



The
Menagerie



Judy Willmore

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By
Judy Willmore



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DEDICATION

To my mother Jerry Anne and my daughter Jerri: may their memories be a blessing.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE INVESTIGATORS

Desgrez, Francois: Captain of musketeers

DuPont, Sergeant: Parisian police officer

DuPont, Sylvie: The sergeant's daughter employed by Mme de Vivonne

La Reynie, Gabriel-Nicolas de: Lieutenant-General of Police

THE NOBILITY

Antoinette, Duchesse de Vivonne: wife of Athénaïs' brother Duc de Vivonne

Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan

Bossuet, Bishop Jacques-Bénigne: Bishop to the court and tutor to the Dauphin

Bouillon, Duchesse de (Marie-Anne Mancini)

Brinvilliers, Marie Madeline, Marquise de

Buckingham, George Villars, 2nd Duke of: renowned English rake

Colbert, Jean-Baptiste: Controller-General of Finance

Fouquet, Nicolas: former Minister of Finance, imprisoned by Louis

Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de Mortemart (Papa): Athénaïs' father

Gabrielle de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Thianges:
Athénaïs' sister

La Grande Mademoiselle (Anne-Marie, Duchesse de Montpensier):
Louis XIV's cousin

Lauzun, Antoine, Comte de: Mademoiselle's lover, imprisoned with
Fouquet

La Vallière, Louise, Duchesse de: first mistress of Louis, later Sister
Louise

Lionne, Hugues de: Foreign Minister

Louis XIV, King of France

Louis-Victor, duc de Vivonne: Athénaïs' brother, husband of Antoinette

Louvois, François-Michel, Marquis de: Minister of War

Maintenon, Françoise, Marquise de: formerly Mme Scarron, governess
of the royal bastards

Mancini, Marie-Anne: Duchesse de Bouillon

Mancini, Olympe: Comtesse de Soissons, Superintendent of the
Queen's Household

Marie-Thérèse: Louis' wife, Queen of France

Monsieur: Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIV

Montespan, Louis-Henri de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de:
Athénaïs' husband

Mortemart, Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de, (Papa) Athénaïs' father,
First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber

Primi Visconti, Giovanni-Battista, Comte de Saint-Mayol: Italian fortune-teller
Racine, Jean: poet/playwright
Termes, Roger de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de: cousin of Athénaïs' husband
Vivonne, Louis-Victor de Rochechouart, Duc de: Athénaïs' brother

THE SUSPECTS

Bosse, Marie: poisoner
Cato, Mlle: Athénaïs' second personal maid
Chanfrain, Jeanne: Guibourg's mistress
Chapelain, Magdelaine: poisoner
Cotton, Abbé Jacques: priest/sorcerer
Filastre, Françoise: poisoner/abortionist
Galet, Philippe: alchemist
Guibourg, Abbé Étienne: priest/sorcerer
Lesage (Adam Coeuret): magician/charlatan
Mariette, Abbé: defrocked priest, co-conspirator with Lesage
Montvoisin, Marie-Marguerite: step-daughter of la Voisin
Oeillets, Claude de Vins des: first personal maid of Athénaïs
Sainte-Croix, Gaudin de: poisoner
Vanens, Louis de: sorcerer/counterfeiter
Vautier: husband and wife, manufacturers of poison and perfume
Vigoureux, Marie: fortuneteller
Voisin (La Voisin): aka Catherine Montvoisin, accused of witchcraft, poisonings, and abortions

THE ROYAL BASTARDS

Unnamed girl (Louise?): born 1669, died age two
Maine, Louis-August de Bourbon, Duc du: Athénaïs' first son by Louis, born 1670
Vexin, Louis-Cesar, Comte de: second son of Athénaïs and Louis, born 1672
Tours, Louise-Marianne, Mlle de: "Tou-Tou," Athénaïs' daughter by the King, born 1674
Blois, Françoise-Marie, Mlle de: born 1677
Toulouse, Louis-Alexandre, Comte de: born 1678

Prologue

1709

Just wait, La Reynie, just you wait! The rattling coach jolted him awake and he gasped—the curse, the drip, drip from the water torture, cries of mercy, please mercy! *No, La Reynie gasped, not that dream again. Just let me get to Paris before I die.*

THUMP—the coach lurched and the black leather casket across from him slid toward the door. He grabbed it and clutched it tight. The words might fly out, the truth disappearing along with the suspects. Most of them are dead by now. Her too? What happened to her? She started it, the marquise. Condemned to hell, perhaps? Or condemned to remember, like him?

“Air, I need air.” He opened the window to see showers drifting toward the horizon, the parting clouds allowing one last shaft of sunlight to lead the way through glimmering puddles. There at last, the lights of Paris were shimmering a welcome through the mist.

* * *

Athénaïs lay dying while the rain crept softly, closer, under cover of darkness. Indeed, a mist seemed to envelope her ladies hovering like vultures waiting for some tidbit. “Oh, God, forgive me,” she whimpered. They drew closer.

But over there, a shadow? Catching her eye. “Look. In the corner. Do you see?” She pointed with a frail hand. “It’s moving... No, no!” Her faded blue eyes searched their faces, pleading. “Don’t you see? I tried to be good.”

She settled back, drifting. “No, it really wasn’t my fault, it was them, remember? You were there, yes, and you too, recall the day it all began. Versailles in the summer was beastly, and Louis’ little château crowded. But with him there it was the center of the universe, for Louis’ sun was rising. And I was falling, falling...”

PART I

Chapter 1

The Star Summer, 1665

Athénaïs looked down from the terrace of the little château of Versailles, taking in the view. What was it about this place that captured the King's imagination? Before her lay not much more than a swamp surrounded by woods. The humble château was cramped and hot, but look—at His Majesty's command, the gravel allées were being lined with flowers and shrubs, spreading out from the château into the distance. The air was filled with the intoxicating smell of tuberose and jasmine, budding, blooming, the gardens coming alive, lush with promise. Louis was excited the day before, the architect's plans spread before him, pointing here and there, barking out commands. A huge palace would envelope his father's little château and eventually wings would stretch out to house hundreds. Over there, a grand canal with gondolas will replace the swamp, and look, there! A ménagerie filled with exotic creatures. Acres of gardens, statuary, all to be the scene of fantastic fêtes celebrating His Majesty's triumphs, for King Louis XIV would soon be off to conquer the Netherlands and even cross the Rhine. All Europe would then lie before him like so many unwilling damsels.

