

"Oh dear, you seem to have misunderstood. I don't mean to suggest I've spent all my time around women."

I replied with a wry giggle. "I wonder."

The idea that he'd approached Lady Anna with no ulterior motive in mind whatsoever was, frankly, unthinkable. He surely had some plot in mind again. And I had to impede him. Whatever it was, Lady Anna could not get wrapped up in it. With mental apologies to the mayor's wife, I continued to ignore her and her incessant throat-clearing efforts to garner my attention.

"Erm, Mrs. Flaubert..."

"Now that I think," I continued, "I'm curious as to what brought Lord Yugin to your house in the first place."

"Oh, well, you see," said the mayor's wife, "we have a son around his age, and they happened to meet and become friends. Our son brought him along. But what I'm trying to say is—"

"My, you never do know where a connection might lead you."

“Yes, indeed! And, well, after that—”

“But, Lord Yugin, if you wanted to approach Lady Anna, you should have gone through Prince Severin first of all. You mustn’t try to sneak around him. She’s a royal princess, after all.”

The mayor’s wife was trying to rein me in, while I was trying to rein in Prince Leonid. The man himself watched our game of offense and defense with clear amusement. *Ngh, how frustrating. I’m not putting in all this effort for his entertainment!*

Meanwhile, Lady Anna was watching with a bewildered face, not saying a word. She didn’t, however, look annoyed at my commandeering of the conversation; she hadn’t been overly enthusiastic about meeting him in the first place, so she wasn’t going to actively insist.

I was grateful for her cooperation. It was a huge help given that I couldn’t tell her any of the real details here and now.

“Do you suspect me of attempting some ill treatment of the princess? It would sadden me for you to think I’m that kind of man.”

How dare you speak so brazenly! I wanted to say this out loud, but instead, I giggled merrily. “All men who approach women of her age do so with ulterior motives to some greater or lesser degree, wouldn’t you say? It’s necessary in order to meet someone, but still, you must be very careful of who you’re meeting and how. I’d hate for it to turn out the same as with Lord Lucio.”

The example I’d brought up was of the Republic of Orta’s crown prince in exile, also known as Prince Gracius, who’d almost been assassinated. Since I’d used his personal name rather than his royal title, Lady Anna and anyone else who overheard would likely have no idea who I was talking about. But Prince Leonid knew, without a doubt, what I was getting at.

There was no way he’d been completely uninvolved with that incident. Even if he wasn’t the culprit himself, he still had *some* connection to it. He hadn’t even particularly tried to hide it, and although it’d been made to look like an internal Ortan affair, the scent of Slavia behind it all was incredibly strong.

But what I’d meant as quite a bold, resolute statement prompted Prince

Leonid to adopt an amused expression. “In both his case and this princess’s, your protective efforts are like a mother hen’s—even though from my point of view, you’re more like a baby chick. Watching you try your hardest to spread your wings is adorable indeed.”

Bah. He’s mocking me. If I’m any bird, I’m a little sparrow. Maybe all I can do is chirp, but I’m filled with knowledge!

But there was a bird of prey right here in this room too. I wonder which would be mightier, a hawk or an eagle? Personally, I think I’d go for the hawk! They can fly against the wind with their huge wings and bring down prey with their sharp claws. Their eyes are cold as ice, and they don’t overlook a single thing. Just like my peerless protector!

The reason I was so eager to lean on the majesty of a hawk wasn’t due to a sudden feeling of timidness, but because I’d noticed a figure coming toward us. A man in a white uniform made his way through the crowd, walking with long strides. His handsome face bore a stern expression, eyes fixed on the man standing in front of me.

When Prince Leonid noticed him, his smile deepened. He didn’t show a hint of looking intimidated by Lord Simeon’s arrival. With an ease in his features that bordered on impudence, he raised one hand as if greeting an old friend.

“Ah, I see you’re here too. Good day, Sir Knight.”

“Good day. Yours is a face I didn’t anticipate seeing. How unexpected for you to find your way here.”

“If I managed to surprise you, I’m overjoyed...although I see you still have the same placid face as well. How dull. Couldn’t you look a bit more shocked?”

His attitude was unbelievable considering how much younger he was than Lord Simeon. This truly was a man who gave an accurate first impression. He had a conscious sense of his own superiority, and he wore it on his sleeve. Did his comfort with that come down to his high status, I wondered? This wasn’t the behavior of one who truly had the malicious intent of denigrating those he spoke to. No, it was more that it came naturally to him. His demeanor was far from charming, but I could see how it might be inevitable.

The two silently glared at one another. At this stage, even the mayor's wife sensed the discord in the air and fell quiet. *I wonder if it would be better to leave Lord Simeon to deal with it and take her and Lady Anna away.*

Then, as if he'd read my mind, Prince Leonid sighed, though there was a hint of laughter mixed in. "I swear, both husband and wife are so intensely wary. All I wanted to do was talk to the princess. Much to my regret, Princess Anna, I'll be leaving now. I look forward to meeting you another day."

"Yes," she replied after a moment's hesitation, clearly unsure how to reply given how little she knew of the surrounding circumstances. This one-word agreement was all she mustered.

Prince Leonid then turned his attention to me. "I'd love to have a chance to catch up with you as well. Could you meet me without your husband present?"

This highly pointed question made Lord Simeon's eyebrow twitch. Despite the placid face Prince Leonid had mentioned, his mood was plain as day if you really looked for it. A certain thief who shall not be named often provoked him in the same way.

Forestalling Lord Simeon, I replied, "I cannot make any such promise to a gentleman other than my husband. Besides, I make it a rule not to hide anything from him, so I'll tell him everything we talk about regardless. There would be no difference between having him there and not, so why not engage both of us?"

"I'll feel more able to speak freely without him staring daggers at me."

"If that would bother you so much, I suppose there's no need for us to talk at all, is there?"

Prince Leonid raised his eyebrows and shoulders in a jesting manner. "What a thing to say with such a docile face. Anyway, it's a real shame. If only you were of higher social standing."



Before I even had time to ask what he was talking about, he turned his back. All he said in parting was a casual “Goodbye” before walking off and making straight for the door. Two other men appeared as if from nowhere and joined him, following close behind—his bodyguards, I assumed. Their duty now complete, they left the parlor with their prince, not even sparing a single glance back into the room.

For a moment, no words escaped my lips. Part of me wanted to sigh in relief, but for whatever reason, I didn’t feel entirely at ease yet. *Why exactly is he here?*

Similarly, Lord Simeon’s brow furrowed as he glared intently at the door through which Prince Leonid had exited. The mayor’s wife looked at us both, a complaint on her lips. We *had* been quite rude to her, in a way.

“My apologies,” I told her. “My impolite behavior must have caused quite some offense. I’m unable to share the full details with you, but that man is no good. He’s not a favorable person to introduce to Lady Anna.”

“What are you talking about? I know he’s a foreigner, but he’s a perfectly polite fellow. And of high status—he’s a nobleman, after all.”

I paused a moment. “Did he say so himself?”

“Yes! He said he’s from an old noble lineage of legitimate stock. And his family must be awfully rich for him to go on tour around so many different countries.” She puffed herself up with a proud snort.

You can’t believe someone’s assertions so easily with no other proof. He’s lying to you—his house isn’t noble, it’s imperial.

As much as I liked this woman’s affable good nature, she was a trifle imprudent for my taste. It seemed that she and her husband’s burning desire to invite His Highness to their home was an example of a general aspiration toward high-ranking nobles.

All that aside...“legitimate” is an interesting choice of words.

I exchanged a glance with Lord Simeon. If Prince Leonid had chosen that term specifically, it felt like there must be some deeper significance.

Though the mayor's wife seemed ready to continue her objections, Lady Anna jumped in to soothe her. "I understand you wanted to broker introductions for my benefit. I haven't been able to find a good match on my own, so I'm truly grateful to you for always keeping me in mind. But if these two saw fit to interrupt, there must be some problem that gave them cause to do so. As a member of the royal family, I have to be prudent in my actions. Could I ask you to please draw a line under this incident?"

Her look of displeasure took on a hint of unease. After a moment, she mumbled, "Well, Lady Anna, if that's what you want... He didn't seem so awful to me, though. And all I had in mind was a quick introduction. I didn't plan to leave the two of you alone..."

I did not want an ally like the mayor's wife to begin harboring animosity toward Lady Anna and her family, so I matched her general tone and affirmed her good intentions. "Yes, we understand that, of course. That's a perfectly normal thing to do at an event like this."

She had chosen the wrong person, but there was no way she could have known that. So I selected my words carefully and praised her kindness to the heavens. When she was just about convinced, and her portly figure was making its way away from us, I burst out into a sigh of sheer exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," said Lady Anna. "My carelessness put you in such an awkward situation."

"No, it's not remotely your fault. Much like the mayor's wife, you had no idea."

"What kind of person is he, then? Is the issue that he's Slavian?"

"Well..."

Just as I was puzzling over how exactly to respond, Lord Simeon took over. "We can't talk openly here, so would you mind waiting until later? I'll need to report the incident to Prince Severin anyway. We can convene and explain everything then."

"All right. Thank you."

She lived far from the capital and was still so young. But Lady Anna possessed

all the awareness and understanding a royal princess needed. After agreeing, she changed her expression at once, her demeanor now suggesting absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. It hit home that she was a far stronger and shrewder person than I'd realized.

I looked back on Prince Leonid's words with vexation. Were my attempts at protecting others really just an overreach beyond my position? I was feeling a little despondent when I felt a pat on my back. I looked up at Lord Simeon, and he didn't need to say a word; he just looked back at me with kind eyes.

Was it really written all over my face? How does he manage to notice the second my spirits sink?

I allowed myself to indulge in the comfort of his large body just for a moment, then, conscious of where we were, I put some distance between us. He also patted my head just for a second. This tiny moment of contact was enough to send my mood soaring again.

Yes, everything's fine! If he's here, it doesn't matter what anybody says to me. Whatever happens, I can face it without fear! After all, love is stronger than any other force!

"I see you two are in fine fettle. And all the while, *some* of us are surrounded by crowds gawking at them like an animal while they try desperately to be nice to everyone..."

I decided to pretend I hadn't seen His Highness's look of resentment.

We returned to the castle, and while waiting for dinnertime, we gathered in His Highness's room to have a secret meeting. Once she'd heard all about Yeremei Yugin's true identity and past, Lady Anna asked us not to tell the duchess. "Nothing happened, after all...and I don't want to add to Mother's worries."

"Yes, I agree it's better if we keep this quiet from Aunt Laetitia," said Prince Severin. "We just need to stay on our guard."

"Why would he go to Easdale and then come straight back here?" I grumbled. "What is he up to? That's too much back-and-forth if he's just visiting for pleasure, and he says he wants to see as many countries as possible—but why?"

Some sort of reconnaissance? Or is he actually studying after all?”

“You said he’s part of the Slavian imperial family, but what does that mean exactly?” Julianne asked. “If he’s not the emperor’s son, is he a nephew or cousin?”

She was likely picturing a relationship similar to that of Duke Silvestre’s to our king. In terms of position, she was nearly correct—but when I’d looked into it, I had found the details to be rather more complicated.

I took out my notebook and drew a simple family tree to help me explain.

“Slavia’s former emperor, who ruled two generations before the current one, died having already lost most of his sons, daughters, and even siblings. According to my grandfather, this was likely caused by their many, many years of practicing consanguineous marriage. It made them prone to hereditary illnesses and disabilities.”

I glanced up to take in Lord Simeon and His Highness’s reactions. Neither refuted a word I said; they only watched and listened. I took that to mean I hadn’t erred in my explanation.

“Only the youngest princess remained, but she was a mere four years old, and her guardians didn’t win the political battle. In the end, a male cousin of the late emperor ascended the imperial throne.”

On my diagram showing the direct descendants, I added an additional branch. The young surviving princess subsequently married a different male cousin of her father’s. In other words, the imperial family married into itself once again.

“Prince Leonid was born to these two. Although he’s no longer in the line of succession, he’s the direct descendant of the emperor before last.”

“In addition,” Prince Severin added, “I’d like to note that both the cousin who became the previous emperor and his son who inherited the throne took wives from outside the imperial family, so no blood relation existed within those marriages. Putting aside the political significance of this, the imperial bloodline itself has been diminished substantially.”

Both Julianne and Lady Anna listened with occasional murmurs of comprehension. Because the information concerned a country so far away, they

apparently hadn't heard the details. I wouldn't know either if not for the prior year's events. Although the government and such were keeping a close watch on Slavia's activities, the general public had little familiarity with them.

"Hence him using the phrase 'legitimate stock,'" said Lady Anna, finally grasping the true meaning of the words relayed to her by the mayor's wife.

Julianne cocked her head. "I must say, though, none of this sounds particularly out of the ordinary when it comes to succession crises. It's far from guaranteed that a direct descendant will always inherit, and sometimes the successor has no blood relation at all. I'm sure he feels hard done by, but what's to be gained from making such a fuss about his legitimacy now? Besides, since the name of the dynasty hasn't even changed, it indicates that the contemporary ruler inherits the same blood—so for the Slavian people, the current emperor *is* the legitimate heir."

"You're quite right," said His Highness, grinning with some amusement. This had been a typically scathing assessment from Julianne. A smile even began to form at the corners of Lord Simeon's lips.

"In fact," she went on, "changing to another bloodline might have been for the best. As Marielle said, repeatedly marrying within the same family led to many members dying prematurely. Surely they started courting outsiders precisely because of that problem."

Everyone nodded; that did make sense.

Suddenly, a thought struck me. I recalled the young princess who had lost her parents and siblings when she'd been too young to understand. She had been thrust into a battle for the imperial throne at such a tender age, and she couldn't have known what was going on—she'd been used as a mere puppet by the adults backing her. Then, when she'd grown older, she had married a cousin of the late emperor...but by whose will?

They surely already knew about the dangers of marrying such a close relation, so why do it anyway? Either they must have truly loved one another...or...

Orta was apparently not the only country with internal conflict—there were elements of it in Slavia as well. Happy as I was to leave them to it, being in the presence of one of the people directly involved made me somewhat nervous,

and it gave me the uncomfortable feeling that I'd be caught up in turmoil again. Staying away and not looking for trouble didn't seem to help when he could suddenly drop in without warning.

Here we are in Embourg, a provincial town far from the capital. Even when the town is bustling, it has a carefree air about it. The people here have nothing to do with any international conflicts or political strife; time flows peacefully. I want it to stay that way. Can't a ghost be the only thing causing a disturbance?

I wondered if the bell would ring again tonight.

After we ladies left the room, Lord Simeon remained with His Highness. Though I didn't know what they planned to discuss, I could make some guesses. Amid the issue we were already dealing with, an ominous figure had appeared, robbing His Highness of any chance for rest and relaxation. This trip had become quite the kerfuffle.

Still, while Prince Leonid presented a need for caution, my priority was the more immediate problem. Before returning to Sans-Terre, I wanted to get to the bottom of the supernatural mystery.

When we met the duchess again for dinner, her spirits seemed once again diminished. Preparations for her to relinquish the castle would still take time, but we would be leaving tomorrow—this had apparently brought her fears and anxieties back to the fore. If nothing was done, I feared she might suffer a nervous breakdown. One way or another, the ghost had to be caught tonight.

As such, I later went to stake out the late duke's bedroom with Lord Simeon.

"You didn't need to come," my husband said with a predictably sullen face, but I insisted.

"There's no particular danger, so why shouldn't I join you? Or do you think the ghost might have a weapon and attack us with it? If so, I'd like you to exorcise them, please."

"We're leaving tomorrow, so you should get a good night's rest. Lack of sleep will give you seasickness."

"Don't worry, I'm quite used to pulling all-nighters. In fact, they really get my blood pumping and fill me with energy!"

“I don’t think I need you to have *more* energy than you already do.”

But despite his objections, Lord Simeon didn’t actually chase me away. This presumably meant there was no real danger. The culprit was only aiming to cause a fuss, after all; their goal wasn’t to seriously harm anyone.

The door to the room was locked. No one was standing outside, as we figured that more surveillance was pointless at this stage. The same applied to outside the window.

His Highness had declared that, rather than solving the mystery of the bell, he’d like to leave this problem behind and continue with the arrangements from a distance. We had agreed with him, claiming we’d get an early night in preparation for tomorrow’s journey.

However, this was only a ruse for the benefit of the castle’s inhabitants. We didn’t even let the butler in on our plan; we involved only those who had come here with us from Sans-Terre. This was, of course, to ensure that no information reached the culprit’s ears.

“You already started your plan last night, didn’t you?” I asked. “Only stationing men outside the room and leaving the inside empty was to lower the culprit’s guard, wasn’t it?”

I went to great pains to ensure my voice was little more than a faint aspiration. I didn’t want anyone to hear, even if they were only the tiniest distance away. Lord Simeon could still understand me, however.

“You want it to appear as if you think there are only two routes into the room,” I continued, “the door and the windows. That you hadn’t noticed the mechanism inside the room. It’s a two-day operation.”

“Indeed. This way, I could be certain we’d catch the criminal. I didn’t know if they’d act last night, after all.”

His voice, too, was only a breath tickling my ears. I was sitting in his lap, so our faces were right next to each other. We had a blanket over our heads, and our bodies were pressed tightly together.

Our hiding place was situated between the windows and the bed. We had lowered the canopy only on one side and were sitting on the floor, hidden

behind it. The darkness helped as well. If anyone entered the room, they'd likely have no idea we were there.

I had intended to sit between Lord Simeon's legs, but he'd lifted me up into his lap and put his arms around me, saying that I'd get cold otherwise. This made me a bit concerned about the burden on him.

"Won't this position get tiring after too long? I don't mind if you set me down."

The nighttime chill was staved off by Lord Simeon's embrace and the blanket around us—but in this position, he wouldn't be able to move quickly when the time came.

However, despite my repeated suggestions, Lord Simeon stubbornly kept me just where I was. "You don't weigh much on your own. Just sit still."

He was always so overprotective, afraid of me even catching a cold. Today, I'd gotten plenty of sleep and eaten well besides, so I was fighting fit. I'd even dressed warmly for our stakeout. But this apparently made little difference to him.

That said, it was awfully comfortable having his safe arms around me, sharing his body heat, and feeling his heartbeat. I'd been missing this physical contact with him; back in Sans-Terre, we had been going through a spell of not spending much time with one other. Naturally, my main reason for joining him here was to resolve the ghost drama, but I couldn't deny that I'd been longing for *this* as well, just a little. Being alone with Lord Simeon, huddled together like this, was precious indeed.

Only, there was a risk that if it went on too long, I'd fall asleep. Despite my professions that I was full of energy, my eyelids gradually grew heavier. *This is no good! It's far too comfortable in Lord Simeon's arms!*

There was no lamp lit in the room, and even the faint moonlight was blocked by the curtains. With the additional darkness of a blanket over my head, I could hardly help but feel sleepy.

Though I knew that we had to stay quiet, it seemed certain that tiredness would win the battle if I didn't say a word, so I spoke again. "Where's the

hidden door? I didn't spot it at all when we investigated the room."

"By the fireplace. The key is probably the candelabra built into the wall. I think if you move that, it'll open."

"How did you figure it out?"

Now that I recalled, Lord Simeon had spent a while examining that candelabra when we'd searched the room.

"The next room over on the opposite side is Her Highness the Duchess's. It's hard to imagine that this incident is her own doing, and if it involved construction on the bell wire, she'd have noticed it and discovered the trick. So, if there's a hidden door, it must be on the side bordering the chapel. The first time we came in here, you all focused on the bed and the bell's pullstring. You didn't touch the candelabra, did you?"

"No. We were careful not to disturb anything we didn't need to."

"It didn't appear as if the room had been cleaned much. This was hard to ascertain by looking at the floor because so many people had been going in and out, but the furniture and decorations were all covered in dust."

I could picture the scene in my mind, and he was quite right. Lord Simeon had apparently noticed that too.

"After deciding there must be some mechanism on the chapel side, that narrowed the possibilities considerably. And sure enough, the candelabra wasn't covered in dust. To be precise, it was *partially* clean—proof that someone had been touching it."

Is that what was running through his mind when he looked at the room yesterday? He's like the archetypal mother-in-law in a story who can spot dust from a mile away.

"So you were already looking around with the presumption that there was a hidden door," I replied.

"Of course," he asserted, his tone indicating that to him, this really was a matter of course. "The door and windows had already been watched with no sign of anyone entering or exiting. That left only the possibility of another

entrance.”

I, of course, knew already. I knew that he absolutely, definitely did not believe in the existence of ghosts. But there’s still something a little dull about him being such a rigid realist. To think, right from the very start, he didn’t even remotely consider the prospect of it being a ghost. He doesn’t have to be as scared as His Highness, but if he were at least a little frightened, that would be quite amusi—rather, quite adorable.

When I gave voice to this thought, he replied, “But you weren’t scared at all either.”

“That doesn’t mean I denied the very *possibility* of it being a ghost. It’s a mysterious phenomenon. I enjoyed the thrill of it.”

“And is that ‘adorable’?”

“Do you not think so?”

“Indeed, it *is* adorable,” he said in a serious tone. He was quick on the uptake. I let out a gleeful laugh, while Lord Simeon fell silent for a moment. *What were we talking about again?*

He brought the conversation back on topic. “You might say that, but you *knew* the culprit was a living, breathing human, didn’t you?”

“Well, I suppose so...”

If a ghost had suddenly appeared, I’d have found it thrilling. That much was true. But it was more wishful thinking than anything. In truth, I thought it was far more likely that the bell was being rung by an ordinary person.

It was all too contrived, after all. The phenomenon never went beyond the bell ringing at the same time every night. For a ghost, they were awfully diligent in their consistency.

“So,” I murmured, “is there a secret room on the other side of the wall?”

“No, there’s not enough space for that. Only a passage leading up to an attic room.”

If there was a hidden door, it meant there was another space between this room and the chapel. In realizing that, I too had finally solved the puzzle.

And when I happened upon Lord Simeon in the corridor, that must have been what he was looking into. If there was a large difference in the apparent width of the room from the inside and from the outside, that meant the wall was thicker than it should be. He was corroborating his theory.

I noticed it too, you know! I wanted to tell him. By then, I already knew!

But...Lord Simeon had seen through it all right from the start. Before even looking at the room, just listening to the discussion had been enough for him to put together a decent theory.

It's so frustrating. And yet, so impressive.

"On that note," I replied, "it was mentioned that the man who had the castle rebuilt was quite a debaucher, correct?"

"Yes."

"The duchess told us that his pleasure-seeking and womanizing angered his wife. Could he have arranged for there to be a secret room in the attic, accessible from a hidden door in his bedroom, so that he could cheat on his wife without her knowledge?"

"Very likely," said Lord Simeon, his voice growing just a touch louder. It tickled my ear. "A man like that would have no scruples about sleeping with the servants. Still, planning the castle's construction with that in mind is simply unbelievable."

"But it explains why this wing's attic windows are only on the outside, facing the castle grounds. If you could see inside from the courtyard, someone might notice a lamp being lit. And the positioning right above his bedroom makes it ideal for getting in and out. 'Unbelievable' is the word—so much planning, all for the sake of committing adultery."

We both let out a soft chuckle. It was common enough to hear of castles having secret passageways, but this one had a secret love nest. What sort of man would do that? Was he really so dedicated to his extramarital activities? And yet so afraid of his wife that he'd go to such lengths?

Or perhaps the fun for him was in holding his trysts in secret and not getting caught. It's amusing enough to think about in the abstract, but I'm glad my

husband isn't like that.

"Have you opened the hidden door and looked inside?" I asked.

"No, because I didn't want to accidentally leave any traces that would alert the perpetrator. We have to make them think we have no idea about their method."

"Well...I'm not certain, but I suspect I know who the culprit is."

"Do you now?"

"And their motive. But I'm wondering if they'll still come tonight. They might feel as though they've already accomplished their goal."

"I'm quite sure they'll come," Lord Simeon replied. "I thought our presence alone might make them raise their guard, but we weren't enough to deter them. That being the case, I expect them to continue tonight. They can't just stop suddenly if they want others to think it's a ghost."

That was quite true. If the supposedly spectral phenomenon ended at this exact moment, it would look all the more artificial. Even if there was no strict need for it anymore, they still had to keep going.

The time was almost upon us, and I wondered if the perpetrator was already lying in wait in the attic room. Lord Simeon and I held our breaths and listened.

At least, I tried to. In the end, sleep started to claim victory over me after all. As much as I told myself to fight it, consciousness grew distant, and I began to nod off. I didn't know how long had passed when Lord Simeon tapped me hard on the shoulder. As I stirred, my eyes widened in shock. I hurriedly slipped down off his lap, wiping drool from my mouth.

Furtively peering out from behind the canopy, I listened intently. What was that I could hear—the noise of a chain being wound? Then followed a snapping sound, and the *clunk* of a soft collision. These weren't coming from inside the room. Perhaps from the other side of the wall?

After a soft creaking noise, it became clear that a person was there. The hidden door opened, and at the same instant, dim light shone into the room, glowing from the lantern they were holding. Although it was barely bright

enough to help the intruder watch their step, that would be plenty for eyes that were accustomed to the dark. The figure entered through the hole that had opened up by the fireplace and then set the lantern down on the floor.

Their first port of call was the room's main door. They moved with stealthy footsteps, most likely going to check that it was locked—that they'd have some time if anyone tried to enter.

Then, the figure approached the bed. I felt Lord Simeon's posture shift suddenly as he tensed his body in readiness. Not noticing our presence, the figure reached out toward the wall by the bed.