Ah, yes, the damsels. Athénaïs fanned herself furiously. She was twenty-six years old, married with two children, and this was not the life she had planned. She was born a Rochechouart de Mortemart, a pedigree more distinguished even than the Bourbons; but she had married for passion, not position. She became Marquise de Montespan, wife of Henri, a swarthy Gascon whose château was far off in the Pyrénées. Henri kept nagging her to live there with him, but she was now a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, and status at court meant the chance at favors from the Crown. She must dress the part, but her diamond earrings—the ones Maman had left her—were gone to a game of cards. She had screamed at Henri. He hit her. Well, at least the bruises didn't show. She glanced down at her dress with a frown. Such a pretty

dress embroidered with flowers, perfect for a day in the garden, but no match for the other ladies in Valenciennes lace fluttering about like butterflies.

The King had smiled at Athénaïs yesterday, a special smile. But he smiles at every pretty face. Did he really mean it? She fiddled with her fan, unsure. *Stop it*, she thought. *I shouldn't be thinking like this, Maman would kill me.* Athénaïs' brother laughed at her for being such a Libra: beautiful, witty, talented, but like the scales, tipping back and forth so she felt like two people. She tried to be a good Christian woman, devout; but her wit was sharp as a rapier, as her victims could attest. Henri called her a bitch. She snapped back, "I am no worse than anyone else at court. Hypocrites! Does anyone advance there by being kind? Polite, of course, but kind?" Then she realized what she had said and fled, weeping.

She looked down from the terrace at the King, who was becoming the center of her universe. *It wouldn't hurt, really.* She descended the stairs; down, down, pulled inexorably into his orbit.

Athénaïs wandered over to join the crowd of courtiers preening themselves before His Majesty. They waved their fans, practicing their most elegant conversation under the most uncomfortable of circumstances, studiously avoiding staring at the King and Louise but not missing a word.

While the rest were miserable with the heat, sweat dripping down waistcoats and tight bodices, His Majesty had tossed his jacket and waistcoat aside and was lying supremely at ease under a tree, his head on Louise's lap while she fanned him with his plumed hat. His Majesty and His Mistress, Louis and Louise. They should match, somehow, but they didn't; the mighty King and the shy little violet, her ash-blond curls damp with sweat.

He sighed and stretched. "This is really too boring," he yawned.

The King must be amused. But poor Louise had no wit whatever, so she summoned the wittiest person at court, her good friend. "Athénaïs!" she called.

Athénaïs took a deep breath and sauntered over to give the King her prettiest curtsy.

"His Majesty is bored," Louise announced with gravity.

“Really? May I be of assistance?” Athénaïs sat down next to them, carefully arranging her flowered dress. She kept that dress for years, just to remember that moment.

Louis stretched, his dark curls cascading over his sheer linen shirt. She blushed and looked away. He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners with mischief. Then, those smiling eyes closely followed a bright bead of sweat rolling down her bosom into her décolletage.

Now he was the one to look away. “It’s too hot to hunt, and Louise is out of conversation,” he declared. “You, madame, seem never at a loss for words.” He grinned. “Amuse me.”

She giggled. “Let me see. Perhaps a fable by La Fontaine?”

“Yes!” the King and his mistress exclaimed.

“Well. Once upon a time...” She whispered her own version of La Fontaine’s more pointed tales, and the King and Louise were soon laughing uncontrollably as they furtively glanced at her targets—the short, sly Comte de Lauzun now a fox, the King’s bejeweled brother Monsieur Philippe a preening peacock. The poor courtiers paused their parade to gabble like frightened geese—they knew they were being watched, but what to do?

His Majesty the cynic gazed right back at them, moustache curled with just a hint of a sneer. His eyes turned to Athénaïs. It seemed like time stopped.

Then the chapel bell tolled the Angelus. “The angel declared unto Mary,” it sang, calling the faithful to prayer. Athénaïs suddenly felt a chill. There she was, a married woman, sinking into an abyss. She made a polite excuse and fled to her apartments to pray.

* * *

An encounter the following December brought Athénaïs a part to play, entering stage left, so to speak—back stage after the play at the theatre Hôtel de Bourgogne—footlights blazing, chandeliers aglow, the happy crowd in full riot with drinks, gambling, even a roulette wheel. Papa had invited Athénaïs and Henri to Jean Racine’s celebration of his debut of *Alexandre le Grand*—and that was where Athénaïs met *her*.

A real stage! Bright lights, the sharp smell of raw wood and paint, a trap door for magical appearances and disappearances,

fanciful scenery depicting a palace in India. A croupier called, "Place your bets, mesdames et messieurs," and Henri was off. Athénaïs frowned; more money lost to the wheel. But the lights called her, the oil lamps blazing at the edge of the stage, the huge chandelier above sparkling with candles.

Athénaïs walked to center stage, bathed in shimmering light, entranced. What would it be like to be a famous actress, like Alix Faviot des Oeillets or Thérèse du Parc? Terribly immoral—Maman insisted that actors went to hell—but oh, how wonderful to wear exotic costumes, play tragic heroines, to be applauded by an enthralled audience...

"Ma chère fille!" Here comes Papa, tipsy as usual. Dear Papa—Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de Mortemart, Prince de Tonnay-Charente, Marquis de Lussac and Vivonne, heir to the most distinguished family in France—next to the Bourbons, of course—First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber. Maman called him a drunken whoremonger and finally left him.

"Papa!" She gave him a kiss.

"Ma bonne," he said to Athénaïs, "would you like to meet the author of the play, Monsieur Racine?" He looked around and finally spotted the playwright.

Racine smiled broadly when Athénaïs was presented. "Enchantée, madame," said Racine with a low bow. "Ah, Athénaïs. You are named for the goddess, no?"

Athénaïs smiled, pleased to be the center of attention. "Yes, monsieur. I was baptized Françoise, but that name is so terribly common. It seems everyone these days is called either Françoise or Louise, or Louis or François. So I added Athénaïs, as I adore the Greeks."

Soon Papa wandered off, and Athénaïs and Racine fell into deep conversation about Greek plays, facilitated by a round of brandy.

They were interrupted by a shout. "Look who's arrived, it's Thérèse du Parc!"

The crowd erupted with joy at the arrival of the leading lady of Molière's troupe, and Racine rushed over to embrace her. While Athénaïs was watching that personal greeting, Papa came over with a pretty brunette about Athénaïs' age.

"Ma chère, may I present Mlle Claude de Vin des Oeillets, the

daughter of our leading lady.”

“Bon soir, madame,” said the mademoiselle. She curtsied politely, her dark eyes flickering, assessing Athénaïs.

“Ma bonne,” said Papa, “You mentioned that you need a proper ladies’ maid, now that you have joined the Queen’s household. The mademoiselle is very talented.”

“Really. Your experience, mademoiselle?” Athénaïs asked. “Can you embroider?” Soon they were engrossed in happy conversation as if they had known each other for years.

A clatter of dice—“Les jeux sont fait!” called the croupier. Silence, for the die had been cast, then loud cheers.

But finally, the clatter of the wheel fell silent, the guests drifted toward the exit, and Racine came over to say good-bye to Athénaïs, still chatting with her new maid. “Monsieur, it has been a delight to meet you,” she said. “And I am glad I came. Papa recommended Mlle Claude to be my maid.”

“Indeed.” Racine lifted an eyebrow. Mlle Claude’s eyes darted from him to Athénaïs. “How fortuitous,” he said finally, and bowed. “I hope we will meet again, madame.”

Henri joined them, his sour expression revealing his luck at the wheel. “The hour is late,” he said to Athénaïs. “Come along.”

As they headed for the exit, shadows slowly advanced across the stage as one by one, the lanterns were extinguished. The die had been cast.

* * *

The following fall found Athénaïs and the court at Versailles, and Henri, thankfully, was off with his troops. It was early morning, and she was dozing.

“Madame!” Mlle Claude banged open the door. “You will never guess who is outside.”

“Come ride with us, madame,” called a familiar voice.

Athénaïs sat up. “It can’t be.” She donned a wrap, ran to the window, and found His Majesty and Louise on horseback below in the morning mist. Louise’s little spaniel Malice ran about yapping, ready for adventure.

“Is that a royal command?” Athénaïs teased them with a smile.

“Of course,” laughed Louise, her blonde curls dancing. “Mal-

ice commands it, and we mustn't keep her waiting. What, aren't you up yet?"

The King ceremoniously swept his plumed hat before him. "Madame," he intoned with the utmost formality, "it would give us great pleasure if you would deign to accompany us." He grinned, his dark eyes sparkling.

Athénaïs gave a mock sigh. "Oh, very well, if it is a royal command. Give me but a few minutes to dress." She shut the window. "Oh, mon Dieu!"

"I will fetch your riding costume." Her maid was already running off.

"And my hat with the big plume!"

Soon they were galloping off with little Malice in pursuit of whatever struck their fancy. They rode down the allées through a swirl of chilling fog, past newly transplanted poplar trees standing like sentinels, past manicured hedges shaping the formal gardens; on past the swamp with hundreds of workers digging it into a huge basin with fountains. The mist lifted, and His Majesty paused to point out yet another piece of wilderness destined for transformation—but Malice spotted a rabbit and dashed off, and whooping with delight they galloped off in pursuit. Finally, they charged up a hill with a view of Versailles and dismounted to sit together on the grass, Malice panting in Louise's lap.

The King's creation lay before them—the old château surrounded by scaffolding, allées and gardens radiating out like the rays of the sun. Farther to the south were the beginnings of a village teeming with workers and servants. They sat in silence; the King's arm around Louise's waist, while Athénaïs scanned the horizon, entranced.

"This is my dream," said the King quietly. "Versailles is destined to be the most magnificent château in the world, a sign to all that France is preeminent in all things." He paused. "Although it may not look like much now."

"Oh, but Your Majesty!" Athénaïs turned to him wide-eyed with excitement. "Do you see the promise here, the classical beauty? Why, with but a few more well-placed trees, this will look like a painting, a landscape that seems to go on forever." She turned again to the view, drinking it in like a glass of fine wine.

"Why, yes, madame." Louis raised an eyebrow with interest.

“And yet, Your Majesty, please do not forget the contrast between formality and nature. Look there, how charming those woods are next to that large fountain? I hear Monsieur le Nôtre designed all this. You are very fortunate to have found him. He has a wonderful eye.”

“As do you, madame,” he said softly.

Louise looked at the King, then at Athénaïs. “I believe it is time we returned,” she said. She got up and mounted her horse. The other two followed, avoiding each other’s gaze.

* * *

When Henri returned from the war, Athénaïs invited their friends—plus important guests—to welcome him home. It was supposed to be the perfect little dinner party. Then the regrets came in. Athénaïs sighed at the diminished guest list. She prayed that at least the flowers, the food, and above all the conversation would impress her guests. But tonight Henri was drunk and a boor. All she could do was watch, and fume, clutching her glass of brandy.

Henri’s godmother La Grande Mademoiselle was declaiming in her most précieuse manner the importance of grace and sophistication in polite discourse. “Not quite,” replied Mme de Sévigné with a smile, “an original style is most important.” Mme de Sévigné’s witty letters were the best sort of news. Then Henri’s impish little friend, the Comte de Lauzun interjected, “But what about honesty?” He laughed, “Ah, perhaps not at court. What would people think?”

“Vraiment,” declared Henri, pouring another drink. “Honesty and morality are certainly more important than manners. Molière was right to lampoon the précieuse and their ridiculously affected speech. Whatever happened to courage in battle?” He took a swallow. “And why must we attend the King at all times? He expects the nobility to strut about like creatures in a cage to keep an eye on them.”

Athénaïs tensed, praying he would shut up.

“Madame,” said Lauzun to Mme de Sévigné, “Speaking of cages, I heard that your cousin has finally been released from the Bastille.” He grinned. “I am dying to hear the details. Will he be returning to court?” Athénaïs took a breath. The Comte

de Bussy had been imprisoned for writing a scandalous exposé laying bare the amours of the royal family, Madame Henriette in particular.

Mme de Sévigné's blue eyes, usually sparkling, now glared. "No, he has been exiled to his estates. I do think he has been punished enough."

Athénaïs opened her mouth to change the subject, but—

"What a travesty!" exclaimed Henri with a wave of his glass. "Bussy told the truth about that den of vipers." His eyebrow arched in triumph, he turned to Athénaïs. "The court seethes with adulterous liaisons," he pronounced. "Imagine, the First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber living openly in adultery, causing his poor wife to flee in despair."

He was describing her parents. Ready to spit, Athénaïs turned to Mademoiselle for help—the fearless La Grande Mademoiselle, the King's spinster cousin, who long ago had led the nobles in a revolt against the monarchy. Mademoiselle opened her mouth to counterattack, but Henri could not stop.

"And the royal family," he declared. "Bussy was right to expose Madame and her escapades. And Monsieur? No wonder he cannot control her. We know what *he* is." He tossed back the last of his drink.

La Grande Mademoiselle rose to leave. Lauzun blinked. Mme de Sévigné's eyes narrowed. Athénaïs seethed. The party was over.

Henri staggered off to their boudoir, Athénaïs on his heels. "You beast!" she railed. "How can you say such things about my family? And Monsieur is the King's brother, for God's sake, and Madame is the sister of the King of England!"