Ring-a-ling. Just as the bell rang, Lord Simeon threw off the blanket and stood. With a brush of his arm, he swept the canopy away too.

The culprit erupted into a confused shriek. She made no attempt to fight or to run away. Instead, the "ghost" behind all this commotion froze in shock at suddenly seeing Lord Simeon before her.

Moments later, the door to the corridor opened, and royal guards stormed in. The room suddenly grew much brighter. Lord Simeon went around the bed to stand directly in front of the perpetrator, while I put down the crumpled blanket and followed him.

"I... But... You..."

I wondered how it must feel to be surrounded by burly soldiers looking down on you. The young woman's face was contorted as if she could pass out at any moment, and she was trembling so hard that she was unable to form coherent sentences, let alone try to escape.

Seeing her in that state, the royal guards, who had come in expecting to arrest a criminal, hesitated and stopped. I slipped through them and stood in front of the woman.

"Good evening." I paused a moment. "I don't believe we've been introduced. What's your name?"

It was only now, talking to her, that I realized I still didn't know her name. But this young woman, cowering with fright, couldn't bring herself to answer.

It was Lady Anna's lady's maid.

Chapter Nine

I walked over to the secret door and picked up the lantern on the floor beside it. "It's very well made. The joins between the door and the wall are hidden among the decorations, so when it's closed, it's not visible at all. The unlocking mechanism is...ah, I see, if you turn the candelabra, this part rotates and winds up the chain...which then pulls on the bolt. Goodness, it's just like something from an adventure novel! This can't be here purely for having affairs. I bet he wanted the excitement of having a secret base. Whatever the era, men are always little boys at heart!"

Entertained, I rotated the candelabra and then turned it back again several times. *This is it! This is exactly what you want a castle to have! Secret mechanisms just like this one!*

The entrance was so small that even I had to stoop to fit inside. In the narrow space, I could immediately see a ladder. *No room for a staircase, I suppose. Still, the idea of the castle's long-ago lord climbing up this ladder for his secret trysts is a slightly underwhelming image. Hmm... It does spark my spirit of adventure, but it's a bit lacking in romance.*

Lord Simeon wrapped an arm around my waist from behind and pulled me back through the doorway. "Don't go poking around in there in the dark. It's not safe."

When I turned to look at the lady's maid, she was still slouched on the floor. Wondering if she'd recovered from her surprise enough to reply, I went back over to her and crouched down. "What's your name?"

"It's...Lise..." she hesitantly told me. Her voice was barely a flicker, but she did muster an answer.

With a nod, I put a hand on her shoulder. "Can you stand? It must be cold on the floor. Let's sit you down in a chair."

But Lise stayed silent and didn't move. For a moment, I wondered if she was

still paralyzed with fear, but then, all of a sudden, she bowed her head deeply.

“I...I’m so sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry!”

Having lowered herself so far that her head was brushing against the floor, she apologized repeatedly. The royal guards standing above her looked highly uncomfortable. I could see why; even if she was behind all this, she was a trembling young woman apologizing fervently. They probably felt a bit like they were picking on her. Watching her tearfully say sorry over and over, even Lord Simeon was struck silent.

Or so I thought.

“Explanations can come before apologies, please,” he said in a level voice that harbored no sign of being the least bit perturbed. “Besides, it’s not us you need to apologize to, but the people of this castle.”

So much for being struck silent! Yes, that’s the Demon Vice Captain I know.

Though familiarity made me aware that he wasn’t especially angry in this situation, Lise shrank back even more.

“Why have you been doing this?” he asked.

This insistence at last made her muster an answer, though she didn’t raise her head. “I...I only meant it as a prank. Someone told me there was no such thing as ghosts, so I wanted to torment them. Then everyone got scared, and I enjoyed their reactions, so I kept doing it. I’m so sorry!”

Hmm, I thought at some length, cocking my head. Lord Simeon’s brow furrowed as well. It was a plausible enough reason, but there was no way she could make us believe that.

“Tell the truth,” he pressed. “What was your real goal?”

“Th-That *is* the truth. I told you, it was all a prank.”

“If you won’t answer, then I’ll ask your accomplice. The guard stationed inside the room was in on it, wasn’t he?”

Lise jumped with fright. Yes, it was just as Julianne had said. That guard, supposedly keeping watch in the room, had been working with the culprit.

It was probably the man I saw her with in the barn. He must be Lise's lover or friend. He claimed that no one came in and the bell rang on its own, while in fact, I expect he was the one who rang it.

This realization made for quite an underwhelming conclusion. In the end, there was no mystery or strangeness at all, just a pure victory for rationality. *How dull.*

Mr. Rationality Incarnate continued without mercy. "I won't hold back with him. If he won't talk, I'll make him talk—the hard way. What you've done is a crime against the royal family. It's no trivial matter; do you understand that? So naturally, the interrogation will be as harsh as it needs to be. I hope he's prepared for that."

Though Lise didn't say a word, she raised her head with a look of despair. *I see. He's torturing her without using any force at all. The worst thing isn't being tormented oneself, it's fearing that someone precious to you will suffer. And the Demon Vice Captain can choose the right method, right on the spot, and drive his victim to the wall without a second thought. So impressive! This is what I fangirl over. You're the most villainous one here, and I cannot get enough!*

I forced down the urge to pull out my notebook, desperately wanting to make a detailed record of this passionate feeling. But I had to hold off for now. Though I couldn't write it down, this moment would surely remain etched in my memory. Even if I tried, how could I ever forget something so sensationally stimulating? My only regret was that I hadn't made him bring along the riding crop. If he'd been holding one right now, it would have been the most spectacular sight imaginable!

Lord Simeon turned his head to glance at me for a moment. *Don't worry, I'm not going to interfere,* I told him with my gaze alone. *By all means, continue with your interrogation.*

For some reason, in response, his expression morphed to one of utter exhaustion. That lasted only a second before he returned his attention to Lise. "Well? Will you leave him to answer on your behalf?"

Lise's trembling lips moved apart, as if she was about to say something, but then she swallowed the words again. It was clear that she was tremendously

conflicted. Her lovely face twisted in anguish; she looked ready to break out into a cold sweat at any moment. Seeing her state, I did feel sorry for her...but I also couldn't deny that this was her own fault, given what she'd done. *I suppose interrogation puts a burden on our own psyches as well.*

Lord Simeon was the only one present who looked entirely unaffected. His expression neutral, he opened his mouth, ready to speak again.

However, someone else ran into the room, interrupting him. "Wait! Lise isn't to blame. It's all *my* doing!"

It was Lady Anna. Clad in her nightgown and a robe, she rushed over to us.

"Princess," Lise uttered in a tearful voice.

Lady Anna kneeled down beside her, putting her arms around the young woman as if to shield her from Lord Simeon. "I asked her to do it. Lise and that guardsman were only my accomplices. I'm the real culprit. So please, don't blame her."

The royal guards looked surprised...but to me, this was merely confirmation of what I'd already suspected.

Supposing it had been a prank played purely for her entertainment, how would Lise have known about the hidden door? Even the attic room's existence wasn't obvious. For the duchess to not notice, the late Duke of Embourg probably hadn't even known about it. A long-forgotten secret mechanism—how had that been discovered? Who would have been able to do that? When I'd thought about it, the answer had come naturally: it had probably been written down in one of those old memoirs inside that locked bookcase in the lounge.

Among the servants, only the butler was likely to have had access to the key. But we'd already ruled him out as the culprit. He'd been keeping watch with the others, so he couldn't have rung the bell.

That left only one real option. Lady Anna, who had told me tales from long ago, clearly had a strong familiarity with the memoirs' contents. For example, she'd been able to note that the name of Castle Embourg's ill-fated young lady had not been recorded anywhere in them.

When I glanced at Lord Simeon, he was looking at Lady Anna without the

slightest hint of surprise. He'd figured it out too, of course. He only hadn't told me because he was serious to a fault and didn't want to reveal too much when everything was still speculative. That was just who he was.

Just as silence descended on the room, a voice interjected. "Anna?"

The duchess had appeared in the doorway. Julianne approached too, Prince Severin's arm around her shoulder.

I directed a look of protest at His Highness. The duchess was already under a lot of strain; it would have been better to give her some medicine to keep her from waking.

He returned my glare with a dour glance of his own. I gathered that this wasn't his intention. Perhaps either the medicine hadn't worked, or she'd refused to take it.

Like Lady Anna, the duchess was in her nightclothes. She stared at her daughter with disbelief on her face. "What is all this? What's... What's going on?"

Lady Anna silently looked away, avoiding her mother's gaze. Lord Simeon gave a signal to his subordinates, at whose urging Lise and Lady Anna stood up.

"Answer me, Anna. What's happening here? Has this entire matter been your doing?"

Again, only silence.

"Aunt Laetitia," His Highness said softly in an effort to rein in the duchess. "Let's discuss all this tomorrow, with clearer heads. It's late now. A good night's sleep is in order."

The duchess paused briefly. "My apologies. I had no intention of causing you such bother. By all means, everyone should feel free to go to bed. I'll talk to my daughter alone."

"No, Aunt, you should sleep as well. You must be careful of your health. We can surely discuss all of this tomorrow, can't we?"

"I can't imagine sleeping. Not now. Anna, answer me! Why did you do all this?!"

“Aunt...”

Ignoring His Highness’s attempt to calm her, the duchess let her fury rapidly grow. “You brought so much misery to so many people. Caused so much fear and anxiety. And all this time, you had the gall to wear such an innocent look! I never thought you were that kind of person. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” Lady Anna hung her head and gritted her teeth.

This time, it was Lise’s turn to cover for her mistress. “N-N-No, you’ve got it all wrong. It was me. I’m the one at fault. I’m the real culprit.”

Lady Anna, however, quickly put a stop to that. “Lise, you’ve done enough. There’s no need for you to go on.”

“Anna, did you really do it?” her mother asked.

“Yes,” she replied after a moment, balling her hands into tight fists. She looked straight at the duchess now, resolve in her eyes. “The entire thing was my plan. That is no lie. I merely enlisted Lise to help me. I’m the culprit. I was the ‘ghost’ all along.”

This plain, direct answer sent the duchess charging toward her. Before there was any time to intervene, the duchess raised her hand and slapped her daughter across the face. It didn’t make an especially loud noise. Still, this action, full of rage, made both Lise and I flinch back in shock.

Lady Anna didn’t even put a hand up to her cheek. She just looked straight ahead.

The duchess, meanwhile, was shaking—not only with anger, I was sure, but with the shock of being betrayed by her own daughter. “Why would you do something so stupid?!”

“Why? Do you really not know? I’ve told you more than enough times.”

In stark contrast to her mother, Lady Anna’s voice was quiet. But it was a powder keg threatening to explode at any moment. I could hear the tension in every word.

“You’ve never listened to a word I said. I’ve told you over and over that you shouldn’t get too close to that man.”

The duchess's vigor diminished. "What are you..."

"That man"—does she mean the one her mother is suspected of having an affair with?

Being accused in front of everyone left the duchess flustered. "I've told you, Mr. Beranger is only a friend. Kindly stop it with these indecent suspicions."

"Regardless of what he is or isn't, to anyone who sees you, it looks like far more than a mere friendship. I've told you many times that you're getting too close to him, haven't I?"

The duchess didn't say a word, so her daughter continued.

"You're too weak, Mother. You always have to depend on something. You never got used to the local area, you relied entirely on Father, and then, when it was clear that Father didn't have long left, you didn't know what to do... You couldn't manage on your own without someone to lean on. That's why you're being taken advantage of. That man sees your anxiety and loneliness, and he has targeted you."

"That's no more than your own presumption. Mr. Beranger is not that sort of man. He has a respectable background, and he's a good person who's been very kind to me. He's always lending me aid. There's nothing to worry about at all."

"A proper gentleman would refrain from acting in a way that invited suspicion," said Lady Anna, flatly dismissing her mother's words. "That is all no more than a series of excuses. Mother, you've become dependent on that man. All because you're both from Sans-Terre and can talk about it, and because he doesn't look down on you. Because he acts kindly and speaks nicely to you. He's your only friend, so you can't part with him even if it damages your reputation. If you lost him, you'd be all alone again. And you're scared of that, so you pretend not to notice any of the accusations. Isn't that right?!"

"Stop it!"

"No matter how many times I tell you this, you don't listen. So I decided the only way was to have Father tell you off instead. The ghost was my creation, but *you're* the one who summoned it!"

The duchess raised her hand again. But this time, she stopped, holding it in

midair. Both she and Lady Anna had begun to cry. His Highness walked over and gently lowered his aunt's still-trembling hand.



Without saying another word, Lady Anna ran out of the room. Lise went after her, looking panicked. The royal guards momentarily started moving, intending to catch her, but Lord Simeon put an arm out to restrain them.

The room was left in a state of awkward silence. The duchess had buried her face in her hands.

“Aunt Laetitia,” said His Highness, “I think you should go back to your room now. Both of you need some time to compose yourselves. Get some rest and we can talk about this tomorrow.”

“My... My apologies... I’m so...”

“Don’t worry. We’re here to help assuage your worries. That’s what we came for, so no apologies are necessary.”

Watching His Highness trying to soothe his aunt, I sensed what was needed, so I stepped closer and took his place. “Come now. Why don’t we go?”

I put a hand on her back and gently urged her forward. She walked without complaint. With Julianne’s help, I guided the duchess back to her neighboring bedroom. The small bedside table held a jug of water and a medicine bottle.

“This is what the doctor prescribed you, isn’t it? Why don’t you have some now?”

The duchess, now sitting on the bed, shook her head weakly. What did that mean? Had she already taken some, or did she not want to?

“It’s all right, Your Highness.” I kneeled down in front of her and looked up at her pallid face. “Don’t worry. The two of you have been at odds, but nothing’s happened that can’t be mended. Lady Anna was sincerely trying to protect you, her mother. Regardless of whether her methods were the right ones, she put in all that effort because she wanted to help you.”

“But...” A continual stream of tears spilled from the duchess’s eyes. “It’s all my fault... All of this... Because I’m so useless...”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Even my daughter’s sick of me... She hates me... There’s nothing I can...”

“That’s not true,” I insisted. “She doesn’t hate you at all. Lady Anna’s goal wasn’t to condemn, but to protect you. You’re her beloved mother—the only one she has. You were also fiercely determined to keep her safe, weren’t you? It’s the same desire. You both care deeply about each other, but you weren’t quite on the same page. All you have to do is fix that. Once tempers have cooled, you should discuss it all thoroughly and clear the air.”

The duchess had lost any ability to control her endless tears, even in front of a pair of girls roughly her daughter’s age. Seeing her helplessness, Julianne kneeled by her feet as well.

“My adoptive mother has told me about you, her older sister. She said that you’ve always been introverted and found it difficult to socialize. That you always hid behind her, and often fretted over small matters, which could quickly leave you despondent. She said she worried about you all the time, because even as the years passed, you were always so precarious.”

Th-Those are some rather harsh words. I can, however, picture them coming from Duchess Christine... She isn’t the type to willingly put herself in the spotlight either, but her serene exterior hides a scathing interior. As sisters, the two were very different indeed.

“Despite saying all that, she smiled as if revealing a beloved treasure. She said you were incredibly kind. That although you were quick to anger and easily got hurt, that enabled you to understand others’ pain. She told me she loved her dear sister.”

The duchess only continued to sob.

“My real parents are frustrating individuals, and they’ve caused me all kinds of hardship, but I still can’t dismiss them or say that I don’t care. I have happy memories with them too, and ultimately, I still like them. I’m sure Lady Anna feels the same way. Even if she finds you vexing, her love for you exceeds that. She wants to protect you.”

Now the duchess closed her eyes. The rivulets running down her cheeks reached her chin and formed into falling droplets. She let out a momentary breath, then raised her head again. “I’m sorry,” she said at last, mustering a wisp of a smile. She looked at us through moist eyes. “How pathetic of me...

What a weak, useless person I am.”

As she focused intently on us, I couldn’t help thinking that, for the first time since meeting her, I felt like she had actually noticed our presence. Until now, even when she’d been directly facing us, it had been like she was looking at something else, off in her own world. Like her voice could barely reach us from beyond the glass—and now, at last, she had returned to this side.

“I’m the oldest and wisest, so I should be the bedrock of the household, but instead all I do is cry and lean on others... How pathetic to need youngsters like you to give me encouragement.”

“No, don’t say that.” Still kneeling, I put my hand over hers. At this stage, I abandoned all thought of keeping appropriate distance. In this situation, age and status didn’t matter. “Even when you get older and gain more experience, painful times are still painful, and sad times are still sad. Don’t try to force yourself to go beyond your limits.”

“I haven’t been trying at all...just wallowing, unable to do a thing. Everything Anna said is correct.”

“Are you sure about that? I think you’ve absolutely been taking action. To protect Lady Anna from a curse, you asked to relinquish the castle, didn’t you?”

“That was only an attempt to run away.”

“Running away from something bad is entirely natural.”

At this, the duchess’s eyes suddenly widened. She brushed away the droplets clinging to her eyelashes.

“A person who truly can’t do anything won’t even try to run away. They harbor discontent at the status quo, but they fear change. They’re paralyzed by the worry that whatever comes instead will be even worse. They suffer, but they’re used to it, so they don’t attempt to alter their situation. All the while, they sit and wait, hoping maybe the wind will change on its own, or someone will come to rescue them.”

The duchess’s expression shifted subtly.

“You raised your voice and asked for help. You stretched your arm of your

own accord. That takes real effort, doesn't it? For a mother to take her child under her wing and run away is a noble, courageous thing. That's what I believe."

Under her breath, the duchess whispered, "Is that true?" This was not directed at me; she was asking herself.

"Because you sought help, we came to the castle and learned about the problem. That opened up the path to solve it. You deserve credit for that."

She had no words in response. Though I'd thought her tears had stopped, they now began to well up again. However, her expression was far softer than before. These were not purely tears of anguish.

Just then, the duchess's lady's maid entered the room, making her presence known in an understated voice. Either she'd heard the commotion herself or someone had informed her. She was a woman of around the duchess's age with a composed air about her, and she assured us that we could leave things to her now. *Sleep will do the duchess a world of good.* We said goodbye and left.

Prince Severin and Lord Simeon were waiting outside in the corridor.

"How is my aunt?" His Highness asked.

"Significantly calmer," I replied. When I explained that we'd been able to talk with her, His Highness nodded, relief on his face. "Is Lady Anna in her room?"

I looked over at the adjacent closed door. Her well-being also concerned me, and I wondered aloud if I should visit her right now, but I was told not to.

"It's late," His Highness said. "You two should go back to your rooms and sleep."

Admittedly, it was the middle of the night. Agreeing that it was better to let her rest, I was escorted back to my room by Lord Simeon, while His Highness similarly escorted Julianne.

"Don't stay awake," said my husband. "Go right to sleep."

"I will, don't worry." I paused, then asked, "Is Lady Anna all right?"

"She didn't seem to be brooding over it as much as Her Highness the Duchess, so I'm sure there's no need for concern. In fact, I suspect she's relieved at

having made her point and gotten this out in the open.”

He leaned down and kissed me gently on the cheek.

“You’ve often argued with your parents as well, haven’t you?” he asked me.

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘often.’ Sometimes.”

“Well, if you say so.”

“I think I argue with you a lot more.”

Smiling, he kissed me again, this time on the lips. This brief contact wasn’t enough for me. I took off my glasses and his—they were only getting in the way—and wrapped my arms around him.

“An argument is caused when people who care about each other have differences of opinion,” Lord Simeon remarked afterward. “That doesn’t mean they won’t make up. One day, today’s events will become tomorrow’s memories.”

“You’re right.”

I still remembered arguments with my parents and brother, and with Lord Simeon of course. Looking back, they all seemed completely ridiculous, but in the moment, it had all felt deadly serious. I’d been angry, tearful, despondent. And I was sure we’d continue to have the same sorts of arguments in the future.

However, the only reason these tiffs affected me so much was because I cared deeply about the other person involved. I loved them, so I was determined to convey my feelings to them.

There are times when not achieving that leads to conflict. If there’s love, though, you can get past it. I’m sure the duchess and Lady Anna will be just fine.

I felt his breath as we smiled at each other before reluctantly parting. Without his body heat, I was suddenly aware of the cold.

That was all for tonight. His hand on my back, Lord Simeon ushered me in the direction of the bed.

I’d be much happier if I could fall asleep in his arms. But yes, I know, he’s on

duty until we get back to Sans-Terre.

After seeing him off, I quickly got ready to sleep. The summoning bell wouldn't ring anymore. Even the ghosts were quietly watching over the night.

Tomorrow, we can talk again. Plans for the future will be discussed, and I'm certain everything will start moving in the right direction. Confident of that, I snuggled up under the covers.

Sleep came quickly, escorted by the warmth of my bed. As soon as I closed my eyes and gave in to the pleasant slumber, I *almost* had a thought—didn't another problem still remain? But my awareness was soon bathed in a sea of sleep. I left the shore behind and rowed off into the world of dreams.

Chapter Ten

It was relatively early when I woke up the next morning, and I assumed everyone else would still be sleeping after the night's commotion. As such, I got dressed on my own rather than calling for Joanna.

I donned the outfit I'd brought to use as a disguise. *A little walk around won't do any harm. I can always get changed again later.*

Although it was now spring, the air was still cold at this hour. After layering a shawl over my upper body, I crept out of the room.

The east wing, with its array of guest rooms, was deathly silent. Straining my ears, I could just make out the sounds of activity far in the distance; the servants were presumably up and about already. I puzzled over where I could go without disturbing them or accidentally waking any of the others, and after a moment of consideration, I opted for the chapel. To get there, I descended one level and passed through the southern corridor. The windows were clattering audibly; the wind was clearly rather strong today.

The door to the chapel was already ajar. *Do they leave it open all the time, perhaps?* When I peered inside, I spied a figure standing before the altar. From behind, I could tell that it was a young woman with long, chestnut brown hair and white clothing.

Is it her? The ghostly young lady?! At last! I began to lean forward eagerly, but a second later, I realized that I was mistaken. Looking properly, I could see she was dressed in a nightgown and robe. *Well, I suppose it wasn't all that likely.*

I stepped into the chapel.

"Marielle?" said Lady Anna, turning around upon hearing my footsteps. Her voice came out as a mere sliver.

As I walked up, I bid her good morning and asked, "Are you doing morning prayers? Aren't you cold?" I removed my shawl and put it over her shoulders, wrapping it around tightly to keep her warm. She didn't object.

“Thank you,” she said after a hesitant moment. “About last night... No, about everything that’s happened... I’m sorry.”

Just as Lord Simeon had suggested, she didn’t seem overly down. She delivered both her gratitude and her apology in a firm voice.

“You haven’t been here all night, have you?”

“No,” she replied. “I tried going to bed, but I couldn’t sleep a wink. Not to mention that being in such close proximity to Mother made me feel awkward.”

“I can understand that. When you’ve had an argument with family, you don’t want to see them again straightaway. Although doing so does make it easier to reconcile.”

Taking a seat in the frontmost pew, I said a good morning prayer to God. *We’ve made it one step forward compared to yesterday, and it looks like new paths are opening. I hope I can help mother and daughter proceed in the right direction.*

Lady Anna slowly came and sat next to me.

“You need to apologize to the servants too,” I said. “It wasn’t nice of you to scare them like that.”

Lady Anna wore a look of fright as her breath caught in her throat. She ducked her head. “Y-Yes, you’re right.”

Those men and women had taken care of her since childhood. Even as the daughter of the duchess, she was in no position to raise her head to them now. I could relate to her fear of them being angry with her. *Yes, I’ve been in that position before. Many times...*

“If you like, I’ll go with you. We can do it together,” I said. “I’m sure if you explain, they’ll all understand.”

“That would be nice...”

“You must take full responsibility as the mistress to ensure that Lise isn’t blamed. And the guard who helped her... Well, I suppose he was neglecting his duty, so he’ll likely be reprimanded by his superior.”

“He doesn’t deserve it. That was all my fault too.”

“Perhaps, but he’s the one who decided to do it. He’s a grown man whose job is to ensure the castle grounds remain safe, but he took part in causing all this distress. That can’t go without punishment. He should have found a different way to assist you—stopped you and suggested a better method. Instead, he simply went along with your plan, and that’s his own responsibility. At least...I’m sure that’s what Lord Simeon would say. And I suspect Prince Severin would agree.”

Lady Anna nodded, despondent.

No one had actually been injured, and the overall harm was very minor. Still, it couldn’t be dismissed so readily. If a punishment was due and none was given, unpleasantness would remain and subsequently serve as a precedent for others to perpetrate misdeeds.

“Still, what spurred him to commit such a sin was your own sin, Lady Anna. I hope you’re keenly aware that this was more than just a prank.”

“Yes...” she said, genuine remorse in her tone.

I put a hand on her back. “Having said that, I think if you earnestly face up to it all, reconciling with your mother will be easy.”

Lady Anna raised her head and looked at me. In her eyes, I saw no hint of disgruntlement.

I smiled broadly. “The duchess isn’t angry anymore. She blames herself, not you. Calling her weak appears to have made an impact.”

Lady Anna stared back at me.

“And it’s not as though your aim was to make her feel bad, was it? Only to make her confront the issue at hand. I think you’ve achieved that goal.”

Her face contorted just slightly, as if tears were welling up. She nodded and slowly began to reply. “Mother, she... She’s not comfortable being around people. She’s so worried about how others perceive her—how they speak of her. And because of that, she struggles to make any friends.”