Henri curled his lip in a sneer. "Why, ma chère, I thought you hated hypocrisy. Did I say anything that is untrue?" He pulled off his waistcoat and started to unfasten his britches.

"They are not hypocrites, certainly not Papa. Monsieur and Madame don't pretend to be moral. Did you see the look on Mademoiselle's face? You Gascon boor, how dare you!"

"You little bitch, how dare *you*!" He backhanded her, and she crumpled to the floor.

The salty taste of blood filled her mouth. "Please, don't hit me again," she whispered. "I have to appear at court, I don't want

the Queen—”

He loomed over her, huge, like Maman in her nightmares. “You will do what I tell you to, bitch.” He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. “Take off your clothes.”

Chapter 2

The High Priestess March, 1667

Athénaïs shivered as she and Papa walked down the frigid halls of Saint-Germain to Louise's apartments. Outside the snow whirled through the woods, flinging icy fingers against the windows, fingers she imagined pointing at her, at her hatred of Henri, at her guilty thoughts.

It was an incredible invitation to dine with the King and Henri was gone again with his troops, so tempting. She looked up at Papa, her heart pounding, ready to turn back, but the door swung open and Monsieur, the King's brother, kissed her on both cheeks, his rouge nearly smearing hers. "You look absolutely *marvelous*," he exclaimed.

"Merci, mon cher," said Athénaïs, with a smile. She could always rely on Monsieur for fashion advice. But her smile thinned. Here was her dear brother Louis-Victor, Duc de Vivonne, and of course he brought his wife Antoinette. They were a mis-matched pair: Louis-Victor, blond like Athénaïs and hugely fat; and Antoinette, dark hair, thin, with ice-blue eyes that cut right through. "Kiss, kiss!" Athénaïs and Antoinette perfunctorily embraced.

She gave a curtsy to His Majesty, kisses for Madame Henriette and Louise, and then they were seated. It promised to be a delightful dinner party with a minimum of formality, but Athénaïs was wary. Everything at court had a protocol, drilled into her as a child. Every Frenchman had *monsieur* before his name and every married woman was called *madame*, but the King's brother Philippe was called *Monsieur*, so his wife Henriette was *Madame*.

The King's cousin La Grande Mademoiselle, Henri's godmother, had a title that was easy to remember for she was both tall and formidable. Only those with the title of *duc* or *duchesse* could sit in the presence of the King. Athénaïs was but a *marquise*, so she had to stand—a lot. But tonight, formality was set aside.

During the fish course she noted the King gazing at her from across the table. “Madame,” he said, “what do you think of Molière? He seems to be both popular and despised after having attacked both the pious and the ridiculous.”

Athénaïs glanced at Papa—her champion—and was reassured by the twinkle in his eye. She put down her fork, gathered her courage, and jumped in. “As for the pious, Sire, Molière did us all a favor when he exposed the hypocrites. His *Tartuffe* is a veritable rapier skewering all those who hide their venality beneath a veil of religion.”

Antoinette turned to stare at Athénaïs.

“Then you may be interested to know,” said the King with a grin, “that Molière has modified *Tartuffe* somewhat to take into account the criticisms of the Church and would like to perform it for the court.”

“I hope, Sire, that his modifications do not detract from his central message. Your court has much to learn about hypocrisy.”

“Why, madame, do you suggest that some of my courtiers might be hypocritical?” said His Majesty with a laugh. “Any examples?”

Athénaïs pondered. Whom could she skewer? The rest of the table fell quiet. Antoinette’s stare became a glare. “As a matter of fact... Your Majesty, your courtiers might be compared to the creatures in La Fontaine’s Fables.”

“An analogy you have used before to good effect.”

“Merci. Consider the snipe.” She flashed an innocent smile at Louise who grinned back. Athénaïs was attacking the long-nosed Olympe Mancini, Comtesse de Soissons. “The snipe is a common bird distinguished by its very long bill—” She paused dramatically, her audience rapt with attention. “A nose it buries in the mud in pursuit of its prey.”

His Majesty threw back his head and laughed. Both Madame Henriette and Louise blushed, giggling. The scheming comtesse had revealed to the Queen the King and Madame’s little plot: in order to avoid discovery of their affair, they had enlisted Louise as a cover—then everyone’s house of cards collapsed when the King *really* fell for Louise.

Monsieur shot a glare at his wife. Her infidelity led to his flaming affair with the Chevalier de Lorraine, then she had an

affair with *his* former lover, the Comte de Guiche. Athénaïs could hear their screaming fights from across the château.

At that, the dinner party evolved into a contest of wits, everyone competing to see whom they could insult with the most eloquence. While Athénaïs gleefully participated, she realized she was the only person present who was not fornicating. Papa was living openly with his mistress Marie, Monsieur and his wife were fighting over who sleeps with his pretty boys, the King not only has Louise, he'd been flirting with the Princesse de Monaco whose brother is the Comte de Guiche. And there were rumors about Antoinette, staring at Athénaïs from across the table. A den of writhing snakes indeed. The only one here with any morals is Louise, a little violet in a court full of thorny roses, hardly the type one would expect to be mistress of a king, his *maîtresse en titre*. Does she still amuse him? Could Athénaïs?

Helas! The conversation dwindled; they had run out of targets for mockery.

"You are not eating, Madame," said the King to Henriette.

"I apologize, it is not the food. I have been unwell." Henriette handed her plate to a valet. "I have been having a pain in my stomach."

Athénaïs turned to her friend. Henriette looked thinner, and pale. "Have you seen a physician?" she asked.

"A physician?" Henriette replied with a wave of her hand. "As if they were of much use. They are telling me to drink ass's milk. Ugh."

Everyone fell silent, a bad sign for a dinner party. Louise's pretty blue eyes were wide with panic. The King was not amused.

Athénaïs came to the rescue. "Sire, we have been looking forward to learning your plans to invade Flanders. Nothing could be more exciting than securing the glory of France."

"Indeed, madame!" The King flashed a smile rivaling the sun itself. "My genius Minister of War Louvois and I have a plan that cannot fail." Shoving the dinner plates aside, he traced battle lines on the tablecloth with his knife. "More glasses!" he called. "They will be my troops. And salt cellars, they will be the enemy." His guests cheered as the King, his dark curls dancing, moved utensils about. "Reinforcements!" he called, and they all joined in, marshalling their troops of glasses and salt cellars and silver

knives and forks, the frantic servants scurrying about protecting the crystal and porcelain from certain destruction.

“En garde, Your Majesty!” Athénaïs positioned a tiny gold salt spoon like a catapult and prepared to hurl salt at him.

“What, madame, you dare?” The King lobbed a dinner roll in her direction. At once the entire dinner party was throwing food and laughing helplessly.

Louis tossed a casual remark in her direction and she sailed a witticism back, keeping up an airy pretense. Perhaps that silly war game made her heart pound. She felt herself sinking, trapped like a carriage wheel encased in mud.

The King’s dark eyes, glinting with a soldier’s ferocity, met hers. He smiled, a brief lift of his moustache, for her eyes alone. They had a secret. Her breath caught—she glanced away, pretending to strike up a conversation with Louise. *God save my immortal soul*, she thought. *I am his next conquest.*

* * *

Later that night, Athénaïs dreamed.

Little Françoise-Athénaïs was running, running to Papa, when Maman grabbed her by the arm and jerked her from safety.

“You insolent little demon! Your wicked tongue will send you straight to Hell.”

“No, please, she is just a child!” Papa pleaded, his arms outstretched.

“She is twelve, almost a woman, and she knows better.”

“Maman, please forgive me!” The weeping girl cowered at her mother’s feet.

“It’s not my mercy, it’s Our Lord’s mercy you must beg for.” Maman, her own eyes full of tears, knelt before her and held up her rosary. “My child, see the suffering Christ. See the wounds you yourself inflicted upon him with your sins, your mocking words a scourge.”

“No!” Rocking back and forth, she could not look. “Oh no, mon Dieu, forgive me.”

“God will forgive you, my child, but only if you are truly sorry.” Maman pulled her to her feet. “Come, I will help you atone.”

“No,” Papa cried, “she is too young for that, please.” Now Papa was in tears.

“Do not dare to intercede. You know nothing about atonement, you and your drink and your whores.” Maman turned to Françoise-Athénaïs. “Come to my room, child.”

The door shut. “You know what this is for, no?” Maman handed her the scourge.

“Yes, Maman,” she whispered. She took the whip with its many barbed tails, favored by saints to mortify their flesh and perfect their souls. Biting her lip, she stood tall, and looked up at her mother with fear and pride. She knew what this was for and she could do it all by herself.

And when she was done and blood traced down her stinging back, little Françoise-Athénaïs and her mother lay on Maman’s bed, weeping in each other’s arms.

* * *

“Maman—Maman!” The nightmare jerked Athénaïs awake. She reached for her snuff on the table and took a pinch with a shaky hand. Why should she feel guilty? Two nights ago she had seen His Majesty leaving Louise, pregnant yet again, and proceed to the Princesse de Monaco’s apartments. The following morning that arrogant woman looked extremely pleased with herself, as did her complaisant husband. No doubt he had been suitably rewarded. The King had made no moves in Athénaïs’ direction and she was hoping to forget him. She deeply inhaled the snuff then sneezed with relief.

“Good morning, madame.” Mlle Claude came bustling in laden with café au lait and brioche. “Are you well, madame? You look upset.”

“I was dreaming about my mother.” Athénaïs clasped the warm cup for comfort and took a long sip. “She died a few years ago.”

Her maid put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I am so sorry, madame.”

“When she died... His Majesty was so kind to me. We wept together, for she had been a great friend of his mother. And then when the Queen Mother died, it was I who comforted him. Such tender moments.” She put down the cup, forbidden thoughts flooding her brain.

“Tell me—” Athénaïs hesitated. How far could she trust

her maid? “What have you heard about the King and his, ah, his amours?”

Mlle Claude smiled with delicious wickedness. “He may be tiring of Louise de la Vallière, and there are many ladies in pursuit of him.”

“There have always been ladies in pursuit. The only ones who haven’t tried are too ugly or too old or too tired.”

“Or chaste, madame?”

“In this court? Adultery is an art form, like painting or sculpture; everyone in competition to see who is the best dressed, the most attractive, who can get into His Majesty’s bed first. And His Majesty seems unable to resist.”

“Yes, madame.” Her maid arched an eyebrow. “He seems to have quite an appetite.”

Athénaïs frowned. “The problem is that he still loves Louise, in spite of the fact that she is unsuitable for him—and for her position of *maîtresse en titre*. She has no conversation whatsoever, terribly dull.”

“Yes, and may I say, madame, she is not so well endowed as you.” Her maid smirked.

“Precisely, and no intelligence either. Both her bosom and her brain are sorely lacking.” They both giggled.

She settled back into her pillow. “What I could do with her position—yes, a patron of the arts, like Madame and Monsieur, sponsoring playwrights and poets and painters. And to be a part of creating Versailles—Oh, there is so much to plan, to develop, to supervise. For her to be *maîtresse en titre*, and for me to be compelled to rise when she enters the room. I can’t bear it.”

She took another sip. “No.” She shook her head. “No, I must at all times appear chaste, even though I am sorely tempted. I must not easily capitulate, or I will be like the rest of them, good for an occasional romp but lacking his sincere regard.” She shut her eyes tight to get Louis out of her head, her body. “I will not sell myself cheap. I refuse to be a casual encounter resulting in my husband’s advancement and the loss of my family’s honor. I must have his respect,” she whispered, “or I will die.”

“Might I suggest something?” With a sly smile, Mlle Claude leaned closer. “Did you ever hear of Madame Montvoisin? She is known to have answers for situations like this.”

“La Voisin? The fortuneteller? Oh no, I couldn’t possibly. It would be a sin.”

“A sin? Oh really, madame. Surely you must know that tout Paris is visiting her. And you *should* know that half the ladies at court are her clients, also attempting to replace the mademoiselle in the King’s affections.”

“No!” But Athénaïs contemplated, her eyes narrowed. “Who are these ladies?”

“Madame la Comtesse de Soissons, and—”

“What? That bitch, I could have guessed. How like her.”

“And her sister, the Duchesse de Bouillon—”

“I should not be surprised, Italians and their poison rings and what not—”

“Yes, madame, please remember the Mancini family’s reputation. It is very dark, especially the sisters. And your family, too. Your sister-in-law is also a client of La Voisin.”

“Antoinette, my brother’s wife? Does she also want to seduce the King?”

“Madame, women visit La Voisin for many reasons. I know these ladies have been there, but as for why?” Mlle Claude smiled at Athénaïs’ confusion. “Listen,” she whispered, “I will take you to La Voisin. We will go incognito. No one will ever know.”

* * *

The following evening, their carriage pulled up at the tail of a long line of coaches in front of a comfortable villa outside Paris. “We can’t go in now,” Athénaïs whispered. “There are too many people.”