It was just what Duchess Christine had told Julianne. Considering Lady Laetitia’s temperament, fulfilling her role as Duchess of Embourg must have

been a bit of a struggle.

“When she first moved to Embourg, I’m told she made a genuine effort to form connections with the locals. She accepted every invitation and hosted tea parties here at the castle. Father was still in good health back then, so he was active as well. Only, she’s such a poor conversationalist that...she picked terrible topics and gradually invited animosity from the townspeople.”

“What sorts of topics?”

A wry smile formed on Lady Anna’s lips—an expression that spoke of affection and frustration toward a difficult family member. “She was so eager to do her best as Duchess of Embourg that she dove headfirst into conversation, even though it is far from her strongest suit. I think that’s admirable. Likely thinking that people would enjoy hearing about grand and impressive scenes, she always talked about what she knew. In other words, about Sans-Terre.”

“Ahh, I see...”

I understood now. It was all too clear. *So that was the genesis of the ladies’ comments at the party yesterday.*

“Apparently, she would talk all about high society in Sans-Terre, how fabulous the theaters and the palace are, what sorts of functions are held there, and what her girlhood days were like. Initially, there was nothing wrong with that. But as it went on and on, everyone got sick of it. They took it in a different spirit than she intended.”

The duchess had probably been trying so hard, imagining her stories would bring joy and excitement. But the townspeople perceived an ulterior motive that wasn’t there—in her words, they heard conceitedness and disdain for their more provincial backgrounds.

That group of disagreeable women I met yesterday were probably all the more primed to feel animosity toward her because they’re roughly her age. Rousing their rivalry was all too easy.

“I was born and raised in Embourg, so I can understand the residents’ feelings, but in the end, this town is halfway between a city and the countryside. Our transport and trade links are expanding, and it’s possible to

get more or less anything you want here. Trends from the capital arrive quickly as well. I think we can pride ourselves on living in a perfectly modern town, but of course, I also realize it'll never live up to Sans-Terre. For those already frustrated by that, Mother's anecdotes were probably grating."

"Her efforts backfired quite spectacularly, it seems."

With a sigh, Lady Anna nodded. "There are some who understand that Mother doesn't have any ill intent. It's not as though she's hated by every single person in town. But hearing one person bad-mouthing her makes me worry that they're saying the same thing to everyone. Before long, people were making sardonic remarks, and my Mother, who was uncomfortable in those situations to begin with, couldn't bear it."

"So she stopped going out in public and hid away in the castle."

"Yes. When Father was still healthy, she did join him on official business, but that all ended years ago. At times when it was absolutely necessary, I've gone in her place."

"You've had rather a tough time of it." As her father's health had rapidly declined, her mother had also grown more afraid of social interactions and had stopped going out. Any teenage girl would have to be brave to get through all that.

"Unlike Mother, I'm quite a bold and impudent person. I take after Father in that regard. Despite his weak constitution, he was always bright and cheerful. Danton gave me a great deal of advice, and the other servants were good to me as well. If it had remained that way, I'd have been all right. Mother stayed within the castle, but she was in fine fettle. I knew that Father would die someday, but I thought we'd get through it together...until *that man* appeared."

Lady Anna's hands clutched her skirt. She'd worn a benign expression while recalling the past, but now, a hint of anger stained her kind smile.

"Your mother's friend...Mr. Beranger, wasn't it? He's a scholar, if I recall?"

"Yes. He asked to come here under the pretext of studying the castle for his research...and his requests to look around grew quite numerous. Such an old

castle presented no end of interest to a history lover, apparently. My father even joked about opening it to the public and charging an entry fee. I've considered the idea quite seriously myself, so I can certainly understand the appeal of coming here...but somehow, he got awfully close to Mother."

I felt as though there had been quite a jump in the story, but Lady Anna explained that she didn't really know how that had happened.

"Apparently, when he first introduced himself, he said he hailed from Sans-Terre, which must have piqued my mother's interest. This meeting occurred when Father's condition was getting worse every day—we were afraid that he wasn't long for this world, so talking to an outsider might have been a pleasant distraction for Mother. And, well...I suspect that's why they spoke so much. As it turns out, they got along well and became rather close friends."

"When was this?" I asked.

Lady Anna strained to recall. "Around Foundation Day, I believe... Yes, that's right. We'd been asked if we'd attend the celebrations at the palace. It must have been late June or early July."

That put the timeline at about half a year before the Duke of Embourg's passing. Naturally, Lady Anna and the duchess would have been in no position to make the journey to the palace.

"The man said he would be staying in Embourg for a while, and Mother told him to come and visit again. He called on her numerous times after that. The pretense of his 'research' was, however, gone. All he did was talk to Mother. I understand why that made her so happy. He was from Sans-Terre too, which meant she could talk about the city without any worry of it being taken the wrong way. Even though she'd secluded herself, she still longed for friendship deep down. But there's no way he could have enjoyed it. Putting up with the same topics of conversation every time—hearing about Father, about her petty grumbles, and talking at length about her anxieties—anyone would hate that, surely? Going on like that to relatives or old friends would be one thing, but this was a man she'd only just met. Why would someone with no obligation visit over and over to subject himself to such boredom? There is definitely something odd about that."

She has a point, I thought. Making friends wasn't especially strange in and of itself, but the details did strike me as peculiar. "Did he have feelings for her, perhaps? Love at first sight?"

"Maybe. But if so, I imagine he'd have been disabused of that notion after talking to her so much."

Lady Anna didn't mince words; that was the sort of harsh opinion that only family would dare to say out loud.

"Besides, she was already married, and he knew that her gravely ill husband was living in the same building. Why, then, would he still pursue it?"

"No gentleman of sound character would do that."

"Exactly!" As Lady Anna's fervor increased, she turned her whole body to face me. "Wondering if he was up to no good, I arranged for one of the guards to follow her. That was...well, Lise's lover, who helped with my scheme."

So he really is her lover. And even back then, he was involved.

"But he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Due to the long-term nature of Mr. Beranger's stay, he'd rented a cheap apartment rather than a hotel room, and he had no fellow lodgers. His reputation in the neighborhood was perfectly ordinary as well. He said a friendly hello to people he encountered, caused no excessive noise, and kept the corridor clean. His neighbor occasionally shared food with him, and in exchange, he'd help them move heavy furniture and such."

"Sounds like a normal part of the community," I replied.

"Indeed." She sighed. "I even inquired with his university to ask if they really had an enrolled member by the name of Edmond Beranger. Sure enough, they replied that he was a researcher in their history department. They even said he was currently on a leave of absence, studying in the countryside..."

Lady Anna was skilled indeed. She'd conducted a far more thorough investigation than I'd have imagined. However, all it proved was that Mr. Beranger hadn't given himself a false title.

"He didn't misrepresent his position, then," I said.

“So it seems. If his whole identity had been a lie, it would have been so simple.”

However much Lady Anna cautioned her mother that the man was suspicious, she didn’t have any definitive evidence. Without proof, she could be dismissed as merely assuming the worst, leaving her with little recourse to argue otherwise.

And indeed, Lady Anna explained that her arguments with the duchess had gone exactly along those lines. “Just because he’s genuinely a scholar doesn’t mean he’s trustworthy. I told Mother that his behavior was plainly suspicious, but she wouldn’t listen. He provided more than just the happiness of having made a friend, I suppose—he also became a lifeline amid all her fears. However, I also made an error in judgment. I should have asked His Majesty or Aunt Christine for help, but I didn’t want to bother them with such a... No, I’m just making excuses. The truth is, I was embarrassed for anyone to know about this. I refrained from mentioning it because I didn’t want anyone to know about our shame.”

Her slender shoulders slumped. Despite the levelheaded impression she gave, she was still only eighteen years old. When all of this was happening, she’d likely wished to turn to her father, but she’d been unable to because of his deathly illness. Coping with all of that on her own would have been a struggle indeed.

“While that was happening, Father died. Mother and I went into mourning. I thought that would at least keep Beranger away for the time being...”

“But he didn’t care that you were in mourning?”

“Not at all. In fact, his visits became more frequent. He would barge in even when we were entertaining visitors offering their condolences. I wanted to shout at him and physically throw him out. Though apparently, when the king and queen visited, the security guards blocked his access and he couldn’t approach the castle.”

“But he still tried even then?”

He’d visited while we were staying here as well. The more I heard, the more my suspicion grew. If a house already had guests, you’d normally refrain from

imposing. Especially if he'd heard that a high-ranking figure was here... Though perhaps, like the mayor, he was intentionally trying to get close to His Highness?

Lady Anna heaved a heavy sigh. "Mother gave so little concern that the servants grew suspicious of their relationship, and that couldn't stay hidden forever. Before long, rumors spread outside the castle. As I struggled to think of any way to make her finally see sense, I came up with the idea: make her think Father was angry with her."

"And thus a ghost story was born. And you intentionally spread the rumor that it was a message from your father, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry." She drew back, dispirited, but there was a hint of playfulness in her air as well. *Perhaps Lord Simeon was right. With everything out in the open, she looks relieved.*

"And since you knew about the secret door, you hit upon the idea of using that."

"No, I didn't find it until after Father passed away. I remembered something along those lines being mentioned in the old records, so I secretly investigated whether the mechanism was still there."

"Well done for finding it. You might have the makings of a detective!"

"So says the person who casually found it in the space of a day. I honestly never expected to be caught so quickly...but it's probably for the best. I succeeded in terrifying my mother, but her fears were nothing like I'd expected. Her health grew quite worrying as well. I was already debating at what point I should give up."

To be fair, it was Lord Simeon who worked it out.

I stood up, urging Lady Anna to do the same. We couldn't stay sitting here forever; with no fireplace and a draft from above, it was awfully cold, and the wind was blowing in through the propped-open door as well. We had to head back, particularly for Lady Anna's sake, as she was so lightly dressed.

By the time we left the chapel and walked along the corridor, the castle was showing far more signs of life. The royal guards were also up and about.

“Lady Anna, why don’t we talk again after breakfast?”

“With Mother there too?”

“Are you against that?”

“Hmm...” She looked away, her expression conflicted, and stopped walking, pretending to look through the window. *Maybe it’s still too raw for her to see her mother. But we can only stay until around noon today, so there’s no time for dawdling.*

“If you talk now that you’re both calmer, you won’t start arguing. The duchess understands your feelings. In these situations, it’s best to seize the moment and try to resolve matters rather than letting them fester. Otherwise, you’ll just overthink and worry.”

“Wait a moment...”

“Don’t worry. Prince Severin will mediate, and I’ll help too.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Lady Anna’s tone had shifted. It held a different kind of nervousness now. She ran over to the window, and I quickly followed.

“The town...” she murmured. “It doesn’t look right.”

The south-facing windows offered an unobstructed view of Embourg. As I gazed at it, side by side with Lady Anna, I saw the point of concern straightaway.

“A fire?” she asked.

Smoke was rising from a dense area of the town, and the quantity was too much for a bonfire. Besides, it wasn’t in the right place for one; I couldn’t see any open stretch of land. With my limited eyesight, I could only make out a rough picture, but it looked to be coming from the buildings, not the ground.

“Yes, that’s a fire,” I replied. “In a place with an awful lot of buildings...”

“It’s the residential district. That area is full of apartment complexes.”

“Oh!” Now that she said it, I remembered. On our tour through the city when we’d first arrived, I’d seen a particularly crowded area. There had been

warehouses on the other side of the road—was that where the fire had started?

“The space between the buildings looked very tight. Too much so to even fit a carriage between them.”

“Yes, you’re right. This is not good. It’ll spread!”

Lady Anna spoke with an anxious voice. A fire in a densely packed area was terrifying. Furthermore, the wind was strong today and would certainly fan the flames. The blaze had to be dealt with as soon as possible or there would be many victims.

We sprinted to the second floor.

“Your Highness! There’s an emergency!”

“Have you gone so far as to assail me while I’m in bed? If you must, at least go out and come back in again with an age-appropriate degree of sensual allure.”

“If I were to assail anyone, it would be Lord Simeon, not you! Anyway, look outside. The town is ablaze!”

Just to be clear, I didn’t charge all the way to his bed. I merely stood in the doorway and called over to him. Also, I knocked politely and was granted entry by the royal guard on duty inside the room. Let the record show that I was obeying all the rules of decorum!

The clock had just passed six. His Highness, still under his covers, poked his face out with a grumpy look. “What good is telling me? The town must have its own fire brigade.”

“The fire brigade’s job is to fight the fire, but that’s not the only duty here. Analyzing the situation and—if needed—organizing an evacuation is important too.”

“Is it that dreadful a fire?” He got up, looking rather cold, and draped a robe over his shoulders while walking to the window. Just then, Lord Simeon arrived, and Julianne appeared behind him. She was already dressed, having apparently been awake already.

“Marielle,” she said, “why are you making such a fuss at this early hour?”

“It’s awful, Lord Simeon! The town—”

“I heard. Please excuse me a moment.”

He slipped past me and joined his master at the window. Both their faces drew together at the narrow pane; the poor view prompted them to open it and lean out.

“Over there?” said His Highness.

“The most densely populated area,” Lord Simeon replied. “I hope we can stop it from spreading...”

“The wind is awfully strong for that. An evacuation plan might be needed after all.”

Now that he had grasped the situation, His Highness sprang into action. He immediately drew back from the window and started getting changed; I went outside, of course.

Since Julianne was the only one present who didn’t know what was going on yet, I told her about the fire. She, too, was shocked to learn that a place we had passed by just a few days earlier was now burning. “Will they even be able to bring pumps there?”

“A water source might be the bigger problem. Besides, those are apartment buildings. Even with a pump, I don’t know if you’d reach the upper floors.”

“Does that mean the only option is leaving it all to burn?” She paused a moment. “It’s going to be absolutely awful.”

“Yes...”

If only one building was burning, things might yet be salvageable. But if the fire spread rapidly and started to cover a wide area...there was a chance the whole district would burn to the ground. It would be a catastrophe.

In my mind’s eye, I recalled the people who had waved at our carriage from the roadside. They had crowded in upon hearing that His Highness the Crown Prince would be passing through, all their faces gleaming, child and adult alike. They’d welcomed the prince with such joyful smiles.

Their houses, the town they lived in—it was all burning. They’d lose every

possession they had. If they were unlucky, even their lives. Imagining it made my heart ache.

As Julianne and I looked at one other with apprehension, Lord Simeon was close by, briskly informing his assembled subordinates about the situation. "All of you, be ready to move at a moment's notice," he concluded.

"Yes, sir!"

Standing beside him and listening to all this, a thought suddenly occurred to me. Naturally, we should provide as much support as we could. Wasn't it less than ideal for the royal guards to be taking the lead, though? Their white uniforms stood out. Anyone would think that the effort was led exclusively by His Highness the Crown Prince.

I turned my eyes to the south wing's array of doors. Lady Anna had gone back to her room to get dressed. It wasn't her I was worried about, however, but the duchess.

The door to her room still looked closed. *If she took some medicine after Julianne and I left, she might still be asleep. Ideally, I'd like the duchess to take command, but I suppose we shouldn't wake her unnecessarily...*

Lord Simeon put a hand on my shoulder. "Both of you should go back to your rooms. You mustn't run off to the town on your own."

"I know that. I was only thinking that we should tell the duchess."

Even Lord Simeon didn't have an immediate response to that. Like me, he glanced along the hallway. "She's probably still asleep."

"You're right, but... Listen, before setting off, could you perhaps borrow some uniforms from the castle guards and change into those?"

"Excuse me?" Lord Simeon furrowed his brow and stared at me.

I hurriedly gathered my thoughts and relayed them. "I definitely think the rescue effort is urgent. Only, if the first people to arrive are clearly royal guards, the townspeople will believe His Highness arranged the operation."

"Yes," he said after a hesitant moment, perplexity in his voice. His light blue eyes held a question: *And what's the problem with that?*

Curbing my impatience, I sorted through my thoughts again and tried to explain clearly, hoping he'd understand. "You're aware that the duchess has found it difficult to make friends among the townspeople and is rather lonely, aren't you? She also hasn't performed any public duties for a long time and has secluded herself in the castle—I'm sure you heard that when I did. If the Royal Order of Knights comes to the rescue in this situation, the duchess will be fiercely criticized as having done nothing. On the other hand, if the effort is carried out under her direction, many people will see her in a new light. It's slightly calculating, but I'd like you to disguise yourselves as castle guards."

Lord Simeon fell silent for a moment. Knowing him, he'd quickly picked up the thread of my idea. I'd gotten my point across. However, he didn't agree straightaway. He looked conflicted. "I understand what you're saying," he replied, "but I'm not sure it's appropriate."

"For an ordinary civilian, it would be a crime to falsely wear such a uniform, but you're members of a military organization, just like them."

"No. This castle's guards belong to the Embourg police force. They may be different from ordinary officers, but they're still police, not military."

"Oh, really?"

Since they were guards protecting a castle inhabited by members of the royal family, I was so sure that they were army forces dispatched by the kingdom. *Although now that I think, they don't carry guns or sabers...they also seem unlike the military officers I know. Not to mention how different their uniforms are.*

"Well, I... No, listen, what organization they're part of doesn't matter right now. These are exceptional circumstances, so surely you can borrow uniforms in the spirit of cooperation?"

"Cooperation is one thing; misrepresentation is quite another."

"Can't you be at least a *tiny* bit flexible?! I know! You could go in civilian clothes!"

"I didn't bring any civilian clothes. Only changes of uniform."

"Gah!" I bellowed.

As we were arguing, His Highness came out to join us. “What was that noise supposed to be? You sounded like some sort of livestock.”

Goodness, he got dressed quickly. In a great hurry, I gave him the same explanation I’d given Lord Simeon.

“I see,” he replied. “It makes sense, but I’ll need to talk to Aunt Laetitia first. Don’t jump the gun.” He gave me a light clap on the head, then made his way over to the duchess’s room, looking gallant as ever.

I rushed after him. “Don’t you think it’s better to let her rest as long as possible? And she probably took some of that medicine.”

“The medicine is to calm her nerves so she can fall asleep more easily. It won’t make it impossible to rouse her. I share your worries, but it’s as you said—Aunt Laetitia herself needs to take action in this scenario. Even if we do end up acting in her name, it should be after talking it through with her.”

Even while discussing his worries, His Highness’s face was stern. His pace didn’t slow either. In no time at all, he had reached the duchess’s room and was knocking on the door.

“Aunt, it’s Severin. Sorry to bother you so early in the morning, but there’s a state of emergency in the town. Would you mind getting up?”

Despite how concerned he was about the duchess’s well-being, his tenor had changed suddenly. He had raised his voice in a bold manner, and his knock had been firm as well. I had the feeling he was addressing her not as her nephew, but as the crown prince. Similarly, he was demanding the duchess act as a royal princess. This was no time to brook any slackness.

I was fully ready to stay behind him, polite and unobtrusive—but suddenly, His Highness turned around, reached out, and pushed me right up to the door. Commanded by his gaze and a gesture, I quietly opened it.

Peering in through a narrow crack so that none of the men would see inside, I said, “Excuse me, I’m just—oh.”

Though I’d quite expected to see her still in bed, the duchess was already up. The butler was also by her side. “Mrs. Flaubert? Where is His Highness?”

She wasn't dressed for the day yet, but she had a robe on, and her hair had been put neatly in order. Deciding she was sufficiently decent, I opened the door wider. "My apologies. We thought you were still sleeping."

"So, you're already up," His Highness said, entering behind me. He looked at the butler. "Did you receive word already?"

Danton nodded. "Yes. A guard reported it."

"I see. Aunt Laetitia..."

But before His Highness could say anything, the duchess forestalled him. "Good morning. Apologies that you have to see me in this state. I just told Danton this, but I'd like to work with the firefighters and police to evacuate the townspeople. Last time a fire broke out in that district, it caused quite some harm. If we don't evacuate them quickly, there will be large-scale loss of life once again. I realize you're leaving around noon, but due to these circumstances, I won't have time to attend you today. I cannot apologize enough for—"

It was as though she'd turned into a different person altogether. The very duchess who had been trembling and on the verge of tears for the past few days now spoke with firm confidence and projected strength. The transformation was shocking.

Even His Highness's eyes widened, but he quickly offered his help. "We were thinking the same thing. If you need additional manpower, we'll send the royal guards."

"I...see." The duchess hesitated and directed her gaze at the butler, seeking his input.

"If we ask for such assistance, it would be a great help," the butler contributed. "Consider that some will take advantage of the commotion to commit misdeeds. We need to not only evacuate the people, but also manage such concerns. I think it would be a great reassurance to have the military officers' aid."

"Yes," said the duchess, "but...their job is to protect His Highness. Surely they need to stay with him. Besides, you must have preparations to make for your

departure.”

“Don’t be silly,” His Highness replied. “Under these circumstances, I’ll be delaying my departure. One or two of my knights can stay behind while the others go into action.”

Naturally, he couldn’t just disregard this emergency. And considering the commotion, it was possible that our boat couldn’t depart anyway.

Lord Simeon agreed with this assessment. It was decided that my husband would remain at the castle along with one of his subordinates, while the others—ten in total—would head to the town alongside the castle guards. My request that they disguise themselves was, however, rejected.

“The royal guards won’t stand out all that much,” His Highness told me. “There aren’t too many of them, and they’ll only be providing logistical support.”

I still think they’ll stand out...but I suppose if it was revealed that royal knights had donned disguises, things would be even worse. Once the fire is out, the duchess will have a great deal of work to do in terms of relief measures. Judging by her current state, she’ll serve perfectly well in that regard, so yes—let’s go the honest route, with no subterfuge.

The knights and guards got on their horses and galloped away from the castle all in one group. The sight of them going across the drawbridge and down the hill was impressive indeed. It was as if they were riding off to battle. I watched from the gate with the duchess, praying that it wouldn’t be too great a disaster.

Servants came out as well, gathering at a point where they could see the city, nervous looks on their faces. I couldn’t imagine how worried they must’ve been; many of them likely had family or friends down there. It would be dangerous to go and check, however, so the duchess and the butler went around telling them all to stay here and wait.

Just as I was wondering if there was anything I could do to help, I spotted Lady Anna a short distance away. Her gaze was directed not at the town, but at the people in front of her. With her eyes, she intently followed her mother; the latter had done the bare minimum of preparation to be seen in public, with her hair still down and no makeup on, and was now rushing about.

I walked over to Lady Anna. “We had intended for Prince Severin to take charge, merely informing the duchess, but there turned out to be no need for that.”

Her young face turned to me.

I continued, “When we went to her room, she was already awake and discussing plans for the rescue operation.”

“Yes,” Lady Anna replied after a moment. “I heard.”

“I was honestly rather surprised. She’s confidently giving orders without a hint of timidity. I’d been laboring under quite a rude misapprehension. The duchess isn’t as weak as she seemed. She has a will and strength quite equal to her position.”

“It came as a surprise to me as well. I didn’t think she was capable of it.” A tearful smile formed on Lady Anna’s face. All kinds of emotions seemed to be jostling within her. She couldn’t help but smile, but she also couldn’t contain the tears welling up.

“It’s like looking at Father. Whenever anything happened, he’d take charge just like that. All Mother ever did was hold me close and watch from the sidelines... I thought she couldn’t act without Father telling her what to do...”

“Then this must be a mindset she inherited from your father. She must have learned a great deal by observing him, even if from afar.”

“From...my father...?”

“Now that the Duke of Embourg is gone, she must be doing all she can to take on the mantle herself. People show their true worth in a crisis. Ordinarily, she may be a shut-in who struggles with socializing, but if need be, she can rise to the occasion—and do what needs to be done. She’s a fine mother.”

Without saying a word in response, Lady Anna, who had mostly been looking down at the ground, raised her head high. Clutching her skirt, she started running. She stood with the duchess now, and as she sprang into action alongside her, I watched with a feeling of happiness.

There’s no more need to worry about those two. They’ll be fine. I’m sure the

late duke is happy as well. From now on, mother and daughter will keep supporting one another.

Which still left the present crisis—the fire. Sadly, the outlook was not optimistic. There was more smoke than before, which meant it was spreading after all. *If only the wind would die down*, I thought, cursing the strong breeze tugging at my hair.

It was also quite dry after all the recent good weather. Combating the fire would be quite an uphill battle.

I made my way to the edge of the garden, where so many others were standing. Peering at the point where the fire was blazing, I expanded my view to the surrounding area. *How far has it spread? There are a lot of buildings downwind...and not all of them are made of stone. Plenty are old, wooden structures. Even though they're quite some distance from the source of the fire, there's no way to stop a spark from catching the wind and reaching them. If blazes break out in multiple distant places, the firefighters won't be able to tackle them all.*

The reason for Sans-Terre's wide streets and several large parks was to prevent exactly that scenario. After the large fire a long time ago, the reconstruction had involved careful town planning. The parks would keep a fire from spreading and serve as a place for the populace to evacuate to. However, no similar planning had happened in Embourg. These buildings were packed together on narrow, winding streets.

I recall mention that redeveloping the area had been discussed, but no progress had ever been made on that front. It would have required a lot of people to leave their homes, and even compensation wouldn't necessarily be enough to convince every resident to do that. Many people were probably opposed to demolishing the historical buildings as well. And, while discussions stalled with no progress, the town continued to expand, the population grew, and it became harder and harder to do anything about it.

The mayor and his wife must be in quite a state of panic right now. Yesterday they were on cloud nine—now, the very next morning, this happens.

A thought caught in mind there. When I was at the mayor's house, something

had... *Hmm*. What was it?

“Duchess!”

Just before I could remember, a loud voice interrupted. The people nearby turned to stare. Like them, I looked for the voice’s owner—and saw a man approaching.

It wasn’t one of the servants. He was dressed in attire that made it clear he was a commoner, but his firmly fastened necktie gave him a gentlemanly appearance. He had dark blond hair, and his face, which suggested he was of an age with the duchess, was as refined as that of an actor.

Oh? What is he doing here?

“Mr. Beranger,” the duchess exclaimed, surprised as well.

Yes, the man who had come running was the concerning figure himself, Edmond Beranger. The same mysterious scholar who had invited suspicion of being the duchess’s lover and had sparked Lady Anna’s ghostly scheme.

Chapter Eleven

The moment she recognized it was Mr. Beranger, Lady Anna's face grew severe. The butler, head maid, and some attendants who looked like lady's maids also glared with annoyance. All other servants present were preoccupied with the fire, but some of them glanced this way and began muttering among themselves.

Apparently unconcerned by their reactions, Mr. Beranger blithely hurried straight to the duchess. The butler stepped out in front of her and kept the man from coming any closer than necessary.

"Oh, I'm sorry for overstepping in my haste. Do forgive me."

It was a rather neutral apology; even after being stopped, he seemed ignorant of the irritated looks around him. Also, while his shoulders were moving up and down as he caught his breath, his clothes weren't particularly disarrayed, and nor was his face sweat-soaked. He couldn't have been running for very long. *Considering he left his office to travel around the countryside, he doesn't appear to have much stamina.*

Now that I could take a proper, detailed look at him, my impression was that he appeared to be a thoroughly ordinary individual. Given all I'd heard about him—that he'd grown close to the duchess without a care for what anyone thought or said—I expected to sense some ulterior motive, but he gave no such impression. The gaze he directed at the duchess didn't hold a whiff of flattery, merely the plain feeling that he'd run over to an acquaintance.

"I'm glad you're safe," said the duchess. "You live around that area, don't you? Are you all right?"

He met her question with a serious expression and a nod. "Yes, I realized what was going on and managed to escape quite quickly. The town is in chaos, though."

"Are there casualties already?"

“Hmm... Some are injured, I hear. On that note, I came with a request—or a suggestion, rather.”

“A suggestion?” After last night’s argument with Lady Anna, the duchess looked uncomfortable. She made the butler stand down and stepped forward herself. “I’m sorry, but could you come back another day? As you can see, this isn’t a good time.”

Mr. Beranger hung on tenaciously despite the strong signs of opposition. “You misunderstand—this isn’t a personal matter. It concerns exactly the situation at hand. I propose that you let the townspeople evacuate here, to the castle!”

“What?”

Ignoring her dubious reaction, he made an impassioned plea. “You could accept the evacuees and keep them safe here until things have calmed down. In particular, the sick and injured, and the elderly, could stay inside the castle building.”

After a moment, the duchess shook her head. “That’s not possible. As you know, the castle is rather small. We can’t accommodate such large numbers. Besides, His Highness the Crown Prince is staying here right now, so we must be careful. Opening up the gardens wouldn’t be an issue, I’d say...”

“That would be fine for anyone still in good health, but it would leave the weaker ones exposed to the elements. Couldn’t you let some go inside, if only as many as you can house? Even if all you can give them is one cup of broth, being inside a building would help so much.”

The duchess refused without hesitation. “I see what you mean. We should set up an evacuation shelter somewhere. But not at the castle. As I told you, His Highness the Crown Prince is here, so we can’t let an unspecified number of people enter.”

She seemed keenly aware that the majority of the prince’s guards had been deployed to help with the fire. Though he may have been her only friend, she could still do nothing but flatly refuse him.

“I’ll open the gardens,” she reiterated. “And provide food to the evacuees. That’s as much as I can do.”

“Please wait,” Beranger urged. “This is an unprecedented opportunity. If you show your compassion and benevolence, the townspeople’s opinion of you will change drastically. It will silence even your worst critics.”

“Are you suggesting I do such a thing purely as a play for publicity?”

“Consider His Highness’s reputation as well. If he hides away in a warm room while banishing the people to suffer with no roof over their heads, what will everyone think?”

“His Highness has dispatched his men to aid in the rescue. Once the situation has calmed down, I’ll announce that and make it perfectly clear. Don’t meddle where it’s not wanted!”

Next to her, Lady Anna gritted her teeth and glared at Beranger, who went on as if the duchess’s chiding meant nothing.

“Telling people after the fact won’t satisfy them. They’ll say it’s just a convenient story that you made up.”

Anna snapped at him. “Even if that’s true, what right do *you* have to issue orders? Who do you think you are? What puts you in any position to offer your opinion?”

“Anna,” her mother cautioned.

“If anything goes wrong, Mother has to take responsibility for it! You won’t have to shoulder any of the blame or deal with the aftermath. It’s easy to talk—and your words are not wanted here!”

“I understand your feelings,” Beranger replied, “but if the people heard those words, they’d be disappointed.”

“And whose fault is—”

“Listen, hold on!” I interrupted. “Let’s all calm down and take a breath!”

As the argument grew ever more heated, I decided I had to step in. This was all a waste of precious time. At this very moment, the fire was spreading rapidly, and the number of people needing shelter was increasing.

“Rather than discussing this only among yourselves, we should ask His Highness! He might be able to suggest alternative means. I’ll go and speak to

him!”

With a glance at Lady Anna that urged patience, I ran toward the castle. I barreled straight across the short drawbridge and passed under the gate. From the entrance, I ran into the north wing, then turned back slightly, went through the small room at the end, and ascended the spiral staircase. Then I opened a door and went through from one room to another in the north wing—and when I reached the east wing, I ran along the corridor in a straight line toward the southern tower!

My word, this layout really is tiresome. It's interesting enough when there's nothing at stake, but what a pain when I'm in a rush! Actually...I could have cut across the courtyard and used the staircase in the southern wing. That would have been faster. More fool me!

As I ran past, Julianne poked her head out of her room, which she had gone back to for now. “What are you doing, Marielle?” she asked, an exasperated look on her face. Joanna and Caron were present too, but I had no time to explain!

“Your Highness!” I cried.

“What is it this time?!” said Lord Simeon, who was guarding the door outside the prince’s room. He halted me with his arms. Puffing and panting, I summed up the situation. *I-I’m rather exhausted...*

Once I’d informed them of Mr. Beranger’s vehement proposal, His Highness and Lord Simeon exchanged a glance.

“Hmm,” His Highness responded. “This scholar’s view is quite correct. Letting them in sounds like a jolly good idea to me...”

“Oh. Really?”

I’d expected to discuss alternative plans, so I was a little surprised that he’d immediately agreed to this one. When I looked at Lord Simeon to gauge his reaction, he didn’t look overly pleased, but he stayed quiet. That was another surprise. No matter what the circumstances, he usually prioritized His Highness’s safety over all else.

“We’ll declare the second floor off-limits and post guards in front of the

staircases. Given the emergency at hand, we can't be sticklers for the rules."

"Goodness." I looked at Lord Simeon. "Is this really acceptable?"

My husband heaved a resigned sigh and stroked my disheveled hair. "I'd love to say otherwise, but if we refuse, both Her Highness the Duchess and His Highness the Crown Prince will face considerable blame. There is no alternative."

"Yes... I suppose you're right."

Joanna came running over with a brush in hand and started pulling it through my hair from behind. Caron and Julianne helped, tugging up my skirt and rubbing my face with handkerchiefs. It was an all-hands effort to groom me. *Do... Do I really look so awful? I couldn't exactly help it. This was an urgent matter.*

I winced, a touch embarrassed, but there was no time to dawdle now that this plan was approved. I had to go and inform Lady Anna and the duchess.

Just as I hitched my skirt, preparing to take off once again, Lord Simeon held me back. "Stop running around all over the place. I'll send word from here."

One of his subordinates went in my place. After that, the commotion at the castle increased to even greater levels.

Mr. Beranger went into town to spread the word, and Castle Embourg began preparations to accommodate people on short notice. Servants carried any antiques and works of art from the first floor up to the second floor. Even though it was an evacuation, if large numbers of people came, there could well be some who might take advantage. Fearing petty theft or damage to small items, it was decided that these possessions would be taken upstairs.

Meanwhile, orders were given to check the food supplies. The castle's reserves weren't overly large, so the provision would mostly extend to giving evacuees a warm drink, as Mr. Beranger had suggested.

That's a point, actually. I haven't had breakfast yet. My stomach feels decidedly empty. While I'd been hanging around outside, His Highness and Lord Simeon had apparently eaten. Seeing my sullen face, Lord Simeon shared some bread with me. "When you know you'll be busy, it's important to fortify yourself

with a meal. You got into this state because you let yourself be distracted by whatever was under your nose.”

“Hmph...”

I calmed my rumbling stomach with a simple ham and egg sandwich and some reheated tea. In the meantime, it grew even more chaotic downstairs. The first group of evacuees had already arrived.

“How does the fire look?” I asked, peering out of His Highness’s window.

“Not overly favorable, but I believe it will be extinguished.” Lord Simeon had his arms wrapped around my waist, supporting me so that I didn’t fall.

Smoke was still rising—and growing—as it spread downwind.

“Can you see the wide road just beyond the fire?” he explained. “That’s the road our carriage went along. The flames won’t go past that, and there are warehouses made of brick on the other side. Those are designed not to catch fire easily, so they should contain the blaze.”

“Does that mean the buildings up to that point will all burn?”

“They’ll stop the fire if they can, but the conditions are rather limiting.”

Winding roads, densely packed buildings, and strong wind. Too many exacerbating factors were layered on top of one another. All I could do was pray that the damage didn’t spread farther in other directions. “I hope the wind doesn’t shift.”

“Yes, indeed.”

I wondered how the people felt as they watched their homes burn down, unable to do a thing. It couldn’t have been much better to be one waiting, one who knew their house *might* go up in flames if the wind changed direction even slightly.

It was quite frustrating that all I could do was stand here and watch. Perhaps grasping my feelings, Lord Simeon told me to go downstairs. “If you’re too full of energy to wait, why don’t you go and help the evacuees? The castle servants will be struggling under the workload—they’ll need any extra pair of hands they can get. Take Joanna with you too...and Miss Julianne and her lady’s maid.”

“Oh, erm, really?” Julianne was a touch shocked at hearing her name mentioned.

His Highness agreed. “Good idea. Would you go and help Anna and Aunt Laetitia?”

We exchanged a glance, then headed for the first floor as instructed.

We found Lady Anna, who was working alongside the servants, and reported to her for duty. She was pleased to see us volunteering. We fetched drinks and comforted children, running about and helping in whatever way we could. *It reminds me of last autumn, when there were all those flood victims to take care of.*

Each dining room, parlor, and antechamber was filled with people. Even the south-wing hallway was packed to the brim. Not all of them had been forced out by flames consuming their homes—many had fled out of sensible caution and would wait here in safety until the fire was extinguished.

Some of the new guests made trouble. I argued with one in front of the stairs.

“The second floor is off-limits,” I insisted. “Don’t use the staircase, please.”

“Come on! Surely a brief peek wouldn’t hurt.”

“No!”

He’s just using the evacuation as an excuse to come into the castle!

Elsewhere, utter chaos reigned.

“Marie, is breakfast still not ready?” asked an elderly lady.

“My name’s Laura,” the servant replied. “And haven’t you just eaten?”

“Hey! What’s that?” cried a child, frolicking about despite the dire circumstances.

“Please, sit still and don’t touch it.”

Then a pregnant woman said, “Can you help me? I’ve been in some pain for a little while now... I think the baby might be coming...”

“Is there a midwife anywhere around here?” Laura asked.

“A midwife?” repeated the old lady. “I’m a midwife.”

“Thirty years ago, perhaps!”

The old woman had to be approaching a hundred. Was it really safe to leave the birth in her hands?

Amid all this pandemonium, someone approached me. “You’re the one who went to check with His Highness the Crown Prince. Are you one of the castle servants, perhaps?”

To my surprise, it was Mr. Beranger. Apparently, he remembered me even after our very brief interaction. Remarkable!

“No, I’m only visiting.”

“Oh, my apologies. You must be an attendant of the current guests.”

My practical clothing must have convinced him I was a maid of some sort. This didn’t especially bother me, so I didn’t correct him. *Why do I have a sense of déjà vu?*

“Can I help you with something?” I asked.

“No, but I am concerned by how much of a commotion this has become, even if I am the one who asked for it in the first place. I’ve caused quite an inconvenience.”

“There’s no avoiding a ruckus when this sort of disaster strikes.”

“Even so, it’s awfully loud.” He paused. “His Highness is staying on the second floor, isn’t he? Where is his room?”

I was silent for a beat. “Why do you ask?”

Nothing in Mr. Beranger’s tone or facial expression betrayed anything out of the ordinary. He responded to my question in a calm, natural tone. “I thought we might at least be able to keep the area closest to him clear, to reduce the noise. If there’s a great fuss directly below his room, that’s not exactly ideal.”

He looked genuinely worried that the prince might object—a perfectly natural view on such an occasion. While caring about the evacuees, Mr. Beranger was also keeping the visiting dignitary’s needs in mind. He came across as a

thoroughly good-natured person with something of a nervous temperament.

I could see why the duchess viewed him so favorably. He left a sincere impression with no air of pretense, and he seemed to put every effort into each individual situation he encountered.

I didn't like it.

Smiling, I replied, "Don't worry. His Highness's room is in the tower, so he's not directly above us. He can probably hear the voices to some degree, but I don't think it's loud enough that he'd object."

"Are you sure? Reassuring if so, of course..."

"Why don't you take some time to rest, Mr. Beranger? You must be worn out after going back and forth between the town and the castle. I'll fetch you a drink."

"Thank you. No, don't worry about me. I'm used to running about all over the place for my research. Despite appearances, my physical endurance is nothing to sneeze at." As he spoke, he drew closer to the wall to avoid getting in anyone's way.

I got a glass of water and brought it to him.

"I heard your specialty field is history," I said, feigning a light, airy tone. "Does history often require going out and about for research?"

He laughed, soft but audible. "More than you might think. If I wanted to learn about what's already known, I could simply read about it in books. To make new discoveries, I have to use my own two feet."

"Oh, really? Do you have assistants and such?"

"Sometimes, but not always. I often bring students with me on excavations. But typically, I work alone."

"Hmm, interesting. I actually have a couple of academics in my family, and they always tell me they work in a team when they go out on research projects. I suppose it must be different for you."

"Oh?" he said, raising his eyebrows slightly. "What field do they work in?"

“Mineralogy.”

“Ah, then their work involves geological surveys and material sample collection. I can imagine that requires greater numbers.”

Even now, there was no change in his demeanor—he replied to my prompts without the slightest hesitation. Nor was there anything overly odd about his response. I could potentially believe that he really was a scholar.

Well, what about this?

“You must work at Riviere University, I assume.”

“Hmm? No, at Sans-Terre National University.”

“Oh, apologies. I just assumed because Riviere is so much more active in terms of historical research. If you’re at the National University, then you might have run into my father-in-law and grandfather.”

He gave a moment’s pause, then asked, “Are those the family members you mentioned?”

“Yes, although I doubt you’d see them often, since they work in an entirely different department. Still, my grandfather is the president, so I’m sure you must know him.”

“Oh...” For the first time, a slight hint of discomposure appeared on Mr. Beranger’s face. “You’re the granddaughter of the university president? That’s quite a surprise.”

“Yes, I’ve often been to his house and met other academics. Since you’re in the history department, you must know Professor Manuel, I’m sure.”

He quickly concealed his trembling and responded in a tone suggesting nothing but surprise. “Of course. My, what a small world we live in. I never thought I’d run into the president’s granddaughter here of all places.”

Clearly, he had decided that the president was unlikely to remember each and every member of staff, especially those who weren’t even professors, while the chances of my father-in-law being acquainted with him were low, given their separate departments. As such, he felt he could continue without revising his story.

But I know you're lying.

Pretending I had come to no such realization, I exchanged a few further pleasantries, then said my goodbyes and left him behind for now. I faded into the crowd, making him think I was going back to aid the evacuees, then furtively made my way across the room. *Which route should I take to the second floor?* After all, His Highness wasn't the only one up there—Lord Simeon would almost certainly be with him.

I opted to go outside, pass by the gate, and enter the western wing. The large staircase in the north wing would have been closer, but it was *too* close, and I feared that Mr. Beranger would see me. If I wanted to keep my movements a secret, a detour seemed prudent.

Taking an inconspicuous look behind me, I saw no sign of him following. *It's all right. I'm sure he doesn't yet realize he's been caught out.*

Honestly, though, even for a fraudster, he's exceptionally skilled and meticulous. He maintained a fully confident tone, always reacting on the spot. I expect there really is a researcher called Edmond Beranger in the history department at Sans-Terre National University. Lady Anna's research showed as much. The real Beranger is currently touring the countryside while on leave, so there's little worry that he will suddenly show his face here. That made him the perfect target for a touch of identity theft.

But alas, there is no Professor Manuel in the history department. He works in the medical faculty! He's a lovely gentleman who was kind enough to show me a skeleton specimen when I was a child. The real Mr. Beranger would have been confused and inquired further. So why did he profess to accept my words at face value? Simple—because he didn't actually know either way. He must have decided that prying too much would be risky.

Additionally, there's no history department at Riviere University at all. He didn't even question that point.

Ever since I'd heard that he claimed to be a scholar, I had been hoping for a chance to grill him. He may have crafted a perfect illusion at first glance, but upon closer inspection, a number of details didn't fit.

When he'd come running to speak to the duchess earlier, he *had* been out of

breath. However, his clothes hadn't been overly disheveled, nor had he been sweating. Plainly, he was only pretending to have run a great distance. And then *he* had been the one to suggest accommodating the evacuees at the castle. What for? He'd claimed it was to bolster the duchess's reputation, but that was too fishy to believe. There was definitely an ulterior motive at play.

Moving apace, I cut through the west wing. There was a staircase near the chapel. My plan was to ascend to the second floor using that.

The feeling of unease inside me was steadily growing. How much of this had he planned? Why had he pretended to be someone else to gain the duchess's confidence? Was it possible that he'd been involved in the duchess's decision to contact His Highness and discuss the matter? Perhaps he had even suggested it. If they really spent so much time talking, that was well within the realm of possibility.

And now, by making her bring the evacuees into the castle, he had created this disarray.

He couldn't have started the fire in town—could he? Realizing just how convenient the circumstances were for him, a shiver ran down my spine. If everything really was connected, and he had set it all up, his crimes went far beyond impersonation. This made it all the more worrying that he had tried to sound out His Highness's location.

Compared to the north and east wings, the west wing was relatively empty of people. It was arranged with no corridor, but rather a series of rooms that connected directly from one to the next. This ended in a short, narrow passage that split in two, with the chapel on one side and, on the other, a tiny room of unknown purpose. It was about the size of a storage closet; a single desk would be enough to fill it entirely. The door on the other side of that room led to the stairwell.

A guard stood before the entrance to the passage. Initially, he took me for one of the evacuees and called me to halt, but when I explained who I was, he quickly realized and opened the door. After I went through, he closed the door behind me. I kept moving, hurrying toward the small room.

As I put my hand on the door to the stairway, ready to open it, I heard

footsteps coming up behind me. With a fright, I pulled my hand away and turned my head. At that instant, a large hand covered my mouth.

“Mmph!”

I tried to run, but the assailant’s other hand grabbed hold of me. He forced me back, and in such a small room, I was quickly pushed against the wall.

As I squirmed, frantically struggling to break free, a low voice whispered, “Shhh. Don’t make a fuss. It’s for your own good.”

Oh, how kind of you! I thought—before suddenly realizing, *Wait. That’s not the fake Beranger’s voice.* When I looked up in confusion, it was indeed not the self-professed scholar’s face I saw, but a familiar one nevertheless.

“Mmph!”

“I told you, be quiet. Stop thrashing about.”

As I tried, however vainly, to escape, the man gripped me even more firmly. It hurt where his arms squeezed me, and it grew painfully hard to breathe.

“Dear oh dear. I’d have expected a noblewoman to have fainted by now, but you’re a stubborn one. However, in these situations, it’s better for your own safety to be a good girl. Too much resistance can be hazardous to your health, don’t you think?”

Since I could do nothing else, I met his patronizing tone with a sharp glare. That alone wasn’t enough to intimidate him, of course. He looked down at me with a calm smile.

The man was young, with handsome features and an arrogant expression. He had this air about him—it suggested he was so used to looking down on others that he took it as a matter of course. His pale skin contrasted with his dark hair and eyes.

Of course! He’s here in town as well! I had come so close to remembering him last night, but with everything else going on, he had ultimately slipped my mind. And indeed, his appearance at this juncture meant our reunion hadn’t been coincidental. *What if he’s involved in the fake Beranger’s plot as well?!*

Prince Leonid’s smile was as odious as it was dauntless. He drew his face and

whole body closer to mine. Behind him, right outside the doorway, I spied two burly men—the same bodyguards I’d seen at the mayor’s house. They were cutting off my escape route while also ensuring no one could peer in from the outside. *And I can’t say a word either. What do I do?!*

Just then, a shadow landed next to one of Prince Leonid’s guards. One powerful punch, and the guard went flying.

Surprised by the sound of impact and the short, sharp yelp, Prince Leonid turned his head. “What?” Before his eyes, the second guard’s counterattack was handled with ease. The man crashed to the floor with an earthshaking sound.

Neither guard rose from the ground. Their eyes were spinning.

Having lost all his backup in practically one second flat, Prince Leonid was at a loss for words. The figure who’d dispatched the guards returned to a standing posture and faced him. Eyes blazing with blue fire stared fixedly at Prince Leonid, leaving his whole body trembling.



The newcomer stepped closer, military boots clacking against the ground. The hand that had been balled into a fist was now reaching for the saber at his waist.

“What? No, wait...” Still holding me, Prince Leonid tried to back up, but in such a tight space, there was nowhere for him to go. All his shuffling did was leave him more firmly cornered. “W-Wait, let me explain. Let’s resolve it all peacefully! By talking!”

Despite his efforts to sound like he was in a position of strength, Prince Leonid was highly vulnerable. He thrust me forward. “See? Here’s your wife—I’m giving her back! I didn’t mean her any harm in the first place!”

“You’ve caused plenty of harm already!” I exclaimed. “You suddenly attacked me! How can you defend that?!”

“I have my reasons!”

“Even *I* get scared and cry when subjected to that treatment. Boo hoo hoo.”

“You’re so *clearly* pretending!” Prince Leonid argued. “What I did wasn’t nearly enough to make you cry!”

“Not nearly enough, you say? You were so rough with me that it hurt. I’m sure I’ll bruise. I’m genuinely in pain, you know! It’s not an act!”

“All right, yes, fine. I’m sorry. Really sorry. Many apologies.”

“That does *not* sound sincere.”

I heard a heavy sigh, and my beloved’s hand moved away from his saber and reached out toward me. “Marielle, come over here.”

I gladly left Prince Leonid behind and ran into my husband’s strong, waiting arms. “Lord Simeon!”

He held me tight, and I drew my cheek up against the reassuring warmth of his chest.

“I swear... I wish you’d at least let me clarify. My men aren’t dead, are they?” asked Prince Leonid.

“I wouldn’t kill them so suddenly,” said Lord Simeon. “Not before I’ve

conducted an interrogation and heard everything I can get out of them.”

“Could you please refrain from killing them after that as well?”

“Are you in a position to be making demands?” Lord Simeon let go of me and positioned my body behind his. Then he took another step toward Prince Leonid. “You’re suspected of arson, inflicting bodily harm, and attempted murder. That’s plenty already, but if it rises to attempted murder of His Highness the Crown Prince, life in prison is the kindest outcome you can expect.”

“All of that is entirely groundless! We didn’t do any of that, and we’re not planning an assassination!”

“You can make your case in the interrogation room.”

“I’m telling you, you’ve got it all wrong! Besides, shouldn’t you be careful about how you treat me? You don’t want to cause an international incident.”

“What a curious thing to say.” A smile appeared at the corners of Lord Simeon’s lips. His light blue eyes filled with a malicious light, projecting even more menace toward Prince Leonid. His hand rested on the hilt of his saber again. “Whatever could be wrong with arresting a criminal? Just because you’re from another country doesn’t make you a special case. Even if Slavia does object, we can present them with entirely justifiable reasons.”

“You’d treat a member of the imperial family the same as any old commoner?”

“A member of the imperial family? Where?”

This question made Prince Leonid’s eyes widen. “I...”

“The man before me is Mr. Yeremei Yugin. Isn’t that right?”

I, too, had been baffled for a moment, but after this clarifying statement, I understood. *Yes, indeed. That’s the name under which he’s been presenting himself.*

“What? Don’t tell me you haven’t realized. In fact...you’re saying this because you *have* realized, aren’t you?”

Ignoring the prince’s question, Lord Simeon went on. “Ever since the incident

last year, we've been following your activities in minute detail. I don't know if you're aware, but we contacted Lavia and Easdale as well, and we've all been working together to monitor you. Naturally, I'd received a report of your presence in this town before actually seeing you. I know about all your actions since your arrival here."

Goodness. Really? This is the first I'm hearing about it. Though I was on the verge of being spellbound by the Demon Vice Captain's sheer impressiveness, I couldn't afford to miss any details of this exchange, so I returned my attention to the matter at hand.

Oh, wait... Now that I recall, someone came to see His Highness the day before yesterday, didn't they? The room was cleared and a visitor arrived to discuss something secretive. Is this what it was about?

"When you entered and left each country, you used the name Yeremei Yugin. Even your passport is printed with that name. So there is no member of the imperial family here. Only an ordinary man called Yeremei Yugin."