“Don’t be afraid,” Mlle Claude smiled. “We can wear our masks.” She put on her black velvet traveling mask. Masks were a boon to ladies, protecting both their complexions and reputations. “And look—many of the coaches are leaving.” Their driver advanced to the door as Athénaïs too donned her mask.

They were about to alight when Athénaïs shrank back into the shadowed corner of the coach. “Look—could that be?” A man built with the broad shoulders and determination of a bull walked briskly past them towards the first coach in line.

Her maid gasped, but quickly squeezed Athénaïs’ hand. “I told you, madame, tout Paris consults the famous La Voisin.

Come along, now." In a rustle of brown silk, the laughing made-moiselle got out of the coach, followed by the wary Athénaïs.

They were greeted at the door by a girl of about fifteen, her frowzy hair peeking out of her lace-edged cap. "Bon soir, mesdames," she curtsied. "Please come into the parlor." Light from a chandelier and a few candles pierced the shadows, reflected in a crystal ball on the tea table near the settee. Next to the crystal ball was a deck of tarot cards lying on a square of purple silk. "Please be seated," the girl announced. "I will fetch my mother."

"Isn't this exciting," whispered Mlle Claude as she looked around the room.

Athénaïs stared at the murky crystal ball. "How can anyone see anything in there?"

"Only someone with *my* gifts can see the future," boomed a woman's voice behind them.

Startled, both ladies turned to see La Voisin in the doorway. Although short and plump, she radiated authority in her magnificent sea-green velvet dress and crimson velvet cloak embroidered with hundreds of double-headed, wingspread eagles. Even her slippers were stitched with gold thread in the same motif. What stunned Athénaïs were the woman's eyes: black as night, so piercing as to invade one's soul.

"You may leave, Marie-Marguerite." La Voisin gestured dramatically and her daughter fled. "My dear Mlle Claude," she said warmly as she swept into the room. "And who is this?" Her black eyes locked onto Athénaïs, still wearing her mask.

"She prefers anonymity," the maid announced. "Her position is rather—delicate."

"Very well." La Voisin seated herself opposite the ladies, Athénaïs still impaled by her gaze. "Please remove your gloves, madame, so I may take your hand."

As if in a trance, Athénaïs did as bidden. La Voisin took her right hand and examined the palm. "There is a gentleman, perhaps, that you find elusive?" Athénaïs shrank back. For a long moment, La Voisin stared into her eyes. "Remove your mask, madame," she hissed. "I do no reading of velvet physiognomies."

Athénaïs reluctantly removed her mask.

"Ah, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan," said La Voisin with a satisfied smile. "That's better. A beautiful woman such as you

should have no problem attracting a handsome gentleman.” She peered closely into her face. “But I see difficulties, another woman.”

“Yes,” Athénaïs whispered. “I want him. But I must have his respect.”

“I see,” continued the fortuneteller, “The gentleman’s love must turn to you alone.” With feather lightness she held Athénaïs’ hand, caressing it while she held her eyes. “But you desire more. So much more. Are you willing to pay?”

Chapter 3

The Gilded Gates

May, 1667

For Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie, the Poisons Affair began in such an ordinary way, routine. Or it should have been routine. La Reynie had been Lieutenant-General of Police exactly one day and here was a body. His first.

And he really had no clue what to do.

La Reynie had been a judge with quiet chambers and a library filled with the classics, Greek and Roman philosophers always there to calm his mind and steady his hand. But then he was appointed to the newly created post by His Majesty, charged with transforming Paris from a wretched, stinking, dangerous place into a modern city. He had been studying, planning for weeks: clean the garbage out of the streets, catch the criminals, install lanterns to chase away the shadows and make the night safe. La Reynie's predecessor, the Criminal Lieutenant, had been killed by robbers; then the Civil Lieutenant also died, quite possibly by poison. Now La Reynie had to replace both.

He was meeting with Sergeant Dupont to discuss the street lanterns when they were urgently summoned. "Poison!" cried the citizens, who led them to a scene of tangled bedclothes, stench of vomit and bloody diarrhea, the corpse's face grimacing in agony. The black robed doctor was putting away his implements preparing to leave.

La Reynie glanced at the door—the weeping family had been exiled from the room—and asked, "Doctor, we were summoned here with a claim this death is suspicious. Do you believe that to be the case?"

The doctor gazed at the body, his face a puzzle. "The symptoms are consistent with arsenic poisoning, but—"

"But?"

He sighed. "If it was arsenic, the poisoner was very careless."

"Monsieur?"

"It could be arsenicum, rat poison. If arsenic is consumed

on an empty stomach, symptoms are immediate and death soon. If taken with food, the signs are less immediately apparent and death delayed, but inevitable. I have heard that to avoid suspicion, arsenic should be administered over several weeks. The victim grows ill, and weak, and finally succumbs. The symptoms are not as obvious and the cause difficult to detect.”

La Reynie turned to Dupont. Surely, he would know how to handle this. “Sergeant? Your opinion?”

Dupont, portly and stolid, shrugged. “The relatives claim the widow was unfaithful, and besides, she detested her husband.”

“And that is all? No other proof?”

“This is the third suspicious death this month. Same symptoms.” He looked at La Reynie with an inquiring eyebrow as if to say, don’t *you* know what to do?

La Reynie turned to the doctor. “Is it at all possible to prove it was poison?”

The doctor sighed and looked at La Reynie with a condescending smile. “No, monsieur, not conclusively.” He shut his little bag and walked out.

La Reynie looked back down at the body. *Merde*. Should he warn the King?

* * *

The following month, La Reynie’s coach clattered down the rutted road to Versailles, kicking up a cloud of dust following like a malign spirit, seeping through the windows and settling on the passengers. La Reynie and his mentor Jean-Baptiste Colbert were lost in their own thoughts, their dark attire matching their mood. La Reynie was bringing the King news of suspicious deaths, rumors, allegations, frightening stories. No suspects. It was bad enough on the streets of Paris, but now the rumors were pointing to the court. Finding the truth was like grasping that cloud of dust trailing behind.

La Reynie contemplated Colbert seated opposite him. He had been unusually quiet. “Is your gout bothering you, monsieur? Do you wish to rest your foot on the seat?”

“What?” Colbert started. Then he smiled. “I am well, but I fear our session with His Majesty may—well, may not be easy.”

“What difficulty do you foresee?”

“Well...” Colbert hesitated. “If I tell you, will you promise not to laugh?”

“Of course I will not laugh.”

Colbert smiled and dusted off his black robe. “For the last several years, I have had a custom you would find, perhaps, superstitious?” He glanced at La Reynie’s face for any sign of intellectual snobbery, but only saw rapt interest. “When I leave my château to visit His Majesty, I take a piece of bread down to the park and throw it at the canal. If it lands on the other side, I know the King will be in a good temper. If it falls in the water, well, things may be difficult.”