"Yes, but..."

"Now," Lord Simeon said, his smile deepening, "if that were to be a fake name, it would add further crimes to your list. Namely, forging a passport and entering a country under a false identity. The interrogation and punishment would both be even stricter."

Prince Leonid gulped audibly. He was starting to look vaguely ill.

Lord Simeon delivered a merciless follow-up strike. "Furthermore, Slavia wouldn't object in the first place. I'm sure you know the reason very well. It might serve as an excuse to criticize Lagrange, but as I mentioned, our actions are entirely just, and we can insist as much. If Slavia were to make too much of a fuss, it would only arouse suspicion that your crimes had the backing of your entire nation. Will the emperor and his forces defend you even at that cost? Do you hold so much value to them?"

Prince Leonid bit his lower lip. *I have many, many questions, but at any rate, Lord Simeon truly is awe-inspiring. That's my brutal, blackhearted military officer! He sets my heart aflutter!*

“Let’s say, hypothetically,” Lord Simeon began, his hand moving; he now gripped the hilt his palm had been merely resting on, “I was forced to cut you down on the spot due to your intense resistance. That would still only be the death of one criminal. It happens every day. What could possibly be the problem with that?”

Prince Leonid stared back at him. “Do you honestly think you can get away with that pretense?”

“Even if we suppose you’re a member of the imperial family hiding your identity, we have no way of knowing that. Nor would Slavia intentionally make it known that an imperial prince stole into another country, committed crimes there, and ultimately lost his life.”

The blade’s dim glow began to emerge from the scabbard.

“I told you, I didn’t do anything!” the prince cried, his expression suggesting that he was past the point of maintaining composure. “It was all at Igor’s instruction, not mine! And the deeds were done by his subordinates too!”

“Who’s Igor?”

“The Slavian crown prince!”

“Then aren’t you his associate?”

“No!” he objected, the denial rather fervent.

I certainly did not want to defend him...but he didn’t look as though he was merely devising excuses on the spot. *Is there a reason he’s so reluctant to be called an associate of that man, even though they’re both Slavian imperials?* Knowing that under different circumstances, Prince Leonid himself would have been the crown prince, I could imagine what kind of relationship they might have.

Suddenly, I heard a noise behind me. Before I could turn to look, Lord Simeon brushed me aside with a sweep of his arm. I couldn’t track the flow of events in real time, and only after did I ascertain what had happened: a thunderous crash ensued, and a guard’s body tumbled into a different position than before.

So...if I understand correctly, the guard woke up and tried to attack from

behind, but a powerful kick from my husband has knocked him out cold again?

Lord Simeon didn't have a scratch on him. However, the vigorous motion had caused his glasses to slip down his nose a little. He promptly pushed them back up with his index finger.

When I looked at Prince Leonid, all remaining color had drained from his already pale face. He was once again pinned beneath Lord Simeon's glare, and he obediently raised both hands in surrender. "All right. I won't resist. Nor will I try to run. So please, listen to what I have to say. Actually, no, this isn't the time to be standing around chatting. I apologize for startling your wife, but I swear I didn't mean her any harm. I wanted to ask her where Prince Severin is. There is an assassination plot—under Igor's direction, as I told you. An underling of his has infiltrated the castle and is planning to attack the prince amid all the chaos. I wanted to warn him. That's all."

Suddenly, I remembered the mission I had been on and looked up at my husband. Yes, I had been meaning to say much the same! And before puzzling out Prince Leonid's motivations, we had to take care of the immediate problem. There was no time to waste.

I opened my mouth, ready to tell him about the fake Beranger. "Lord Simeon!"

But my husband's handsome face didn't waver even a smidgen. "Don't worry. His Highness has been moved to a different room and is safely hidden there now. We've deliberately reduced security on the southern side so that those drawn in by his *supposed* location can creep in more easily. It should be starting around now."

As if his words were the signal, ripples of noise began to emerge inside the castle. I could hear a large number of footsteps. People were moving toward us from the south. Soon, they were pouring in—out of the chapel too—and passing right by us in a steady stream like a flock of sheep. Some looked at us, but with two large men passed out in the passageway, they probably thought it was better not to interfere—or indeed, to get involved at all. They quickly averted their eyes and entered the west wing.

Finally, the last one went past, and bringing up the rear to drive them onward

was a sheepdog—wait, no... Looking carefully, was that a royal guard disguised as an ordinary towns person? Someone I'd thought had gone into the town had apparently returned.

Noticing Lord Simeon there, the knight said, "It's done."

After responding with a nod, Lord Simeon stepped out of the small room.
"Well then, time to exterminate some rats."

Chapter Twelve

After *appearing* to head to the town along with the castle guards, the knights had secretly doubled back. Though support *was* needed at the site of the blaze, the castle couldn't be left unguarded with such storm clouds on the horizon. So they had blended in with the evacuees and returned to the castle to keep watch for suspicious activity.

By the time we got up to the second floor, the intruders had already been apprehended. As befitting the elite royal guards, their handiwork was second to none. We hadn't encountered even a single culprit who had slipped through and tried to run down the stairs.

"Oh, how abrupt," Prince Leonid said, sounding bored. "There was no need for me to make such efforts to inform you after all." His expectations of winning our favor by warning of the danger had not gone as he'd expected. "How did you know? Have you been watching not only me, but Igor's camp as well?"

"No, we don't know anything about him," Lord Simeon replied while confirming the details of those captured. Three people had been caught trying to infiltrate the tower room, and a few others had been taken in from the far side of the east wing. "I merely judged based on the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" Prince Leonid asked.

I was intrigued about that too. At what point had Lord Simeon begun to suspect? When I asked as much and glared at his broad back, he looked at me over his shoulder. His light blue eyes softened, showing a touch of amusement.

"It came down to intuition. For a large fire to happen while His Highness is staying here already seemed too convenient to be a coincidence. And if someone planned it, they would definitely take action while all the royal guards were elsewhere. I ordered my men to change their clothes after leaving and come back in disguise."

"So the reason you sent them in uniform was specifically so they would stand

out?" I asked. Apparently, that had been part of Lord Simeon's strategy from the very beginning. *Hmph. Another frustrating development.*

He met my objections with a question. "You say that, but you suspected too, didn't you?"

"I only started to think something was amiss when 'Beranger' arrived. I had suspicions about him, and the way you and His Highness responded to his suggestion felt too unlikely." After all, they had agreed to let a large number of people into the castle while they were short on security staff. How could I believe there was nothing more going on? "Lord Simeon, you're usually the first to object to safety concerns, but you accepted the request straightaway. Then you immediately sent Julianne and me away from the second floor, which suggested that something was going to happen there. Prince Severin would therefore flee to another location as well. Assuming that, when 'Beranger' asked about his location, I said that he was in the tower. Just as I was on my way to inform you that the prey was cornered, I found myself detained by *this man.*"

"Yes, very sorry," Prince Leonid said. "But if I hadn't stopped you, you'd have been caught right in the thick of it, yes? You should really be thanking me."

"It hurt so much when you grabbed me. I'm getting bruises. Ungh, such pain!"

"It still sounds like you're pretending... Why are you glaring at me, Vice Captain?!"

While we engaged in our idle war of words, the scoundrels were taken away. The knights planned to join the rescue effort in town now, so the plotters were to be locked away in a disused underground room. After hundreds of years, the dungeons would finally house prisoners again. *I wonder if wandering spirits will be there to greet them?*

"The fake Beranger is nowhere to be seen," I remarked. "Did he not go up to the second floor?"

"Perhaps he was not assigned to this group doing the actual assassination. His tasks were probably separate. We're guarding the gate, so he can't have gotten away."

After checking and satisfying himself that there was no one else left on the second floor, Lord Simeon went downstairs, bringing Prince Leonid and his bodyguards with him.

“I’m not going to run,” said the prince. “You don’t need to be so wary.”

“If you’d like to run, feel free to try it. I’ll deal with you just like we did the other operatives.”

“I told you, I’m not going to! Are you sure you’re not looking for an excuse to slice me to death?! You need to search for the one you haven’t found yet, don’t you? I’ll help. I know his face, after all.”

I watched them disappear down the spiral staircase, deciding not to accompany them. By now, I was feeling exhausted and I wanted to take a short rest. Lord Simeon would be preoccupied for the time being anyway, so we wouldn’t be able to talk it all over in detail until later, when the situation had calmed down.

Just as I was about to leave the stairwell, ready to go back to my room, I suddenly stopped. The spiral staircase didn’t end on the second floor; it continued upward.

Did...anyone check the attic? Lord Simeon certainly hadn’t gone up there. Had any of his men? Still, they had been watching for the intruders, so if anyone had gone upstairs, they would presumably have seen them. *Without a doubt, everyone should be in custody now. Lord Simeon would never tolerate a failure to make sure everyone was accounted for.*

But, I thought with some trepidation, what if someone came afterward? What if they knew it was a trap, and thus didn’t enter via the stairwell? If they tried to escape alone while their accomplices were apprehended?

After pausing to think for a moment, I made for the third floor.

As surreptitiously as I could possibly manage, I crept up the stairs and opened the door the tiniest bit. When I peered through, there was no sign of anyone nearby, so I opened it a little wider and poked my head out to look left and right.

The narrow corridor was arrayed with doors on one side, while the other

boasted a row of modest windows. The decor was entirely different from that of the floors below; the plaster walls and ceilings had no ornamentation at all, and bare wooden boards lined the floor. It only made sense, as it was a section of the castle that visitors and even the noble residents would hardly ever lay eyes on.

To my left, the west wing corridor stretched out before me. If I went right, I would soon reach the south wing. Both were deathly silent; all I could hear was the distant chattering downstairs. *Perhaps there's no one here after all.*

I quietly slipped through the doorway and made my way to the south wing. The maintenance here appeared to be lacking—maybe because this space wasn't used as living quarters. Peeling plaster exposed the bare structure underneath in some spots.

The position of the doors and windows here was opposite to the west wing, with the corridor windows facing the castle grounds. *Ah, yes. The rooms were built on the outside so that no one would see a light come on while the lord was enjoying his illicit affairs.*

Which meant...I had come to the rendezvous room itself. I stopped in my tracks and peered at the door to the right. *The one closest to the corner. It must be this one.*

When I tried turning the doorknob, the door wasn't locked. My heart pounding, I opened it and looked inside.

An ordinary storage room greeted me. Beneath the slanted ceiling, the space was so jam-packed with objects that one wondered whether there'd be any space for a secret rendezvous. What was that in the wooden crates without lids—old weapons? Along the walls were tall chests and bookcases. Next to a scratched saddle sat a spinning wheel, and old rugs were haphazardly propped up against the wall. Helmets with visors were lined up on top of the bookcases. Altogether, it was a motley collection, the narrow room fully occupied by items that had been put away here and then forgotten to time.

I suppose it has been many hundreds of years. Eventually, no one knew about the room's secret anymore, and it ended up being used for this.

It was an awfully anticlimactic sight. *Still, there's plenty here to arouse my*

interest. Every item looks to be an antique dating back at least a hundred years. Later, I'll have to ask Lady Anna if I can come and look in more detail.

Meanwhile, I went to close the door—only to hear the floorboards creaking.

Gasping, I turned and saw a figure at the far end of the corridor. The corner door at the other end was opening, and someone was emerging from it. A man. The distance and dim light made it hard to make out his face, but from his clothes and stature...it was the fake Beranger.

He's here! He really was hiding in the attic!

Our eyes met, and the very next instant, “Beranger” kicked off against the floor. I thought he might be running away, but he turned toward me and charged. *He sees that it's only me, a lone woman, and it's made him feel brash! It's frustrating, but if he gets to me, I'll have no chance of fending him off.*

I leaped into the rendezvous room at once. If I'd gone toward the staircase, he'd have given chase. This was my only viable choice.

After slamming the door closed, I tried to lock it, only to notice there was no lock below the doorknob. *This can't be happening!* I thought, but when I looked up, I spied a latch above the knob. I'd overlooked it in my haste. *Phew, there's some kind of lock after all. Thank goodness!*

It was a simple mechanism—a metal fixture was mounted to the wall and the door, and twisting a dial made the bar slot into the hole. Urging my trembling hands to calm down, I somehow lined up the bar and the hole.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but the very next instant, the door began to rattle. I jumped out of my skin. Cursing came from beyond the door. “Dammit!”

I'd been saved by a hair's breadth—or not even that, maybe. The lock could have been installed generations ago, and now, its very old screws were coming loose. Every time the door moved, the latch wobbled with it. The surrounding plaster couldn't withstand the force either; chunks of it were dropping onto the floor. I didn't know which would give way first, the lock or the wall itself.

The man on the other side was determined. He wouldn't give up easily. After all, he couldn't hide up here forever, and if I called for the knights, all hope was lost for him. Now that it had come to this, was he thinking of using me as a

hostage and running away? Either way, he'd clearly realized the lock wasn't very sturdy and was tenaciously shaking the door.

I could have waited here, praying that the lock didn't break before Lord Simeon came and rescued me...but I didn't. I couldn't wait for someone to save me. While the lock still held, I had to run—there was nothing else for it!

So, I whirled around. I hadn't come inside this particular room for no reason. This was the clandestine rendezvous room, which was secretly connected to the lord's room below. In other words, it had an escape route!

I ran over to the wall and searched for the secret door mechanism.

Nothing. I saw nothing. Just a smooth plaster wall continuing on, unbroken. *I can't find anything that looks remotely promising!*

I focused on points where the plaster was peeling, but I saw neither a mechanism nor anything that looked like a join. All of it was just ordinary damage. I grew panicked. The door was now shaking wildly, the lock ready to break at any moment. *Hurry! I have to find it quickly!*

Moving to the chest placed by the wall, I opened the lid. Inside it was...no, still nothing. Just an empty chest. To make absolutely sure, I felt around inside, but there was no sign of a mechanism. Growing despondent, I looked around again.

What if it's not in the wall, but the floor? It could be like a trapdoor leading to an underground storehouse.

If so, it had to be in a fairly clear area of the floor, since Lise had been repeatedly coming in and out while pretending to be a ghost. With that in mind, I scrutinized the floor, but I still didn't see anything promising.

Hidden door or otherwise, there must be some way to access it! Like the candelabra in the room below! Something to grip, some floorboard out of alignment, or some such. But I don't see anything!

Ugh, if only I'd come to look at the mechanism from this side. What now?! I want to cry! Lord Simeon, what should I do? Should I let him take me hostage for now and wait for a chance to escape? I'm sure that even if I'm taken as a hostage, Lord Simeon will manage somehow. I'm sorry, but I'll just have to rely on him to...

No. I really can't do that.

There was no guarantee that “Beranger” would even take me hostage. For all I knew, he was fretting so much that he couldn't think straight, and he meant to kill me. If he had that in mind—taking me out so I couldn't make a fuss—what then? It was a possibility I couldn't rule out.

I really do have to escape. I don't want this to be my final parting from Lord Simeon. If I get killed so nearby while he doesn't even know it's happening, I dread to think how the shock will impact him. He'll definitely blame himself. In the worst case, he might even take his own life to join me.

So I definitely can't die. I don't want to in the first place! But where's that stupid mechanism?!

Just as I was about to fly into a rage, I heard a ringing sound by my feet. *The sound of a bell? Where?*

It chimed again. If I wasn't mistaken, the sound was coming from inside the chest.

Is that the summoning bell in the room below? The bell was by the wall, attached to a rope. Perhaps the vibration from the door was reaching all the way down to the floor below. *And...does this mean the chest is the way down after all?*

I investigated the inside of the chest again. It was a built-in unit that couldn't be moved, making it all the more suspicious. But the surface at the back of it showed nothing of note, and when I pressed on it, it didn't move.

What about the bottom, then? Will the panel move?

When I crouched down and really, *really* looked, there was a tiny metal part in the corner. And when I pushed on this, it rotated. A handhold rose up. *Just like a trapdoor leading to underground storage! This is it!*

I pulled on the handhold. The bottom panel lifted up, revealing a yawning rectangular hole. Sure enough, there was a ladder inside it.

It's here! I found it!

I wanted to jump for joy, but there was no time. Hurriedly, I put my feet

inside the hole. It was rather scary. At first, I kept my hands on the ground to support my whole body, descending only gingerly to ensure my feet didn't slip off the ladder. *I am incredibly glad I wore these clothes. An elaborate dress would be getting snagged all over the place.*

Once I'd gone down a short distance, I pulled the chest's lid down after me. Closing it from the inside was not easy. After some struggle, I just about managed it. Supporting the bottom panel with my head, I continued downward. Once my head was fully inside the hole, the panel dropped down, and the metal handhold rotated back to its original position.

I was engulfed in darkness—or so I thought, but apparently not. A narrow slit in the wall allowed a sliver of light to shine in from outside. This meant I could see just well enough to make out what was where. I'd never even noticed it from the outside. This slit wasn't vertical, but long and horizontal, so perhaps it had been purposely built in a blind spot. It was even glazed to prevent rain from blowing in.

So elaborate. To think the lord all those years ago put such fervent effort into the design, all for the sake of his adultery. I suppose men really do devote themselves to such handiwork. A secret base indeed. Well, I like those too.

Anyway, I was glad I could see. While holding on tight to keep from falling, I descended one rung after another. When I was about halfway down, I heard the loud *crack* of something breaking above my head.

It sounded as though the lock had finally given in. I froze for a second, then quickly kept going. *Since he won't see me there, he'll probably think I'm hiding. And the first place he'll look is...*

I heard the chest open.

Immediately, I stopped moving on the ladder and held my breath. *He shouldn't notice the mechanism in the base panel so easily. He won't, will he? Please, don't notice it!*

I suppressed my presence with all my might, and the noise soon grew more distant, replaced with the sound of him searching elsewhere. I untensed my shoulders in relief. Escaping by the skin of my teeth was far scarier than any ghost.

Trying to make as little sound as possible, I rushed down the remaining rungs. *Now that I'm here, it's all going to be fine. I can calm down and stop being so frantic.*

I had tested out this mechanism the day before, so it didn't fluster me. Working the bolt, I pushed on the door. It was somewhat heavy, but it opened without any resistance.

Instantly, brightness surrounded me. Squinting, I stooped and passed through the doorway. I emerged into the late duke's bedroom, of course, which was just as still and quiet as last night.

Yes, I did it! I managed to run away!

Relief left me weak in the knees. But I couldn't stop yet. It wasn't over.

I headed for the door to the corridor. I had to inform Lord Simeon of the fake Beranger's location. If I left him too long, he'd escape and cause harm to other people.

Running, I reached the door and extended my arm toward it. But suddenly, it swung open from the other side.

A man hurtled through the doorway with such force that I let out a loud yelp. Just as I was about to tumble over backward, he caught me. "Marielle!"

His voice called my name—that dear, beloved voice. A white uniform filled my vision. I felt his gentle warmth and sturdy arms. *Ahh... It's him...*

"L-Lord Simeon..."

This time, my knees really did give way. Lord Simeon was here. He was holding me. Those familiar glasses and light blue eyes were right beside me, his concerned gaze fixed upon my face.

Feelings welled up inside, and I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. I put my arms around Lord Simeon with as much vigor as I could muster. Wailing, I murmured, "Lord Simeon, you surprised me!"

"I'm the one surprised. Are you all right? What happened?"

"What happened? Well..."

Only now that he asked did I realize—what was he doing here? And not only him. Behind Lord Simeon appeared one of his subordinates, along with Danton the butler and some other servants.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Why have you all come here together?”

“The summoning bell rang. We thought something must be going on.”

“The summoning bell?” As in...the sound I’d heard from upstairs? *Was it really that loud? Maybe it only sounded quiet to me because I was in the attic.*

Though something didn’t quite add up, that didn’t matter right now. *Of course!* I recalled suddenly. *There’s a far more urgent issue at hand!*

I pulled away from Lord Simeon’s embrace and urged him, “Lord Simeon! The fake Beranger, he’s in the attic! Well, he was—he might have run away by now. You must hurry to the staircase and chase after him!”

If you go now, there’s still time. Quickly!

My husband didn’t hesitate. He understood my hurried explanation at once and immediately turned to his subordinate. “Second Lieutenant, you take the other staircase! I’ll go up from here!”

“Yes, sir!”

The two split up, one running east and the other west. The servants stayed behind with me as I weakly collapsed to the floor.

Lord Simeon did indeed find the fake Beranger and apprehend him. He was still prowling around the corridors, where they caught him in a pincer attack. The fraudster who had thrown the castle into turmoil was, ultimately, tied in restraints.

Thus, the last of the intruders who had schemed to assassinate His Highness the Crown Prince was taken in to be dealt with by the military.

After discovering the true identity of the man she thought was her friend, the duchess collapsed in shock. Despite all her personal hardships, she had been keeping herself on her feet throughout this whole ordeal, determined to keep going for the townspeople’s sake—but it was as though she finally snapped.

However, this all occurred within view of the evacuees, so she apparently

received a great deal of compassion from them. I only learned this afterward, but she hadn't only made the castle available, she had also personally worked to take care of the evacuees. Also, she received praise for her quick response—for sending out men to help at the site of the blaze and also for opening another evacuation site outside of the castle. The little scheme I'd had in mind hadn't been necessary at all. The duchess had proven herself a responsible person who could do what was needed when the time came.

Though malicious comments about the duchess wouldn't disappear right away, there were now people who understood her intentions. If the duchess could display some courage and start to, little by little, appear in public, I was certain attitudes would change.

As for the blaze threatening the city, it spread only as far as the wide road and stopped there, just as Lord Simeon had said it would. However, this still meant a rather vast area went up in flames. Quite a few were injured, but fortunately, nobody lost their life. Thankfully, it had started in the morning rather than at night, allowing for speedy discovery and evacuation.

The fake Beranger had aimed to cause a large commotion, but that had ultimately been a remarkable boon. Using the castle as a refuge had also proven a huge success. How ironic, then, that he had failed in his actual mission. It served him right.

After the royal guards shut the conspirators away in the dungeons, the situation at the castle was largely under control, so they hurried to aid the town as originally planned. The fear that opportunists might take advantage of the commotion for ill purposes proved valid, so indeed, the knights largely took on the duty of handling those cases.

By the evening, the fire had grown far less intense, so most people were able to return to town. It would still take time for the blaze to die down entirely, and those whose homes had been burned were still in tears; they had no home to go back to. As tragic as that was, Prince Severin was looking into relief measures. After all, this situation had been caused by nefarious actors making an attempt on *his* life; the townspeople had been caught in the cross fire, and he couldn't leave them high and dry. Apparently, he was keen to provide enough support for them to get back on their feet and resume their lives.

At the very least, the people themselves were safe. They could stay at the castle tonight and get some rest. Thinking about the future could wait until tomorrow.

We extended our stay as well. It was already clear that we couldn't set out today, and we weren't sure if tomorrow would be any more feasible. There were a number of concerns still at play.

Foremost among them, of course, was Prince Leonid. Once all the fuss surrounding the arrests and the fire had been dealt with, we were finally able to garner some information from him. We borrowed a lounge on the second floor to use for a proper conversation.

Leaning back arrogantly in his chair, he gave his real name. "I didn't tell you who I really was before, so allow me to reintroduce myself. I'm Leonid Georgievic Pimenov. I beg your forgiveness for falsifying my identity. However, if I'd been more open, I wouldn't have been able to travel so freely."

He had entirely regained his usual attitude. *Even if he wasn't involved in the assassination plot, it was still caused by a relative of his. I would have thought he'd show at least a modicum of contrition...*

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who felt that way. Prince Severin looked far from best pleased, and Julianne narrowed her eyes at him. In Lord Simeon's hands, the riding crop whipped with a loud *crack*.

Prince Leonid cloaked himself in calm, but it was very clear that his eyes were drawn to the source of this sound. My husband had brought a horse with him, yes, so naturally, the riding crop was here as well. *Indeed, a rider must have a riding crop.*

"Do you have anything else to say?" Lord Simeon asked.

Hesitantly, Prince Leonid replied, "Why are you holding that?"

"Please ignore it. I've been unable to spend time with my wife due to work, so I'm doing this as a favor to her."

"What sort of 'favor' is— Oh my, she really does look happy!"

Heh. Heh heh heh. Hee hee hee hee hee. As much as I tried to restrain it, my

face filled with glee. *It's just as wonderful a sight as ever. The brutal, blackhearted military officer holding a riding crop. The beautiful, uniformed, bespectacled man and his riding crop. So exalted, a treasure of the world, the absolute pinnacle!*

"Well," Prince Leonid added slowly, "I don't want to interfere in a matter between husband and wife."

"Indeed," said Lord Simeon. "What I want to hear are your thoughts on these events. Ordinarily, when misconduct occurs, those in a position of authority take responsibility somehow, or offer an apology at the very least. But in this case, that does not appear to be happening."

"I'm not in a position to take responsibility for Igor's actions, obviously. Well, I *do* feel bad that a fellow countryman caused all this damage."

"Is that the most you can muster?"

Another whipcrack reverberated. Prince Leonid's facial muscles tensed. Even his battered and bruised bodyguards, standing behind him, couldn't glare back in protest; they found themselves unable to look Lord Simeon directly in the eye.

So good... This entire image is simply so good... He's so refined and dashing, yet so incredibly roguish and villainous too, and so overwhelming that no one can withstand his force. Such impact! It's the picture of predator and prey. Ngh, the scene before me is paradise!

"Marielle, you're drooling," whispered Julianne.

Excuse me! No, I'm not! Though I feel like I might start at any moment...