La Reynie suppressed a grin. The powerful Secretary of Finance, twenty years older than His Majesty, yet so in fear of the King that he would resort to fortune telling. “And today?” he asked. “Where did the bread land?”

Colbert sighed, “In the canal.”

“Monsieur,” replied La Reynie with mock gravity, “this brings new meaning to the Biblical injunction, ‘cast your bread upon the waters.’”

Colbert chuckled. “Very good, monsieur, very good.”

How ironic, thought La Reynie. The powerful Colbert had brought down the former Finance Minister Fouquet, and with quiet precision meticulously accounted the millions Fouquet had siphoned from the royal treasury. Utterly without pity, Colbert pushed for Fouquet’s imprisonment for life, and now, years later, Colbert was feared by many and hated by more than a few. His nickname was “Le Nord,” for his coolness. Rumor had it that his real enemy was the much younger Minister of War Louvois, rising fast to power. And rumor also had it that the King liked to play them against each other, just to see who would win.

“If only I could alleviate my mind as well as my foot,” Colbert said with a sigh. “I haven’t slept well since you summoned me. The possibility of courtiers using poison for any reason I find disturbing. And not knowing who they are makes my stomach churn.”

“Monsieur? Do you think you yourself—”

“No, monsieur, not yet. Although I have my own enemies at court, and I’m not even sure who my friends are. I am far more concerned with the safety of His Majesty.”

“As am I. But is he concerned too? How frank can I be?”

“Don’t worry. The King is young, but very astute. You can always trust him with the truth.” He looked at La Reynie closely. “Are you yourself nervous about this meeting?”

La Reynie looked down at his black robe that he had been fiddling with for at least a half hour. “Yes, I suppose so. I do not know His Majesty very well. He is much younger than I, but he is the King and he is... imposing.”

Colbert smiled. “He knows the art of kingship well. He can be infinitely polite, but you will know in an instant if he is displeased. And he will let you know that without even raising his voice. But what was that you were saying about witchcraft?”

“The poison stories are bad enough, but it gets worse. I was visited by a priest who was alarmed by the tales he was hearing in the confessional of jealousy, murder, poison. Then he said he was visited by a young priest he had known for years. He was terrified—a woman had just confessed to him that she had consorted with the devil himself.”

Colbert shook his head. “Mon Dieu. And the court seethes with jealousy.” He turned to look out the window. “Ah, we have arrived.”

The horses clip-clopped through the new village of Versailles, swarming with an army of workmen and a forest of timber both for the château and new houses for the nobility. At last the Château de Versailles loomed before them, and the enormous gilded gates swung open presenting a great framework of forged iron half encircling the façade, awaiting the thousands of bricks that would practically double its size.

La Reynie hadn’t been here since before his appointment as Lieutenant-General of Police, and he was stunned at the changes. The once boggy marsh was being transformed into fountains, ponds, even the beginnings of a canal, and in the distance hundreds of trees of every variety were lumbering along in wagons, on their way to grace the gardens and frame the views.

“Ah, yes,” said Colbert with a sigh. “The cost.”

The coach halted and they got out, making their way through noisy crowds of workers, courtiers and servants, dodging swinging beams and flailing hammers down the crowded halls of the château, and finally into the oak-paneled King’s Chamber.

“Monsieur Colbert.” The King rose to greet them. “And Monsieur La Reynie, my new Lieutenant-General of Police. A pleasure to see you again. Please be seated.”

La Reynie took a deep breath and sat down.

His Majesty gave his new Lieutenant-General of Police a warm smile. “Monsieur La Reynie, I have heard about your progress in turning Paris into a modern city at last. How many street lights so far?”

The royal smile worked, and La Reynie could finally exhale. “Your Majesty, we have installed over 2,000 torches, about half needed, and I have started regular patrols. Some of the most dangerous neighborhoods are now safe at night. It is amazing how illuminating the streets discourages criminals.”

“Excellent.” The King leaned forward, his dark eyes intent. “But that’s not why you have come, is it? Your message sounded serious.”

“Your Majesty,” said La Reynie carefully, “we have come to discuss a matter of great delicacy. We have received disturbing reports from parish priests throughout Paris. Women are confessing to all sorts of hideous crimes, especially poisoning the men in their lives—husbands, fathers, lovers. The worst of it is, they may be procuring the poisons from witches.”

“Witches?” The royal eyebrows raised. “Surely this is something you can handle, monsieur. When I appointed you Lieutenant-General of Police, Monsieur Colbert praised your many talents. I am certain—”

“The poisoners are reportedly ladies of quality, Your Majesty,” interjected Colbert.

“And some, apparently, are members of the court,” added La Reynie.

“What?” Louis sank back into his chair, his dark eyes hooded. “Who?”

“We don’t know yet. The priests, even if they knew, cannot tell us.”

“But what motive could make a gentlewoman even consider such villainy?”

La Reynie and Colbert glanced at each other. The King knew perfectly well that ladies fought each other for the privilege of his bed.

“Jealousy,” Colbert responded. “Power. Greed. Revenge. Freedom. The same motives that drive anyone else. And it has long been fashionable for ladies to have gypsies and witches tell their fortunes. We don’t know how far beyond that it has gone.”

Louis pondered, drumming his fingers on his desk. “I want a very thorough, very discreet investigation. And I want both of you to work with Monsieur Louvois.”

Colbert’s smile faded. La Reynie sat back, quietly studying both men. Now Minister of War Louvois was in charge of this investigation. Colbert was not pleased.

“Monsieur Louvois,” the King continued, “has also heard some disturbing news, rumors of Dutch spies operating in Paris. I think it best that both investigations be coordinated.”

“Spies?” asked Colbert. “From Holland? But what connection could there be to—”

“A threat to the safety of the kingdom. Remember, we are pitted against the Dutch, the Spanish, factions of the English. None of them is above using poison and witchcraft, if only to subvert those around me. And—” The King handed a pamphlet to La Reynie. “The Dutch will stop at nothing to attack my family.”

La Reynie perused the scandal sheet printed in Holland. In bold letters, “*Amours de Madame et du Comte de Guiche*,” describing in lurid details Madame Henriette’s old liaison with her husband’s former favorite. The Dutch, expecting an invasion by His Majesty, had succeeded in invading the royal family.

Colbert turned to La Reynie. “I have a suggestion. You will need help in this matter, and I know just the man. Have you met Captain François Desgrez? He worked with me and d’Artagnan on the Fouquet investigation. He is an excellent officer from a fine family.”