I subtly covered my mouth, and after a disgusted glance my way, His Highness raised a hand to interrupt Lord Simeon. "You've stated that this was a plot on my life, which I daresay puts us in a position to give Slavia a jolly good talking to. Frankly, we could take this as a declaration of war."

"You're quite right. But complaining to Slavia would be meaningless, I expect. They would never admit to it, and the confessions of the men you've arrested would not alone be enough proof. Slavia would turn around and accuse Lagrange of fabricating the whole thing."

His words were astoundingly shameless. However, rather than taking offense, His Highness nodded. “You’re not wrong. Does the emperor know about all this, I wonder?”

“If he’d known beforehand, he would have stopped it. Maybe he’s only just realized what occurred and is desperately trying to decide how to cover it up.”

“What?” I interjected. “You’re saying the crown prince acted on his own?”

Realizing I had spoken out of turn, I hurriedly clapped a hand over my mouth. But His Highness didn’t scold me, and I received only a brief sidelong glance from Lord Simeon.

Prince Leonid chuckled. “Your own crown prince seems to know all about that, doesn’t he?”

“To some extent,” His Highness replied. “Though I’d be grateful to hear more specific details from one of his relatives.”

A statesman had to have some grasp of other countries’ internal affairs. As such, His Highness and Lord Simeon had obtained some measure of information, it seemed. This left only Julianne and me without a clue. We exchanged a glance, both of us feeling vaguely disgruntled.

“This is highly embarrassing for me to admit as a Slavian,” said Prince Leonid, “but Prince Igor is exceptionally lacking as an individual.” He didn’t mince words, stating this very bluntly indeed. “How bad is it, you ask? Well, critics say Igor should be disqualified from inheriting the throne, and his father, the current emperor, agrees.”

I couldn’t keep another remark from slipping out. “What?” *Can that really be true?*

“A little bad behavior would be one thing. That’s common enough among imperial and royal families. But Igor is lacking in *this* department as well.” Laughing, he gestured pointedly at his head. “He leaves most of his duties to government officials, then just signs whatever documents are put in front of his face without even looking at them. Naturally, this means his close associates are free to do whatever they want, making him a handy puppet for his maternal grandfather, Marquess Akimov. Even when this is pointed out to him, all he says

is, 'So what?' He pushes through whatever policies he thinks of, interferes in military affairs, and uses people based on whim only to throw them away when it all comes to naught. He's the picture-perfect example of incompetence."

I couldn't help looking over at His Highness—the picture-perfect example of *competence*. To think that two men in the same position could be so dissimilar.

"As a result, he's now reached the age of thirty and is no longer assigned any important work. Additionally, the emperor is feeling a great deal of consternation."

"So I've heard," His Highness agreed; he apparently knew about this. Similarly, Lord Simeon listened without his expression shifting at all.

"The anti-monarchist faction in Orta that planned last year's failed assassination attempt on Prince Gracius had Igor's hands all over it. It failed due to the efforts of the Vice Captain here and his wife, but that only set Igor thinking—instead of Prince Gracius, wouldn't it be better to take out Lagrange's crown prince, who is such a thorn in his side?"

"That's awfully simplistic," I remarked.

"Simplistic thinking is Igor's entire nature." Prince Leonid gave an exaggerated shrug of the shoulders, his tone half-mocking and half-frustrated. "He was thrilled with himself for coming up with such a good idea on his own. I feel sorry for the operative on the ground who then received that reckless instruction. That man was originally only sent to Lagrange to collect information and send it back to Slavia. Even so, he put his all into finding some way to carry out Igor's order."

"Are you talking about the one who called himself Edmond Beranger?"

"Yes. Oh, and spare me any complaints about his spying. You're doing the same kind of thing in Slavia, aren't you? Anyway, since he was posted in such a far-flung town, he wasn't expected to find out anything too important. He was merely researching the peripheries of the royal family. If Igor hadn't given him such a stupid command, he'd have been harmless. As a personal request, I ask you to take that into consideration when deciding how to deal with him."

As much as this argument prompted me to roll my eyes, the details cleared up

some mysteries. No wonder “Beranger” had succeeded in gaining the duchess’s favor—he was a spy proficient in methods of infiltrating foreign territory and earning people’s trust. Even if he made for a somewhat shoddy assassin, he’d performed his intended job with aplomb.

That also explains why he was so patient in conversing with the duchess. He didn’t even mind the rumors that they might be lovers—those were a convenient way of obscuring his real aims. In fact, maybe he even encouraged that misunderstanding on purpose.

“Harmless? I wouldn’t say that at all,” Prince Severin remarked with displeasure. “In fact, he caused a great deal of disruption.”

That’s true. He was the ultimate cause behind Lady Anna dreaming up her ghostly scheme. All that bother was his fault.

“He was also the one who convinced my aunt to summon me here, yes?” His Highness asked.

“Of course. He couldn’t get to you in the palace, after all. His only option was to target you while you were elsewhere. After some investigating, it was decided that Her Highness the Duchess could prove useful, so an order was handed down to the spy that he should go ahead with the plan. Then, when the crown prince turned up with only twelve guards as an escort, along with some women, the spy grew eager. He decided that these circumstances made the plan look very possible. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have any information about the prince’s attendants.”

Prince Leonid cast a teasing look toward me and Lord Simeon. *What exactly is he implying?* My husband returned his gaze with an icy one of his own.

“Anyway, that sums it up,” Prince Leonid said, bringing his story to a conclusion. “I hope it’s enough to satisfy you.”

In response, His Highness merely let out an indifferent snort. Lord Simeon didn’t say a word either.

I, however, had a question I was burning to ask His Highness. “You told me something once. That even if an attempt on your life succeeded, it would only provoke Lagrange to take revenge, and thus wouldn’t give any advantage.”

“Yes,” Prince Severin said after a moment, “I did say that.”

“Does it apply in this case as well?”

“Yes, I’d say it does.”

I nodded. “I thought as much.”

Prince Leonid burst out laughing. “I told you, Igor’s an idiot. He doesn’t understand that if he’d succeeded, it would only have made things worse for Slavia.”

“Didn’t anyone try to stop him?”

“Maybe they all thought he’d fail anyway. It’s like dealing with an unruly child. Scolding him will cause a temper tantrum, and no one can be bothered to deal with that, so they let him do whatever he wants, as long as it’s not *too* awful. They don’t care if it causes a mess for other people.”

“It seems the one left in the biggest mess was your own country’s spy,” I commented.

“You think Igor cares about the little people and their suffering?”

The more I heard, the more maddening the details grew. *But, tragically enough, this sort of mindset isn’t rare at all. All over the place, including Lagrange, people with money and power use and abuse their underlings. Though of course, the two Lagrangian men in front of me would never do such a thing.*

“I may be an outsider,” I said, “but I must say, I’m rather worried about Slavia’s future.”

“Your sympathy is appreciated. But you can’t be all that detached. It affects you too.” Prince Leonid’s voice lost just a hint of its jocular tone now. “If that dolt becomes emperor, I expect he’ll start war after war without any regard for the consequences. Then there’ll be a *real* mess—on everyone’s hands.”

I was stunned into silence. Truly, I’d believed that the internal affairs of such a distant country would never affect me. Prince Leonid’s words had shown me how shortsighted I’d been. *The Slavian succession is still some time away...but it will happen eventually.* When I looked at Prince Severin and Lord Simeon,

though, neither of them wore particularly troubled expressions.

Instead, a sardonic smile appeared on His Highness's face. "So you're asking us to give you a hand and help *you* become emperor instead of that rotten chap, is that it?"

"You must admit I'd be far easier to deal with than Igor."

"Mayhaps," he replied vaguely, resting his chin in his hands. "If the crown prince hasn't been disinherited despite being such an imbecile, it's because there's an impediment. It's as you said earlier—he's backed by his maternal grandfather, Marquess Akimov."

Prince Leonid had no retort to that.

"The crown prince's wife is related to Marquess Akimov too, as I recall. Igor is only a figurehead. Even when he becomes emperor, he'll still be humored as he is now and left to play with only the toys he's given."

So, His Highness was saying that the real power driving the country was Marquess Akimov. *In that case, perhaps it doesn't even matter if the emperor is a half-wit—and Prince Leonid only wants the throne for his own benefit.*

"You have a point," said Prince Leonid. "And you could see it that way...if we were talking about Slavia alone. But would it really be safe for you? Recall the recent war between Orta and Smerda. General Mengibar's fervor was fanned by Marquess Akimov's faction. His camp has an intense desire to expand Slavia's territory. The emperor himself isn't so bothered about that, and he made them withdraw on the grounds that the odds were against us. He managed to quell tensions...*that time.*"

Now it was His Highness who was left with nothing to say.

"If Igor ascends the throne and gains absolute power, he'll act even more aggressively. When I say he'll start war after war, I mean it. Unlike Emperor Ustiv, Igor won't stop. I guarantee he'll see it as the most delightful game ever and will be only too happy to fan the flames."

His Highness looked at Prince Leonid, remaining quiet. From his expression, I couldn't tell how he was taking the other prince's words. As inappropriate as it was of me, watching him made my heart pound.

This is a top secret discussion, isn't it? Before my very eyes, diplomacy is taking place—a decision about whether to join hands or not. His Highness is so impressive to watch. I can hardly believe he's the same man who was cowering in fear of a ghost!

As if suspecting something, Lord Simeon directed his eyes my way. Don't worry; I won't interfere. I want to be able to use this moment to fuel my fangirl fire and thus my creativity. To do so, I must watch every moment with all my attention!

Though my hands instinctively tried to reach for my notebook, I forced them to stillness. I really shouldn't, should I? Oh well... I'll have to burn each detail into my memory and write it all down later.

Lord Simeon heaved a soft sigh, while Prince Leonid looked at me with a hint of mystified curiosity.

Then His Highness spoke again. “Jolly good. You’ve made it clear that Crown Prince Igor and Marquess Akimov will present many problems. But that doesn’t give me any particular reassurance that *you’ll* make a better emperor. You’re only saying all this because you’re eager for the top job. Who’s to say you won’t use us to get it, then turn around and send your armies our way?”

“Yes, that worry is sort of inevitable,” said Prince Leonid, not discouraged by those cold words. “I’m in the same position—I can’t ignore the possibility of you making promises now, then pulling the ladder out from under me. We need to clear the air between us. And on that note, I have a proposal.”

He leaned forward just a smidgen and smiled as if revealing a delectable secret.

“Why don’t we follow the classic approach? Standard practice is to broker peace by forging ties through marriage. Let’s make a blood tie between Slavia and Lagrange. I’d like to take *her* as my bride.”

As he said that, Prince Leonid extended a hand and pointed directly at me.

Chapter Thirteen

What in the world?

I wasn't the only one left with a dumbfounded expression. His Highness and Julianne had the same reaction. At a loss for words, we all stared blankly at Prince Leonid.

Only one person present retained the same placid stare he'd worn all along. Without a word, Lord Simeon rose from his seat and grasped the saber at his waist.

"Simeon, wait!" His Highness exclaimed.

"So, you *do* want me to cut you down after all. There was no need to take such a roundabout route. You could have said so directly."

"No, Simeon, stop!"

"I'll gladly oblige and send you to hell. Don't worry. If Slavia comes for us, I'll make sure the crown prince and Marquess Akimov follow straight after you. You and your relatives can all have a pleasant time in hell together."

"Simeon, please! Can't you see that Marielle is writhing in agony?!"

"I can't...help it..." I groaned. "My heart is pounding out of my chest... I can't breathe... He's...so...incredible..."

With murderous intent streaming out of every pore of Lord Simeon's body, Prince Leonid's bodyguards took up position to shield their master, though they couldn't help recoiling in fear.

Prince Leonid drew back as well, having received a far more intense reaction than he'd expected. "Do you have to take it so seriously? I was obviously joking. Even ignoring that she's already married, our union would offer no political advantage."

"I know that," Lord Simeon replied, light glinting off his glasses. "But even joking about it is a bridge too far. I will exterminate any and all vermin plaguing

my wife.”

“Are you trying to spark an international incident after all?! Harming me will only give Slavia an excuse to start a war!”

“How do you foresee it causing an issue?” Lord Simeon retorted. “I explained it to you earlier. We have no record of any member of the imperial family entering the country. If we’re asked about your whereabouts, we have no obligation to answer.” Tension shot down into his fist, and his blade began to emerge from its sheath.

The bodyguards looked ready to fight for their master even if it spelled their own deaths, but Prince Leonid called them to a halt. “Yes, all right. I went too far and I apologize. I won’t say anything so untoward again, so please calm down. I’m sorry.”

His apology finally made Lord Simeon return to normalcy. The blade disappeared, and Prince Leonid slumped into his chair, drained. “Honestly, how can you be so ferocious with such a composed face?”

“I was obviously joking,” said Lord Simeon curtly, sitting down again. “Do you have to take it so seriously?”

This left Prince Leonid stunned. Prince Severin also heaved a heavy sigh, a look of exasperation on his face. *We knew Lord Simeon wouldn’t actually kill him, but I can imagine the three from Slavia wouldn’t have been so sure.*

“Mind if we get back to the point?” said His Highness. “My time is limited, so I’d like to make the most of it.”

Prince Leonid nodded, still looking rather stupefied. He had tried to seize the initiative in the conversation, but sadly, he’d been dealing with the wrong people.

“Putting aside the question of *who* you’d marry,” His Highness continued, “I’m assuming the idea of a marriage arrangement was a genuine one?”

“It was. I think the idea could be beneficial for both of us.”

“At the mayor’s house, you were trying to woo Anna. Is that why you came here to Embourg?”

“Exactly,” he admitted. “She’s the only female member of the royal family in my age range who isn’t already spoken for. Ideally, I’d have liked to speak with her more and get to know her nature, but as far as I can see, there’s nothing wrong with her intellect or deportment. Nor does she have any particular personality flaws. I would like to take Princess Anna to be my bride. I ask you to seriously consider it.”

The way he summarized her like that reminded me of a tradesman describing wares. Even though he was proposing marriage—a life spent with Lady Anna—he wasn’t considering the will of Lady Anna herself at all. It was as if he didn’t even think it necessary to take that into account.

Of course, this is the nature of political marriages...and even among commoners, marriage is often decided between the couple’s parents. Still, he could at least show some respect for his intended. Treating Lady Anna like an object to be bartered for is awfully rude.

I raised my hand and asked His Highness for permission to speak.

“Don’t say anything peculiar.”

“No need to fear. I just want to raise a slight objection.” Focusing all my contempt, I glared at Prince Leonid. “You’re being awfully cocky about all this, when you’re really in no position to hold such an attitude.”

Even Lord Simeon, who would normally scold me, didn’t interrupt. In fact, everyone on our side of the table wore the same expression. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one whom the prince’s verbiage had rubbed the wrong way.

“A gentleman who currently has no real power, and is asking another country to provide support, isn’t an especially appealing marriage prospect for a lady. It means you offer nothing while coming with an endless supply of problems. I can’t think of a worse husband to choose, frankly. What gives you the right to be so smug?”

I spoke without the slightest reservation, prompting an angry look from Prince Leonid’s bodyguards. The prince himself also replied with less warmth in his voice than usual; perhaps I had struck a nerve. “This is a political negotiation. I’m not asking one-sidedly for support, but making a proposal that will bring Lagrange all kinds of benefits as well. This isn’t a casual subject one discusses

over tea. If you don't understand, kindly don't butt in. I don't remember asking your opinion."

So he's saying that women should know their place? I laughed sneeringly —"Oh ho ho ho!" At moments like this, it was ideal to have a fan to unfurl for maximum noblewoman impact, but I didn't have one with me, so I put the back of my hand up to my mouth instead. *Yes, I must be just as imposing as the beautiful golden rose, Lady Aurelia! I may be nothing compared to her, but I can imitate the sentiment, at least!*

"Oh, how rude of me," I remarked. "Why, indeed, I ought to leave all the complicated talk to the men. We women should discuss only among ourselves. I know that every one of the duchess and Lady Anna's relatives are concerned about them, so once I'm back in Sans-Terre, I promise I'll report back. I'm fortunate enough to be in Her Majesty the Queen's good graces, and I'm also rather close to her daughters, the princesses. What a fine opportunity for me to repay all their kindness. I simply *must* inform them of this crucial event that is soon to affect the two ladies of this castle."

Prince Leonid had nothing to say. However, Julianne, who had watched and listened patiently until now, did speak up. "Oh, and I must tell my adoptive mother as well!" she exclaimed, as if suddenly remembering.

As her closest friend and companion since birth, I grasped her intent immediately and played along. "Yes, indeed! I know she's been very worried about her sister. You have to let her know all about it. Of course, there will be no keeping it from your adoptive father..."

"Hmm, yes. I wonder how Duke Silvestre will take the news?"

"Good question. He's so hard to predict. Still, he has a sweet and indulgent side when it comes to family, so I'm sure he's protective of his niece, Anna. I expect he'll be too considerate of her—and his wife—to turn a blind eye."

"True. His intellect, power, and wealth make him akin to a natural disaster. I wouldn't want to be on his bad side—how terrifying! Still, he's such a devoted husband that I'm sure he'll pitch in and help for Duchess Christine's sake. As an ally, he's more dependable than anyone else."

I pretended to ignore Prince Leonid and continued conversing with Julianne.

I'm holding a discussion among women, just as I said I would.

“His Majesty the King always respects Her Majesty the Queen’s opinion as well, so I expect he’ll consult with her.”

“And before a decision comes, Princess Henriette will be married and move to Lavia. I imagine she’ll be experiencing all sorts of anxieties. If so, I wonder if she’ll consult with Prince Liberto about Lady Anna’s possible betrothal?”

“Ah yes, that shrewd, blackhearted prince. When all is said and done, he is fond of Princess Henriette, so he’ll probably lend his aid, wouldn’t you say? Lavia’s main weapon is its economic strength, so Prince Liberto won’t merely provide cooperation, but take measures that will have abundant benefits for his own country.”

“Isn’t Orta the nation that will be most concerned about a tie forming between Lagrange and Slavia? They’re positioned between the two, so they can’t ignore it.”

“Oh, absolutely! Prince Gracius will have to be informed about this matter posthaste. Don’t you agree, Your Highness?”

“Hmm? Oh. Yes, quite right.” His Highness raised his eyebrows slightly at being addressed so suddenly, but he readily agreed, leaving no awkward pause in the conversation.

While holding this affected conversation, I occasionally took in Lord Simeon’s reaction. If he’d thought I was doing anything wrong, he would undoubtedly have rebuked me. But he stayed silent, his face placid.

Both of them were giving a wordless signal that they understood my plan and I should go full steam ahead with it. Julianne and I looked at each other and nodded.

“Eventually, Prince Gracius will return to Orta and be crowned king,” I said. “This will be a matter of great importance to him.”

“The queen consort of Linden is Prince Gracius’s aunt, isn’t she?” Julianne replied. “I’m sure if he goes to her for advice, she’ll be glad to help.”

“Yes, absolutely. Lagrange is hosting him at present, but he grew up in Linden,

after all. To the queen, he is the last memento of her late brother. She has watched over her beloved nephew as he grew from a baby to a young man, treating him as her own son. Undoubtedly, she'll want to lend him aid in whatever way she can."

"What about Linden's king?"

"From what Prince Gracius has told me, the king always treated him well too. Not to mention that the king and queen are a close-knit couple, so I'd expect him to respect the queen's wishes."

Prince Leonid was glowering at me with irritation. While feigning an air of indifference on the surface, I chuckled inside, then expanded the field even further.

"A negotiation between two governments impacts not only the countries directly involved, but also the surrounding ones. And I'm sure if all those nations start to act, Easdale will enter the fray as well."

"The wife of Lavia's current grand duke is of Easdalian origin, isn't she?" asked Julianne. "Do you think she would talk to Easdale's queen?"

"Most likely, yes! They're in an alliance, so I'm sure she'd bring it up."

"Worsening our relations with Easdale would be quite a problem, so Lagrange would have to approach that rather cautiously, I suppose."

"In that case, we'd have to rely on Princess Henriette again. I'm sure she'd put in every effort. It would be hard work when she's newly married, but she should be able to intervene and mediate."

After continuing for quite some time, I glanced at Prince Leonid's face again. I met his look of displeasure with a sweet smile.

I'm not saying a single word to you, as per your wishes. But hopefully by now you've realized you can't be dismissive of women, hmm? The very reason intermarriage is so beneficial to countries' relations is because it enables the power of women to come into play. Perhaps it begins with their father or lord ordering them to marry, but the wedding itself is far from the end. A wife will make personal connections in their new homeland, gain influence, and inevitably become a bridge back to their country of origin, taking on a role akin

to an ambassador. And when she bears a child, she is their mother—a figure second to none. One day, that child might perhaps become the monarch...

Women have great influence, and that's exactly why marriage between countries is such an effective tool. However, Prince Leonid seems not to understand this. Does he think that just signing his name on a marriage certificate produces immediate results?

As I had just roughly outlined, women fostered connections all over the place. Whether a husband took advantage of those connections or let them slip away depended on his relationship with his new wife. I was somewhat dubious that Prince Leonid would be able to forge a strong relationship with Lady Anna when he was ignoring her in favor of talking exclusively to Prince Severin.

His Highness let out a sudden burst of laughter. "It's a jolly interesting idea, I'll give you that, but the decision of who my dear cousin will marry requires very, very close scrutiny. There's no point in turning Anna into a sacrifice, especially if we're thinking about our strategy toward Slavia. A deal is only viable if you have meaningful expectations of the other party."

Prince Leonid clenched both his hands. "You don't have any meaningful expectations of me?"

"How could I? What have you said to give me any? All you've done is bad-mouth your crown prince."

Grinding his teeth with frustration, Prince Leonid lowered his eyes to his balled fists. He had tried his hardest to debate on equal footing with His Highness, but he was a neophyte facing a master, both in terms of his approach to marriage and his method of negotiating. For all that he listed Prince Igor's flaws, if he didn't sell himself as having redeeming qualities in comparison, it all amounted to nothing. Only focusing on the negative just made it seem like much of a muchness.

At last, he spoke up again. "You say that I want to be emperor. I can't deny it. I'm aware that I have legitimate blood, more so than Emperor Ustiv or Igor. More than once, I've thought about *what if*." His sense of ease had all but vanished now. He spoke in a low voice, his emotions subdued. "Of course I have. Anyone would if they were born into my position. But I'm aware that

times have changed. If Igor wasn't such a fool and Marquess Akimov wasn't greed incarnate, I'd have resigned myself to watching from the sidelines, never giving a second thought to reclaiming my birthright."

Naturally, I stayed silent and watched. His Highness and Lord Simeon also listened with serious expressions. This was exactly what we had been waiting for—Prince Leonid's true feelings that had been hidden behind all the bluster.

"If we leave Marquess Akimov's faction to its own devices, Slavia will become an exceptionally difficult place to live for anyone *but* them. They'll monopolize power, start wars, and sacrifice soldiers. Prices will rise—people's lives will be miserable. And if Slavia is in disarray, the other lands under its rule won't stay quiet. There's a risk of breakaway attempts, and stopping those will mean more fighting." Prince Leonid raised his head and looked His Highness straight in the eye. "Even Emperor Ustiv feels a sense of impending doom, by the way. You'd normally expect a father to want his own son to inherit, but there are sons in this world stupid enough to overcome even that parental affection. And fathers in such an antagonistic relationship with their sons that they don't want to leave them a single thing. That about describes the father and son at Slavia's seat of power."

"And Emperor Ustiv has said he'll make you his heir?" asked His Highness.

"No," Prince Leonid replied with a thin smile. "If it were that simple, there would be no problem. As you suggested, Marquess Akimov's power and influence is a huge obstacle. If the emperor went up against his faction at the moment, it would probably end in a draw. Disrupting the empire with an internal conflict like that would defeat the purpose. So, he told me to obtain what was needed for a definitive victory."

Then, Prince Leonid means to use Lagrange as his backup? I cocked my head. *Would that really benefit him, though?*

His Highness's question indicated that he wondered the same. "Surely your marriage to Anna would put Lagrange in the same position that Marquess Akimov is in now. We could follow in his footsteps."

"There is one major difference: unlike the vermin currently devouring Slavia from the inside, Lagrange is a foreign country. Not to mention, the difference in

strength between our two nations isn't vast enough to create a power imbalance. I'd expect us to be able to work together in a healthy way."

"So you want to use us to gain power, and then after that, you won't let us have any say?" asked His Highness. "Awfully self-centered of you."

"In the world beyond that, I won't start any wars. That's the reward. Isn't it enough?"

Prince Leonid seemed too stubborn to lower himself at all in this equation. Instead, he spoke so definitively that I'd describe it as shameless. *Though I'm sure he's bluffing to some extent.*

But His Highness didn't react negatively. He folded his arms gently and pondered. "The reason you've been touring various countries is to scrutinize potential negotiation partners, I assume. Why did you choose Lagrange?"

"Not true. It was because if I stayed in one place too long, it seemed likely I'd be assassinated. Marquess Akimov has caught wind of the emperor's intentions and is trying to put a stop to them."

That was a rather remarkable thing to state so casually. *Is that the reason he used a false identity?*

"Why Lagrange? Hmm... It's tough to explain." After a moment's thought, Prince Leonid looked—for reasons unknown—in my direction. "I'll note in advance that I have no intention of interfering with her. Please don't murder me, Vice Captain."

Lord Simeon stared back at him in silence.

"To be frank, it's because she intrigued me more than anyone else I've met. I honestly *did* want her, you know. I thought, 'If only she was someone to whom I could propose marriage.'"

Lord Simeon's eyes grew dark. This time, it was my turn to still his hands. Prince Severin, too, stared intensely at him to urge forbearance.

Prince Leonid shrugged. "Somehow, I just had a feeling that if I made her into my ally, everything would turn out all right. It wasn't based on anything concrete, but...you accept her, and she trusts you. I decided that with her as my

negotiation partner, I couldn't go wrong."

This was quite a nebulous rationale. Was it supposed to be taken as reassurance? I couldn't help doubting that this was a sufficient reason to commit to negotiations that would decide his whole country's fate.

But neither His Highness nor Lord Simeon argued with him. Instead, they both looked at me. I stared back, quizzical.

His Highness wore an exceptionally mixed expression. He was in disbelief, but with a faint hint of a smile buried in there too. He sighed and nodded as if to say: "Yes, this is only natural."

When I looked at Lord Simeon, not quite comprehending, he smiled gently back at me. This left me all the more mystified. Finally, I looked to my trusty best friend, who let out a vague sound of resignation and glanced away with a half-smile.

Honestly, what is going on?!

"And yet you said you weren't even asking for my opinion," I muttered under my breath.

Prince Leonid smiled unapologetically. "Well, I wasn't. I don't particularly want anything from you as a person. Nor do I think you capable of it. I don't have such expectations, but... Ah yes, that's it—you're something like a good luck charm. It feels better to have you around than not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Somebody burst out laughing. *Was that His Highness?* For some reason, Julianne laughed too—and even Lord Simeon!

Everyone was busy chuckling, and I was the only one left in the dark. Given the context, it sounded as though I was supposed to take this as a compliment, but the mood was entirely at odds with that. I pouted as hard as I could.

As his laughter subsided, Prince Severin said, "Yes, jolly good. I understand your thought process now. I'll inform His Majesty, and we'll consider it as a serious proposal."

Prince Leonid began to lean forward. "In that case—"

“But,” said His Highness, halting him in his tracks, “that’s only if you woo Anna first. If you mean to marry a lady, you must start by winning her over. You cannot merely skip that portion and proceed straight to the next step.”

“Wha...?” Prince Leonid looked stunned. “Isn’t persuading her your job?”

“Unfortunately for you, I don’t feel like disregarding her wishes and ordering her to marry. If Anna hates the idea, I won’t force her.” He rose from his chair.

This was the signal that the conversation was ending here. Lord Simeon stood too, and Julianne and I soon followed.

“You ought not to be surprised. Marielle backed you into a corner with her argument earlier. A political marriage is only effective because of the power wielded by the wife. Respect her character and will; forge a relationship of trust. You must see these things through or else you won’t gain the power you desire.”

Though Prince Leonid looked like he still wanted to say something, His Highness flatly turned away. Then, without looking back, he left the room, while Prince Leonid just watched, thunderstruck.

I chuckled surreptitiously. *He was so convinced that women should obey men as a matter of course, but it won’t be that simple. Have fun and best of luck!*

After that, I got to witness his ardent marriage proposal.

“Princess Anna, I expect you’ve heard about this from Prince Severin, but I’d very much like to have you as my bride. Could I ask you to accept my hand?”

“No, thank you.”

After approaching Lady Anna in such a smug and aristocratic manner, Prince Leonid was rebuffed in one second flat.

He froze for an instant. “What?”

“I said no, thank you. I refuse.”

“I-Is there some other suitor you have in mind?”

“No. I just don’t want to marry *you*.”

“Why not?!”

Since he's fairly attractive on the surface, I'm sure there are plenty of girls whose hearts he can set aflutter just by showing them a sweet smile. But we had told Lady Anna exactly why he intended to propose, so that didn't work on her.

"Why would I want to marry into such a distant foreign country's imperial family? I'd be worried about leaving Mother behind, and I don't want to be thrown into a place where I don't know even a single person. I'd rather marry someone closer."

"I understand your unease," he said, wavering, "but it's good to leave the nest. You'll make friends quickly, and I'll keep you safe."

"Apologies, but I can't trust a word you say. What you're really seeking is Lagrange's aid, and all I am is a kind of promissory note. You just need to have me there; my own feelings and struggles don't matter to you at all. I'm not saying I demand a marriage born of passionate romance, but I can't take someone's hand knowing from the start that he'll be a cold and apathetic husband."

"Please don't judge me prematurely," Prince Leonid implored. "When you're my wife, I'll treat you with every care."

"Treating a promissory note with care and treating a wife with care are two very different things. From what I hear, you have trouble making that distinction."

"I don't even need to ask—I *know* who's been putting those ideas in your head. But Lady Anna, I'll take all the responsibility required of me. I mean it."

"You can't expect *that* phrasing to convince me."

"This is a contract that relates to both our nations' futures. Your position is different from that of an ordinary girl on the street, so please bear that in mind when you answer."

"I've been told it's my decision whether to agree or not," Lady Anna replied. "Don't worry. I'm sure the likes of me won't sway the future of any other country. After all, His Majesty is a highly capable person, as is his heir, His Highness."

Merciless, Lady Anna cut Prince Leonid down to size. Watching secretly from around a corner, I did feel a touch of sympathy for him, but I couldn't help laughing. *Yes, yes, good! Keep going!*

I thought back to our conversation with Lady Anna about the impending proposal. In all honesty, upon hearing about it, Lady Anna responded with surprising positivity despite her initial surprise. She didn't particularly hesitate to say that if His Majesty and His Highness advised a marriage to Prince Leonid, she would accept.

"It's not as though I'm single by choice," said Lady Anna. "I have no suitor and don't possess much confidence in finding one by myself, so I've been hoping for you to introduce me to a good match."

To avoid overburdening her father, he had been excluded from most official duties. As a result, Lady Anna had lived a peaceful life quite unlike that of a typical royal, which had left her feeling some measure of guilt. If possible, she wanted to marry not only for her own benefit but also for that of the nation. With her usual cheery smile, she explained that becoming a bridge to another country, just like Princess Henriette, was everything she could wish for.

"Having said that, my father only just passed away, and I'm still in mourning. I wouldn't want to leave Mother alone. It would be ideal for me if matters didn't proceed *too* quickly. And if it's true that he's at risk of assassination, it would be too terrifying to marry before that's resolved to a certain degree. For now, could it remain merely an engagement, putting off the marriage itself for a few years?"

Lady Anna was only eighteen, so marrying in five or six years' time would be no issue at all. The engagement alone would provide pretext enough for Lagrange to support Prince Leonid, so there was no urgent need for her to move to Slavia. In fact, in various ways, keeping the relationship in the realm of mere formality for now was quite convenient.

His Highness said that once he returned to the capital, he would begin discussing the matter—of course, while keeping her point of view in mind. At this juncture, Prince Leonid's proposal was essentially accepted, but they would hold off telling him straightaway.

“The way you begin is crucial,” I said to Lady Anna. “A man like that believes, without any intentional maliciousness, that his wife will act according to his wishes. He won’t even see his tyranny for what it is and will still think of himself as a good husband. You need to make it very clear to him just how wrong he is.”

“You’re right,” Lady Anna agreed. “I often hear as much from the women in town. If they indulge their husbands at the start, it leads to all sorts of problems later. I’ll say everything I need to say as soon as I need to say it!”

As such, Lady Anna was currently leading Prince Leonid in a merry dance. And, since it was too important to him to simply give up, he was fervently trying to change her mind somehow. Faced with this situation in which he couldn’t use threats, but actually had to win her favor, he seemed to be struggling and unsure of what to do.

“I feel as though he’s not a bad person at heart,” I told Lord Simeon, who was accompanying me as I spied on the pair. “Only, he can’t picture what married life will be like, or what his wife will have to go through. If he understood, he’d put in a suitable effort, I think.”

“If he understood,” said Lord Simeon. “That’s the difficult part.”

I looked up at him with a smile. “We just have to keep telling him until it sinks in. A lot of people don’t really start to learn until after they’re married, do they? You have to be patient and persistent in getting your feelings across, all while accepting your partner’s feelings. Then, over time, you become a family.”

His light blue eyes held a smile too as they gazed back at me. Keeping my eyes fixed on him, I stretched onto tiptoes. He knew what I was seeking and leaned down to meet me.

“Of course,” I said afterward, “Prince Leonid has to be careful how he treats Lady Anna, so he might just find that the power dynamic in their marriage is opposite of what he expected. Somehow, that seems like exactly the right thing for him.”

“Absolutely.”

We exchanged a laugh, then kissed once more. Around the corner, the strenuous game of persuasion continued.

“What about my wife?” asked Lord Simeon. “Is there anything she wants to tell me?”

“Hmm.” After a moment, I replied, “No, it’s no use. You’re far too dashing and I can’t think straight.”

When I jokingly pulled away, he grabbed me again, laughing.

“And you, Lord Simeon? You seem to have plenty to say.”

“You know about my gripes. For example, why does my wife have to attract such swarms of vile insects?”

“Prince Leonid’s feelings aren’t like that.”

“What makes you so sure?” Embracing me from behind, he whispered into my ear. The warmth of his breath sent a shiver down my spine. “Sometimes, I want to hide you away so that no one else can look upon you. If I were the only one who could see you and hear your voice, would that finally set me at ease? That’s the sort of silly thought that runs through my mind.”

I couldn’t say a word.

“Of course, that wouldn’t leave me satisfied.” His arms smoothly released their grip on me. As I listened to his voice and the wry smile it held, his warmth threatened to slip away from me. “If I forced you, one who loves being around people, to live in solitude, I would no longer be able to see that smile I adore. What a contradiction that would be. I love you for the way your eyes glimmer at the tiniest of events, for the way you find joy in every situation—how could I extinguish that glimmer simply because I can’t be satisfied?”

His white sleeves were about to disappear from my field of view. I raised my hands and firmly grasped them. “That’s it!”

“Excuse me?”

Though he looked puzzled, I spun around and embraced him with as much might as I could muster. “The dark road that your thoughts go down when you least expect it. Though you know you’re straying from the path, you can’t help the desire to give in to temptation. But what keeps you from succumbing? Of course—it’s love! So you hide your contradictory feelings and play the role of

the faultless lover. This must be it! That fabled bittersweetness!"

Lord Simeon frowned. "Pardon?"

Chattering away to myself, I pulled out my notebook and obsessively wrote down all that had just come to mind. "Joy and anguish exist side by side, but you never show the feelings you harbor inside, even as they try to tear you limb from limb! To the female protagonist, you're nothing but a tender, perfect man. You hide what's underneath like a terrible secret, maintaining your lover's innocent smile at all costs. But even the pain that burns up your heart is only a mirror of the sweet delight..."

"Well, no, I don't think I'm saying any of that."

"Yes, I can feel it all coming together! This is just right! I can use this!" I raised my fist in celebration.

In fact, it might even be better if the heroine doesn't realize he's in love with her! She just thinks he's treating her kindly in a platonic way, but really, he's infatuated with her. A man who loves the protagonist so much that it devastates him, but he's concealing it... Ohh, it gives me an overload of fangirl fever!

Lord Simeon sighed. "So it comes down to this, in the end. My true romantic rival is your writing career."

I put my notebook away and turned to look at him. "I can't help the thrill that runs through me when I think about the twisted feelings haunting a blackhearted military officer. I was fangirling so very hard just now. Thank you so much. But in reality, Lord Simeon, I know you're too wholesome to ever seriously wish for such a thing. After all, you're so stubborn and serious and honest. You'd rather live in a bright and lively world for your own sake as well. I cherish *your* glimmer too!"

I hugged him again. Lord Simeon didn't say a word; he merely shrugged his shoulders, laughing.

Just out of sight, Prince Leonid was still trying his hardest. *I hope you put in a lot of work, and as a result, you're able to enjoy a kind of happiness you never expected. I have a funny feeling... That might be exactly how your love will*

bloom.

The castle gleamed beneath the early spring sky like something out of a fairy tale. The prince and princess's story was only just beginning, and it would continue to unfold. Right now, they were only just meeting. After this, they would go through many ups and downs, but I was sure it would all end with them living happily ever after.

Far in the distance, happiness awaited. I hoped for that and believed in it. The small flowers starting to bloom at my feet imbued me with that warm feeling.

Chapter Fourteen

Even before the topic of Lady Anna's engagement had been raised, the duchess had many worries on her mind. Fortunately, however, she soon calmed down and returned to good humor. In fact, having so much keeping her busy seemed to be of great benefit. She was actively rushing about, examining the site of the fire, meeting with the mayor and other figures to decide on the next steps, and so on. With so much to focus on, there was little time for her to dwell in her own thoughts. All the back-and-forth actually made her more energetic. Her expression regained its vigor, and she started eating more at dinner.

"Your Highness, my gullibility put you in so much danger. To think that his real aim was to assassinate you... And if I hadn't been such a fool, he'd never have come so close to succeeding. Thinking about what might have happened sends a shiver down my spine. I cannot possibly apologize enough."

"It's not your fault, Aunt Laetitia. The blame lies with that scoundrel who took advantage of your fears and anxieties. I hope you can find a way to put the condemnation where it belongs."

The way she had been used by "Beranger" was weighing heavily on her mind. She also suggested that the townspeople's suffering due to the fire was essentially her fault. We repeatedly argued that this was not the case; the duchess was another victim of this situation, targeted by someone plotting wrongdoing. The perpetrators, seeing the duchess's distress over her husband's failing health, had exploited her sadness and anxiety. Even her conviction that a curse was afoot had been caused by a bit of skillful manipulation that'd planted the belief in her mind. True, trusting "Beranger" had been a mistake...but in the end, she had lost her beloved husband and was determined to do all she could to keep her only daughter safe. Who could possibly think less of her for that?

Lady Anna understood her mother's feelings and didn't speak a word of criticism. Though some awkwardness remained between them, they were able

to converse normally again, and I had the feeling they'd be on better terms soon enough. That was how it was with family. They would undoubtedly be all right.

As for the duchess's initial desire to relinquish the castle and move back to Sans-Terre, this was put off until later. There was a lot to deal with in the aftermath of the fire, and questions remained about what to do with the servants. The duchess wanted to arrange her affairs as fully as possible to ensure no lingering regrets.

Upon parting, I offered her some words of advice: "Most people prefer talking over playing the role of the listener. As such, when conversing with others, there's no need for you to work so hard at bringing up new topics. You can liven up the room simply by listening attentively to your conversation partners."

"Just by listening?"

"Yes, though if you both fall silent and the conversation needs a bit of a push, there's no harm in taking the reins. In terms of what to bring up, I'd suggest asking the mayor and his wife, as they seem to have a good grasp of the townspeople's personal lives. Everyone has certain topics they like to talk about and others that are better avoided, but you won't know those at first, so why not lean on the mayor and his wife for that information? I'm sure they'll be glad to help."

Though there were some unkind people among the townsfolk, by no means did *everyone* hate the duchess. I was sure that just spending time with her and seeing that she wasn't unpleasant after all would gradually result in them opening their hearts.

"Thank you. Yes, I see what you mean... I *am* better suited to the listening role, aren't I? I'll try it."

The duchess looked me in the eye and smiled. At our first meeting, I'd gotten the impression that she was staring off into the distance—like she was a ghost herself—but that was all gone now. I felt able to say my goodbyes with a sense of reassurance that she would be fine.

Thus, we returned to Sans-Terre one day later than originally scheduled. I was soon invited to a tea party at the palace, partly to report on all this. There, Duke

Silvestre's wife, Christine, expressed her gratitude. "Such an uproar! I can't say I expected any of that. But I'm glad everything turned out okay in the end. Thank you for all your help—it certainly sounds as though my dear older sister is doing better. She's such an innocent! As a child, the wet nurse told her that if she ate sweets at night, an evil gremlin would come for her...and she always believed it. Clearly, she's just as easy to deceive as she's ever been."

Even while describing her sister's flaws, Duchess Christine wore a warm expression. Julianne cast a furtive glance my way, and I returned it. *Yes, she seems the type to fangirl over a person she cares for when she sees them being scared and flustered. I can't say I don't relate to that feeling!*

"The tiniest poke is enough to make Laetitia burst into tears. I got so little resistance from her that she was dreadfully dull to play with."

This heinous statement had come from Duchess Christine's husband, the duke. He knew her well too, having been a childhood friend of both sisters. The stories he told of old times elicited a smile, but I felt sorry for Lady Laetitia that she'd had to suffer his torment. Even when his wife chided him, Duke Silvestre merely smiled placidly and turned to look at me, a meaningful gaze in his eyes. It was terrifying. *Yes, I know, I don't have any resistance either! I'm well aware. So please don't bully me!*

The queen and princesses donned wan half-smiles. Most of the gentlemen were otherwise occupied and would be joining us later, but Duke Silvestre had lost none of his casual ease even while sitting alone among a group of women.

"To think a marriage proposal would come from Slavia," said Princess Henriette. "Embourg is so close to Lavia that I'd have thought it far easier for her to meet a Lavian suitor. And it's hard to imagine Aunt Laetitia being comfortable with the arrangement. Slavia is so far away, after all. Will she really be all right?"

I shared her concerns. "Though Lady Anna herself may be fine with it, I'm sure her mother is worried."

The duchess had lost her husband, and now her daughter was marrying into the monarchy of a faraway country. Moving to a neighboring land would be one thing, but if Lady Anna left for Slavia, her mother might hardly ever see her

again. *I expect that's exactly what she's afraid of—being cut off from her daughter forever.* Given her nature, the thought of the duchess being left all alone was a concerning one indeed.

“Absolutely!” Princess Henriette exclaimed. “I definitely think it would be better for Anna to marry a Lavian man. Slavia just wants Lagrange’s support, so they’re fine with a marriage that’s only for show. I bet as soon as Prince Leonid wins the throne, he’ll dissolve it anyway.”

“Henriette!” the queen snapped.

The princess merely shrugged her shoulders—but her older sister, Princess Lucienne, made a keen observation. “Henriette, you’ll soon move to Lavia. I suspect you just want to have a friendly face nearby.”

“What? N-No, that’s not what I...”

Princess Henriette’s attempt at a denial faded to nothing on her lips. It appeared very much as though that was *exactly* what she had in mind.

After Julianne and I shared a laugh, I addressed the princess who was soon to be wed. “You’ll make plenty of friends in no time, Princess Henriette. Not to mention that Prince Liberto will be the best ally of all. You’ll already have someone there you can depend on.”

Her cheeks flushed in a thoroughly adorable manner. “Oh, do you think so? I mean, it’s a political marriage, and he said outright that he sees me as a pawn. He’s the kind of person who would rather count his money than spend time talking to a woman.”

“You’ve written letters to each other since that great kerfuffle, haven’t you? Does he still send you nothing but empty flattery?”

“No, he’s been writing with much more frankness. At first, I had some doubts, suspecting that perhaps he was having someone else write them on his behalf, but they are undoubtedly letters by his own hand.”

“Honestly, Marielle,” her sister interjected, “there is *nothing* to worry about. How could there be when they’re exchanging letters every ten days?”

“Lucienne!” cried the younger princess.

“And the number of pages is never fewer than three. There must be far more written than empty compliments!”

“I’m sure he’s not the sort of gentleman to cut corners when it comes to a valuable investment,” I replied, “but diligently writing letters while he’s already so busy sounds like quite a burden. If he really was just being polite, he’d run out of things to talk about and be unable to write so many pages. If his heart wasn’t in it, he’d stop.”

“Exactly,” said Princess Lucienne. “And there goes Henriette talking such nonsense while the truth is plain as day to anyone. Such a bore!”

“Lucienne, you’re so mean!”

Clearly, there was no need to worry about her. We all watched the princess sulking with laughs on our lips.

The queen then set down her cup and quietly said, “We have been giving a great deal of thought to Lady Laetitia as well. One option is to send her to Slavia alongside her daughter, but that wouldn’t suit her character. Better for her to move back to the city and live with her own family, or nearby at the least. She’ll be happier in familiar territory with relatives and acquaintances close at hand.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Though I’m sure she’ll still be sad to part with her daughter.”

A faint smile formed on the queen’s lips. “That much is unavoidable. Any mother would feel that way if their daughter was leaving to live far away without her. She’ll inevitably worry about whether her daughter’s new family will treat her well. Whether the girl will be happy there.”

Only now did it occur to me that Her Majesty was in exactly the same position. Very soon, Princess Henriette would be leaving Lagrange; unlike her older sister, she wouldn’t be close enough to meet anytime they liked. The queen must be harboring feelings of sadness and worry as well.

Did my mother feel the same way? There wasn’t much time for solemnity with all the rushing about to prepare for the wedding ceremony, but she must have felt a twinge of melancholy too.

“But,” said Her Majesty, her smile deepening as she exchanged a glance with the now meek-faced Princess Henriette, “I’m sure she also feels proud to have

raised a child into such a fine young woman. Relieved for her to have found such a good connection. All parents have these mixed feelings and accept them as part of life. Each of you will likely be in that position one day as well, so prepare yourselves.”

I wasn't the only one whose eyes widened at the sudden blow of that last statement. Julianne and Princess Henriette reacted in much the same manner.

N-Now that you mention it, that's true. I haven't had any children yet, but...once I do, I'll raise them and watch them grow, and then one day they'll leave the nest. I, too, will be abandoned one day. This isn't a matter purely affecting other people...

Princess Lucienne and Duchess Christine, who both already had children of their own, chuckled at our reactions.

“And, after fulfilling her duty, a second life awaits,” the queen went on. “It depends on Lady Laetitia's wishes, but I think she'd do well to remarry.”

“Remarry?” I repeated.

“She's not at the age to retire and lead a quiet life yet. Yes, I think remarrying would be the best thing for her.”

“Mother, don't you think you're rushing ahead somewhat?” Princess Lucienne interrupted. “Uncle Stephane only just passed away.”

“It doesn't have to be right away, of course. I'm talking about after Anna is wed.”

Her Majesty turned to Duchess Christine, who looked back with a perfectly ladylike smile. Cocking her head to the side slightly, Duchess Christine asked her husband, “If Laetitia does wish to remarry, will you find her a suitable gentleman?”

“Hmm...” Duke Silvestre pondered. “I wonder if there's anyone you would actually deem suitable. I feel as though moving her in with us would be more efficient.”

“She hasn't forgotten your bullying. Besides, I'm sure she'd refuse—she'd feel like a sponger in her younger sister's house. Instead, I'd like you to introduce

her to someone as kind and bighearted as the late Duke of Embourg.”

“I’ll think it over,” he replied after a moment. His face was as unreadable as ever; I couldn’t tell if he actually wanted to take on this task or not.

Well, I don’t suppose it matters right now. As Princess Lucienne said, it’s too early to be thinking about this. There’s absolutely no need to rush. Still, it’s reassuring to know that Lady Laetitia has so many people concerned about her well-being. She won’t be on her own by any means. I feel confident that she’ll be all right.

Our tea party continued with much animated chatter. As it was approaching its end, His Majesty and Prince Severin finally appeared. Apparently, they had both struggled to find any time in their day for this gathering.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Julianne,” said His Highness, making a beeline for his fiancée.

“Yes, I *have* been waiting for you. But I’m glad to finally see your face.” After a pause, she added, “I hope all your work has gone well.”

Julianne was treating him with tender kindness today. I suppose seeing him in action as a statesman had given her affection a new lease on life.

He certainly was an impressive sight. So distinguished! You’d never guess he was the same man who’d trembled at the thought of a ghost.

Though, according to Julianne, even His Highness’s fearful cowering was not off-putting in the slightest. Despite his dread, he hadn’t run away or hidden behind others. Rather, he’d put his feelings aside for the duchess’s sake. I agreed with her, ultimately; even if it wasn’t entirely dashing, it was still a touching sight to behold. If she could fall for both his confident and cowardly sides, he was unstoppable.

Though his array of assembled family members could have poked fun, they quietly ignored the syrupy sweet atmosphere. It was like they were doing so pointedly, as if telling him, “Fine, be like that if you have to.”

Only one person present actually spoke up, taking on a sarcastic tone. “I’m so jealous.”

It was the much-spoken-of Prince Leonid himself, whose snideness was undoubtedly an effort to hide the element of truth in his words. He had arrived with His Highness and His Majesty, having come back to Sans-Terre with us to secretly meet with the king.

“Good day.” I stood from my seat to make space for him.

“Oh, leaving already? What a shame. I was so excited to learn you were here.”

The instant this incorrigible man spoke his words of wooing, the royal guards standing at a distance tensed up with nerves. It wasn’t the king or queen’s reaction that concerned them, but rather that of their superior officer, who was present and correct. The guards remained unnaturally still, as if afraid to see what expression he wore.

But His Highness merely rolled his eyes, while the others hid their smiles. With nothing else for it, I gave Prince Leonid a curtsy. “Apologies, but I have another appointment after this. Given that the nature of your engagement is still tentative, I’d advise you to avoid making imprudent remarks in front of your intended’s family.”

Prince Leonid dismissed my pointed comment with a snort of laughter. “How self-absorbed you are. Did you take such a mild comment as flirtation? Your husband’s coddling behavior has given you an awfully inflated opinion of yourself, it seems.”

Oh dear... Was that really the wisest thing to say?

The murderous rage wafting over from one side of the room suddenly turned sharp as a knife. I walked closer to Prince Leonid and deliberately drew the attention of a man who was smiling happily. “As you can see, Your Grace, you have someone here who will be *well* worth prodding at! One day you’ll become uncle and nephew by marriage, so why not take this chance to deepen your affection?”

Duke Silvestre’s gray eyes surveyed Prince Leonid intently. The young prince’s face still held haughty arrogance rather than respect for the older man; he didn’t yet know to be afraid.

Duke Silvestre scares me too—he’s far from my favorite person—but I’ll rely

on him in this instance. For Anna's sake, I hope he breaks Prince Leonid in...I mean, educates him.

The corners of Duke Silvestre's lips turned up. "All right," he said after a moment. "Perhaps I will play with you for a while."

I rushed to hide myself away. "Well then, I'll be off!"



I grabbed Lord Simeon by the arm and forcibly pulled him out of the room. That had been an awfully rude way to behave in front of the royal family, but I was sure His Highness would smooth it over. Holding on to my husband, I left the small detached building.

“Marielle, that attitude was not appropriate.”

“You’re in no position to talk. You wanted to kill him at the drop of a hat.”

Now that spring had arrived, the expansive gardens along the northern grounds of the palace were a joy to behold. The warm sunlight and gentle breeze were delightfully pleasant.

Sadly, Lord Simeon couldn’t come home with me. However, he agreed to see me as far as the main palace building. “Do you have a meeting with your editor now?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll be back before nightfall. You won’t be home too late, will you?”

“I certainly don’t intend to be.”

“Promise me, will you? Don’t simply forget to come home because you’re too busy cleaning up one last matter or another.”

After some hesitation, he replied, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Such a vague answer wasn’t really enough to reassure me. A touch of unease crept in. *If you break your promise, I’ll be upset with you, you know. Your vacation starts tomorrow, so get home early today.*

Yes, it wasn’t just the spring breeze that had set my heart aflutter. The royal guards who had been on duty during the trip to Embourg had been granted a special vacation. Starting tomorrow, Lord Simeon would be free for five days. Although we’d both been on the trip, we hadn’t been able to spend any time together as a couple, so I was greatly looking forward to his company.

“Could we go on a brief excursion to somewhere nearby?” I suggested.

“You want to go away again when we’ve only just returned?”

“I mean a trip just for the two of us—one that isn’t for work. Are you against the idea?”

“Not exactly. However, with only five days, time will be tight. Traveling will take up some of it.”

“But with you, I’d enjoy the time spent traveling as well.”

Where could we go? If we use up the full five days, he’ll have no time to rest, so we should probably stay for two nights at most. I’ll have to look into recommended sites just outside the city.

Seeing me strolling with a spring in my step, Lord Simeon’s expression softened. The ridges that his bloodlust had engraved into his forehead disappeared entirely.

“You have to write your new book, don’t you? Will you really have time?”

“First I have to put an outline together. Besides, I may encounter stimuli that I don’t experience in everyday life, and that’s the best way to get new ideas. The trip might inspire me.”

“And here I thought you’d more than stocked up on ideas during the Embourg trip. Are you still searching for inspiration?”

“Always. I never stop looking. Oh, what about somewhere that’s known to be haunted? I could add that to the bittersweetness. It could make for a very interesting book!”

“I have my doubts,” Lord Simeon said with a hint of laughter.

Despite saying that, he’ll go along with my request...and I know we’ll have a wonderful trip.

“That reminds me, I do still have one lingering question.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

I stopped walking, the doorway to the main building within my sights. I didn’t want to get there before we finished our conversation, so I decided to wait and talk to him here for a moment. “When I used the hidden trapdoor to go from the attic into the bedroom below, you said you came running because you heard the summoning bell.”

“Yes, that’s right. And?” His face remained neutral. Apparently, he saw nothing amiss at all. In the moment, there had been bigger concerns to focus

on, so he had probably deemed that detail irrelevant.

It hadn't occurred to me at first either, but after some time to reflect, it *had* given me pause. "I also heard the bell chime—as I was being attacked. That was actually how I found the hidden trapdoor. Only...who could have rung it?"

I looked straight up at my husband's face. He looked bewildered, wondering what I was getting at. "What do you mean?"

"The man claiming to be Beranger was violently shaking the door to try and break the lock, so at first, I thought the vibration might have been enough to shake the bell somehow. Only, when I really thought it over, it didn't seem possible. It's hard to imagine a person's hands shaking a door so hard that tremors would be felt on the floor below—and if that did happen, well, surely a rattling floor would be noticed before the chiming of a bell."

"Yes," he said slowly, "that's true."

"And even if, for the sake of argument, the bell in the room below *was* shaken enough to start ringing, there's no way the vibration would reach as far as the other bell in the waiting room. The latter must have been the one you heard, and if it rang loudly enough to be heard on the first floor, someone had to have intentionally rung it."

He had no response to that. For a moment, the two of us stared at one another in silence. The warm breeze suddenly held a chill.

"Afterward," I continued, "I went around and asked various people if they knew anything about it, but they all shook their heads. I didn't ask everyone, though, and I can imagine someone might have gone up to the second floor and done it. Do you have any idea, Lord Simeon?"

Lord Simeon put his hand to his chin and pondered this. "No," he said after a moment. "My men were escorting the prisoners, so none of them would have been free to do it."

"There's also the question of where this bell ringer disappeared to."

As my husband fell silent, the ridges that had only just disappeared from his brow returned with a vengeance. His face looked serious as he mused over this conundrum. He didn't come out with a quick answer, as he usually did.

The chiming of the bell had led me where I needed to go. Thinking back, I had felt no fear, only curiosity about the oddness of it. Who had been my mysterious savior?

Watching my husband think so hard, unable to accept the obvious explanation, made me burst into laughter. *Personally, I think it's fine to have a mystery now and then that remains as such, with no solution. Not everything has to have a definitive answer, does it?*

"I know! Let's go on a ghost-hunting trip! I'll find us a suitable spot nearby."

"What's the point in 'hunting' if you know there won't be any ghosts? Let's find a more worthwhile destination."

"This *is* worthwhile. Besides, can you really say for certain that there won't be any? Do you still believe they don't exist?"

"Even if they do exist," he said after a moment, "they would steer clear of you."

Tales from a distant time had been left behind in an old castle, with people's thoughts and feelings passed down from generation to generation in the form of history and legends. One day, we might also become one such story.

Now, though, our first incident of spring had come to an end. All sorts of ulterior motives had been exposed and were now resting in the gentle light. In the future, flowers of peace were sure to blossom, opening their petals when one hand joined another.

And, once there were flowers everywhere, I was sure that the spectral young lady would no longer appear in the chapel at Castle Embourg. Perhaps her regret was an unfulfilled promise. If she witnessed the world she wished for become a reality, then perhaps this time, she'd be able to find rest.

For the sake of her restful, uninterrupted sleep... For the sake of the new era that will come to be... Let's all work together to make those flowers bloom. Lots and lots and lots of them—so that the world is filled with smiling faces.

The Prisoners' Release

They couldn't remember how long they had been there or why they couldn't depart. None of them, male or female, had any memory of being alive. All that remained was sorrow and distress, intense loneliness, and a strong sense of some grudge they bore.

Unable to recall what the grudge concerned, they were unable to let go of it, and thus continued to be bound. So, drawn toward this mass of thoughts, the unsaved souls moved nearer to one another, mixing together, coalescing and expanding into an even murkier vortex of negative emotions. As countless souls merged together, an entity was born, one capable of influencing even the living.

In the end, rumors began to spread. People said if you entered those grounds, you'd be cursed, struck by calamity.

This should have been taken as a dire warning, but some thought the tales amusing and found their curiosity piqued. There was no end to the stream of people who'd intentionally burst in out of eagerness to see a ghost.

Those with sufficient willpower and stamina weren't impacted too heavily by the entity, but anyone with some weakness found themselves falling ill. The worst cases were those of mental affliction. There were instances of people being bedridden with depression, acting strangely, and ultimately taking their own lives. At that point, their soul would be enticed into the maelstrom and swallowed up by it, becoming sustenance for the malevolent entity, which grew ever stronger.

Thus, over a long period of time, what had started as a powerless being with no will of its own had become far more. And, if it continued to accumulate power, there was a chance it might one day break its bonds and be able to go outside. With no particular aim or destination, it would keep waiting for its next prey...

Footsteps approaching again. One of the living is coming closer.

The entity perked up, feeling a dark joy and practically licking its lips in anticipation. *What sort of prey is it this time?* Not comprehending the danger, the mortal fool plunging in with misguided curiosity started to speak...

“Here we are, Lord Simeon! The old abandoned manor house, just where we heard it would be. My, it’s so full of atmosphere! I get chills just looking at it!”

It was the enthusiastic voice of a woman. One still young. She cheerfully approached, stepping through the dry grass that had been left to grow wild.

“Marielle, watch your step. If you run like that, you’ll trip.”

A young man’s voice called out to her. The sound of his footsteps was unusually regular and powerful.

Were they lovers, perhaps?

Hmph, one of the souls protested. *What idiots they must be to come here on a date. I’m sure he thought it would be a terribly exciting place to show her.*

A similar couple had come here once before, but the man had fled in terror first. These fools would be broken soon enough as well.

“Seems that it’s not locked,” said the woman. “We can go inside.”

“Stop that. Ruined or otherwise, it’s still someone else’s house. You shouldn’t go barging in of your own accord.”

“The last resident passed away about a hundred years ago, and the heir died without ever living here. Since then, no one is sure who the rightful owner is, and—from the looks of things—no one has even maintained the property. It’s outside of the city and not in anyone’s way, so it’s simply been left alone.”

“Even so, a stranger shouldn’t go trampling all over it. Not to mention that an unmaintained old house presents all manner of dangers. If you want to be a grown-up with common sense, just look at it from the outside.”

The woman huffed irritably. It seemed she was the enthusiastic one, with the man her reluctant companion. Despite being young, he had spoken in a rather sanctimonious manner. Rather than lovers, they had the air of a parent and child, or a teacher and student.

“Then I’ll just peer in through the entryway,” the woman insisted, unwilling to

give up. “I won’t actually go inside. Agreed?”

The man sighed. In the end, he indulged her. “As long as it’s only a peek.”

Yes, that’s it. Open the door. Once outside and inside are linked, our power can reach you. Why don’t we drive them mad? Make them see each other as bitter enemies—monsters, even? We should force them to kill each other. One will murder the other with their bare hands, then fall into the deepest despair when they come to their senses.

The decaying old door opened with a creak. Light flooded the dim, murky house, shining in front of the entity that lay in wait. However, it was not mere daylight that suddenly entered, but a brilliant glow that struck with violent force.

Wait. Why is it so dazzling? It’s far too bright! Ridiculously bright! We can physically feel it—well, we don’t have a physical form, so not exactly. But anyone who does have a physical form must be able to feel this! Surely?!

Shrinking back, the entity saw the girl poking her head in through the narrow opening. In terms of appearance, she was a perfectly normal young lady, probably not yet twenty. Her face was filled with curiosity as she scrutinized the area visible from the doorway. In theory, she was no more and no less than a local girl who didn’t stand out in any way.

But she’s anything but normal! Is she even human?! She’s so absurdly dazzling that we can’t get close!

The entity’s retreat went far beyond merely pulling back. For the sake of its pride as a malevolent spirit, it decided to try possessing the girl. But it couldn’t even approach her. The intensity of her light repelled it.

“Hmm. After all I’ve heard about this malevolent spirit, I don’t see a thing...”

“Of course not,” the man replied. “It’s just a tall tale.”

“But there have been so many unexplained phenomena. Even though this manor is abandoned, they say that if you go near it unwittingly, you’ll end up suffering an accident.”

“Pure coincidence. I said so just now, but old buildings are dangerous.

Accidents are inevitable. That doesn't mean there's an evil spirit here."

"But some people say they've actually seen it."

"Their minds were playing tricks on them. If someone's already scared, and they delve in with the assumption that there's a ghost here, then the slightest sound or shadow will be enough to convince them of the supernatural. I mean, look—we're right here, and nothing's appeared to spook us, has it?"

No, we're here! We're right here! But of course you can't see us—her light is so bright that it's blocking us out. In fact, are we fading away?! Oh no, it feels as though every last bit of us is evaporating! Noooooo!

"Oops!" There was a soft *clack* on the ground as the girl dropped her pen. It rolled across the warped and rotten floor, escaping the girl's attempt to reach for it and journeying deeper inside.

"Ugh, what a pain."

Forgetting her promise to not cross the threshold, she chased after the pen. *This is our chance! The prey is right here, ripe for devouring! But...wait, no, now's not the time to be saying that! As the girl moves nearer, we're being pushed back even farther! Stop! Don't come any closer!*

"Marielle, stop." The man came after the woman, who was fully inside the building now. His tall figure appeared in the doorway.

Ooh, a man with glasses! My oh my, he's rather dashing! So intellectual and manly! Whatever shall we do?!

Shut up. What do we care if a man is pretty or not? That doesn't matter.

It does matter! It's very important! If we're looking at someone, they might as well be a feast for the eyes, no?!

We don't even have eyeballs! Besides, there's this intimidating air coming from him too! He's scary!

With so many different souls jammed together, contradictory thoughts were jostling for supremacy. What had once been the spirit of a woman had even forgotten about the malevolent spirit's identity, and she now seemed enthusiastic about the mortal man's appearance.

However, every soul was aware of one shared thought: this man was quite fearsome. The pressure emanating from his whole body struck like a punch. The entity couldn't approach him either, though for a different reason than the girl.

"Wait! Stop! Ngh, it won't stop rolling away!"

"Don't go any farther. It's not safe. You go back, and I'll get it."

"It's just picking up a pen. And if it's dangerous, surely that danger could affect you as well, Lord Simeon."

"In the unlikely event that anything happens, I'm better equipped to handle it."

"In the time you took to say that, I've already—ack!"

"Marielle!"

As the girl tripped over, the man grabbed her arm to keep her steady. By now, the two of them had ended up quite far from the entrance.

"That's why I told you to be careful."

"Sorry..."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

Not letting go of her arm, he acted as though he was rebuking her, but in fact, he was flirting. It was exceptionally off-putting to witness. *How irritating. Curse them! Wait—we're an evil spirit. We'll put a deadly affliction on them ourselves!*

But...no. It's us that's dying! We're on the verge of being killed! The light and the pressure are pushing us back and there's nowhere left...nowhere to go...ngh...

Unable to flee outside, the evil spirit bound to the manor house crumbled in the face of the intruders' unwitting attack. The amalgamation of souls that had become one entity splintered, separating into individual, smaller spirits.

Then, a miracle occurred. The light that had repelled the malevolent entity swept away the evil thoughts that had kept them all bound. The weight dragging them down burned away to nothing, and they were purified into

innocence. Surrounded by joy, the souls gently ascended to heaven.

It was a divine and moving spectacle. Only, no one could see it, so no one was moved. The pair who had caused it were completely unaware that this phenomenon had occurred and that they had been responsible for it. One was disappointed at not getting to meet the rumored malevolent spirit, while the other merely shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes as they left.

“Oh, look at this news article. It’s about the haunted manor we visited. It says they’re finally tearing it down and plan to build a hotel there instead. They had a famous priest perform an exorcism, and then the strange phenomena and accidents stopped altogether. How incredible!”

“You mean a swindler earned a handsome profit.”

“That reminds me—I received a letter from Lady Anna, and apparently it’s been a long while now since any ghostly goings-on have occurred in the cellars. I wonder if the prisoners’ ghosts are gone now.”

“Indeed. Maybe they left along with the assassins we threw in there temporarily.”

“Maybe they saw them as friendly faces? Either way, that means they were set free from the dungeon. I wonder if they made it to heaven.”

“Yes, undoubtedly. Now, let’s go. You’ll have time for a leisurely read of the newspaper when we get back.”

A Young Noblewoman's Deeply Hidden Feelings of Friendship

Marielle was so plain and made so little impression that even when she was right there, nobody remembered her. She was like a ghost story or urban legend come to life. Even after you met her, she blended in with the bustle of any social function, slipping among people like a specter.

The plainness went beyond merely her appearance—she had techniques of the sort that spies learned in specialist training. She held herself in a manner that made her stand out as little as possible and behaved in such a way that no one would register her presence. Yes, Marielle was a match for those who employed such crafts professionally. It had raised questions about what sort of upbringing House Clarac had given her, and the Captain had even brought up the idea of hiring Marielle as a spy instructor. He hadn't sounded like he'd been joking.

She could be seen as naturally gifted, but the only way to learn *why* she'd been granted these gifts would be to interrogate God directly.

Regardless, she used these abilities plenty and seemed satisfied. Today, as was often the case, she had left me behind and was working diligently to gather information. Even while being so energetic, she had made herself as inconspicuous as possible, applying her skills with exceptional deftness.

As I watched my wife from a distance, a young lady approached and spoke to me. "My, are you on your own today?"

Her singsong voice was somewhat familiar. When I turned to look, a golden-haired, green-eyed beauty was standing there.

I wasn't especially eager to talk to her, but in accordance with polite decorum, I replied, "Good day, Miss Aurelia."

"Good day. It's unusual to find you on your own, Lord Simeon. I see your wife is running about like an eccentric again."

The girl known as the “Golden Rose” turned away from me and looked into the distance, where Marielle was moving about. Her graceful smile vanished in an instant, replaced by a cold glare with a hint of exasperation. “That girl never changes... What is she thinking, leaving her husband by himself?”

The muttering that had emerged from her red lips was probably not meant for my ears. It even held a measure of annoyance, if I wasn’t mistaken. But why did it annoy Miss Aurelia that Marielle had left me standing alone? She didn’t have an especially close relationship with me or Marielle. My wife did have a one-sided admiration for her, but it was truly unrequited. As far as I knew, Miss Aurelia hated Marielle.

Her green eyes turned my way again. “I’m sure it must bother you too, Lord Simeon. How you must suffer.”

I was not inclined to agree with her, so I bluntly replied, “We don’t have to be joined at the hip from the very start to the very end, do we? It’s normal to spend some time apart during a social function.”

“To say hello to acquaintances, certainly. But I don’t know anyone who acts like *she* does.” She pointed with her closed fan.

Currently, Marielle was approaching a group comprising several members of parliament. Later, I would definitely be asking her about any information she gleaned from them!

“It has its benefits. She enjoys herself while also getting results, so I don’t see any problem.”

“You’re an awfully lenient husband. It’s more than she deserves, I swear.” Miss Aurelia laughed icily, having perhaps taken my words as a mere justification.

It was fine if she didn’t understand—that didn’t matter to me—but she shouldn’t be disparaging Marielle. I couldn’t keep myself from adopting a frigid demeanor as well.

“Frankly,” she added, “I feel inclined to advise that if you’re too lenient, you might regret it one day.”

“Why should I have any regrets? I certainly have no complaints at the

moment.”

“My, abandoned by your wife and you don’t even care! I suppose your hearts are rather distant already. I needn’t have talked about ‘one day’ after all.” She then broke into laughter: “Oh ho ho ho!”

I wasn’t about to get into a childish argument with a lady so much younger than I, but furrows did form on my brow.

Undaunted, Miss Aurelia went on, “I recommend having at least *some* awareness of which eyes are looking your way. If you exhibit such distance from your wife, certain ladies—ones who never quite give up—will develop expectations.”

“Will they now? And are you one of those ladies approaching me with expectations?”

She snorted. “You really don’t understand women’s hearts at all. Do I really look like I have any such intentions?”

I stayed silent for a moment. True, she didn’t look that way right now, but I recalled her sending more than a few amorous glances my way when I was single—but I swallowed my question as to whether she had forgotten that.

Miss Aurelia opened the fan in her hand with a snap. “I’m afraid I have no need for someone else’s used goods.”

Again, I didn’t reply. *Ah, yes. Now that she says it, after I got engaged to Marielle, she did stop all that. Though she made cutting remarks and sneered derisively, the amorous glances disappeared altogether. Toward His Highness, it was the same—after he got engaged, she stopped lingering around him.*

So, a lover could be stolen, but a fiancé or husband was more official. She didn’t want to come between a pair like that. That was her line in the sand.

On that note, despite all the romantic rumors swirling around her, I’ve never heard of her being involved in adultery. The myriad men she has as her hangers-on—even they are all unattached. If a partnered man did try to woo her, I expect she’d shoo them away. Despite seeming like a selfish girl who does whatever she wants, she knows how to moderate her behavior. In that one aspect, she is actually quite admirable.

“I’m picky about who I keep around me, you know.”

Why could she only talk in this manner, I wondered? This trait put her at quite a disadvantage.

My displeasure toward Miss Aurelia lessened. I began to find her interesting after all, albeit only very slightly. Perhaps I was gaining some inkling as to why Marielle adored her despite being the target of merciless bullying. Well, no, I still didn’t understand that... Though Miss Aurelia did have a certain charm to her, it was nothing that should prompt such worship. Only Marielle would have the mindset to enjoy bullying rather than be upset by it.

The implication in her words was she had no interest in me whatsoever. Suppressing a wry smile, I said, “What a shame. Well then, as an apology, may I invite you to my house? Mother tells me she’s planning to assemble a number of young people for a tea party. Some of the attendees won’t be well-known in Sans-Terre society, so you might meet some interesting new faces. Naturally, they’re all people I can confidently recommend.”

In other words, this was an invitation to a social event for meeting potential suitors. A mixed expression formed on her beautiful face. “Do you think I’m so lacking in interest from gentlemen that I need *your* help?”

“Quite the opposite. I suspect you have so many admirers that you can’t decide. You don’t want your parents to choose a husband for you, but you’re struggling to find a man who stands out as the right one. Your parents are worried that you’ll never progress from your current point, and their nagging has left you at your wits’ end. Is that the long and short of it?”

Her perfectly formed lips puckered sharply.

“In fact, your wealth of choices has only increased your standards and made it more difficult, I expect. You might have backed yourself into a corner. I propose that it might be good for you to start again from scratch.”

This was probably a difficult opinion for such a proud girl to hear. If she had gotten angry and walked away, I wouldn’t have been bothered.

But, contrary to my expectations, Miss Aurelia fell silent. I had apparently hit a sore spot. However, rather than arguing, she looked deep in thought. Seeing

that she was able to listen to outside viewpoints, I reconsidered my opinion of her once again.

“My wife would be thrilled as well if I can help a friend of hers,” I added incidentally.

Her shapely eyebrows shot up. “Friend? What are you talking about? I don’t recall having any such relationship with your wife.”

In a vigorous motion, she turned her head aside and went to stride off. However, with a jolt, she halted, withdrawing the foot that had just stepped forward.

“My favorite and my other favorite, right next to each other... It’s so unbelievably perfect... I can’t help but worship...”

I didn’t know when she had returned, but Marielle was now right next to us. She folded her hands as if in prayer and gazed at Miss Aurelia with dewy eyes.

“Wh... Wh-Wh-What are you doing there?! Wh-Wh-When did you get here?!”

“I hurried back as soon as I spotted you, Lady Aurelia. Oh, you’re so beautiful today...and you smell so lovely...”

“Stop that at once! You’re making me uncomfortable!”

Ignoring me, the two women bickered fervently. This actually *did* make me feel abandoned and peevish, but that seemed immature, so I kept it to myself. Marielle was happy, and that was what mattered. I decided I’d make another effort to invite Miss Aurelia to the tea party.

That malicious young lady whose every word was harsh—was she even aware of it herself? Marielle went unnoticed by everyone, forgotten even by those who had just spoken to her. And yet, Miss Aurelia had immediately spotted her at a distance in this crowded ballroom. Did she know how unique it made her? That people capable of that were exceptionally rare?

The two of them may not have had a history of getting along, and this was, no doubt, different from the usual kind of friendship. Still, watching the boisterous pair, I let out a furtive laugh and considered it—perhaps this was one form of friendship after all.

Afterword

At last, it's volume 10. Hi there. It's me, Haruka Momo.

When the first volume came out, I doubt anyone expected that the series would go on this long. I've thought this all along, but you never know where life will lead you.

In volume 5, Marielle began her newlywed life, and at the same time, the countries to the east made their debut. The friction has been ongoing for a while now, with rumblings of war on the horizon and uncertainty as to whether it could be prevented, but this volume finally settled that for the time being. Naturally, history never pauses, and new conflicts between nations will continue to develop, so something else will undoubtedly happen one day. For now, though, peace has come to Marielle and her friends.

Despite breathing a sigh of relief at having written up to this point, real-world events have left me with feelings I can't describe. I'm sure you don't need me to tell which country Slavia was modeled on. However, I only used it for inspiration in terms of image, drawing on none of the real history. In particular, it has nothing to do with that country as it exists today. When I wrote volume 5, I had no idea these events would unfold, which gave me severely mixed feelings during 2022.

I can only hope that flowers of peace bloom in the real world as well. I pray that this situation doesn't continue forever.

Spring has come a second time for Marielle and Simeon. Marielle, who has always been speeding about in a fangirl frenzy, is almost twenty now. It feels like it's about time for her to calm down and be more grown up, but I also feel like if she did, she wouldn't be Marielle anymore. I bet she'll keep leading a happy life while rushing all over the place.

Nearly six years with these characters has passed in a flash. I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart to my editor, who gave me all kinds of advice when it came to publication, and everyone else involved who gave me their support.

Not to mention Maro, whose wonderful illustrations thrill me every time—they were just as skillful as always. When Simeon’s fury was unleashed, it was just spectacular. Marielle looked so lovely and full of expression, and His Highness and Julianne made such a lovely couple too. Thank you.

Meanwhile, the manga adaptation has reached the *Wedding* arc. I can’t wait to see how Alskapan draws the “servant of love” moment. I’ll be cheering in support until the very last scene when the two of them are running with all their might.

Finally, to you, the readers. It’s all thanks to you that I’ve come this far. Thank you so much for accompanying me. I hope that this tale of Marielle and her friends has provided you with plenty of enjoyment, and now, it’s about time for me to wrap up. Good day.

—Haruka Momo

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