The King rose, prompting his guests to stand as well. He turned to La Reynie. “I will be leaving soon with the army and Louvois. Send us a report by special courier with any new developments. But now, gentlemen—” He escorted his ministers out the door, and down the hall. “Time for some relaxation.”

A door to the salon swung open, revealing crowds of courtiers dancing, drinking, and gossiping, ignoring the small orchestra in the corner. His Majesty was announced, they all fell silent and bowed as he headed for the billiards table, then the

noise started up again. Gilded mirrors reflected more mirrors, reflecting another salon branching off from this one, all lit with flickering candles. The air was redolent with perfume wafting from profuse roses in ornate silver vases; the elegantly dressed courtiers vied with the flowers with festoons of lace and ribbons adorning gentlemen's britches and sleeves, the ladies competing for the curliest hair and the lowest décolletage. Many of the gentlemen sported towering wigs, unlike the King who still had plenty of his own curls. La Reynie had to suppress a smile—with his black robes he looked like a stern raven in a flock of chattering parrots.

An English accent caught La Reynie's ear—a gentleman with a huge black wig murmuring compliments to a politely smiling blonde submitting her fingers to his kisses.

"Who is the English nobleman?" he asked Colbert.

"Milord George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, paying his compliments to Madame Henriette. She is, of course, the sister of Charles II, and that's how she met Buckingham. He is called—I think the English term is a rake. Milord Buckingham has been in and out of favor with Charles, and he still seems to be pursuing Madame."

They seemed to be doing a dance: milord moved forward a bit, lingering over Madame Henriette's delectable fingers, while she slowly inched back.

A lady came to her rescue, a striking brunette with a long thin nose that would have made her look severe if it wasn't for her dimples.

"This is one to watch," whispered Colbert. "Madame la Comtesse de Soissons."

"Isn't she one of the Italian nieces of the late Cardinal?"

"Precisely. She was banished a few years ago for plotting to oust the King's new mistress, Louise de La Vallière. She wrote a letter to the Queen exposing the King's affair with the mademoiselle."

"Why did he allow her back?"

"Who knows? Her nickname is 'The Snipe' because of her nose, but the Queen calls her 'The Snake.'"

La Reynie raised an eyebrow, wondering how many of the ladies here he would have to keep under scrutiny.

“Chérie,” cried Olympe, Comtesse de Soissons, she of the long nose. “Come join us at our table. I brought my tarot cards.”

Henriette bid a hasty adieu to Buckingham and joined the comtesse shuffling a deck of cards. Buckingham scowled and stalked off.

“Ah, tarot,” whispered La Reynie. “I believe that is a card game used by gypsies—and witches too.”

The comtesse laid down the cards on a square of purple silk. “This one covers you,” she murmured. “This one crosses you... Ah, l’Amoureux.” The top card showed Cupid aiming his arrow at a young couple.

“Such a wonderful card, luck in love,” exclaimed the comtesse. “I know who needs to play. Louise, chérie,” she called. Her slanting dark eyes searched the room, then found their prey. “Come and have your fortune told. The cards are simply amazing.”

Louise glanced around the room, then came over. “I beg your pardon, madame,” she said with a polite smile, “I was looking for His Majesty.”

“Oh? Don’t you want to know your fortune in love?” Olympe tittered. She gathered up the cards and shuffled them expertly.

Louise blushed. “Oh no, I—” Then she caught sight of the King and her face lit up. “Please excuse me.” She rushed away in a swirl of white silk.

“That simpering little idiot,” hissed Olympe to Henriette as they vacated the table.

“She deserves your pity,” replied Henriette. “I do believe His Royal Appetite is on the prowl again.”

“Again?” Olympe cocked an eyebrow. “Who is it this time?”

“I’ll just say that Antoinette had better not find out.”

Olympe blinked. “No. *Really?* Why, that little—”

But a hush fell over the room as His Majesty appropriated a lute from one of the musicians. He bent his head over the instrument while he tuned it, then looked up with a smile and began to sing.

“Helas! My love, we soon must part...” His clear tenor filled the room, captivating the ladies who swarmed about him, their fans and bosoms fluttering.

Even La Reynie found himself lost in the memory. The song

was an old chanson d'amour of a troubadour to his lady. It belonged to another time, another place, where virtue and innocence and piety ruled, the only form of evil in dragons to be slain by courageous knights. He sighed and noted a few of the older courtiers were also wistful.

The blushing young ladies, however, had something else on their minds and fanned themselves furiously. Ignoring them, the King turned to sing a verse to his Queen.

La Reynie finally noted Her Majesty. In spite of her magnificent gown and diamonds, the plump little Queen, a Hapsburg by way of Spain, looked like a simple German hausfrau with her frizzy blonde hair and double chin. And sadly, being a Hapsburg, her chin was larger than her wit. She had no clue her husband was having an affair with Louise until she got the tell-all letter. Here she stood, wide-eyed and smiling, clasping her hands in excitement over her husband's momentary attention.

The ladies encircled the King like a pride of lionesses ready to pounce. Beneath their vapid smiles and coquettish glances, La Reynie could sense calculating ambition. How far would they go?

The King turned from the Queen and began a new verse: "I beg to kiss your ruby lips and taste your sweet perfume." He slyly winked at the ladies as he caressed them with the sensual lyrics. They nearly swooned. "To drown in your silken hair." He strolled over to the blushing Louise, who curtsied low and smiled shyly over her fan. He flashed her a grin and turned to the covey of tittering ladies. The only female not smiling was Her Majesty. "Now we must part, my love..."

La Reynie sighed. His Majesty knew the risk perfectly well.

With a dramatic final strum of his lute, the King finished his song to thunderous applause. He handed the instrument back to the bowing musicians, then turned to the conductor. "Monsieur, a pavane, please."

The orchestra began to play' and the mating ritual commenced, the stately pavane affording all a tasteful veneer for seduction. The women glided by Louis, smiling, winking, but he kept scanning, searching... There, from across the room, an opulently gorgeous creature with honey blonde hair and flashing blue eyes slowly danced towards him. Now she was under the glittering chandelier, on center stage at last. Their eyes locked;

the King paused for a beat, transfixed. Heads turned, all eyes were on them—astonished, curious, bitter.

La Reynie stared, pulled back to the legends of old. “Who is she?” he asked Colbert.

“Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan. She married somewhat beneath her—the Mortemarts actually have a more distinguished lineage than the King himself. Her husband is off with his troops.”

Mon Dieu, thought La Reynie, *His Majesty has been bewitched.*

Chapter 4

The Empress June, 1667

June was the month for war, time for the King to display his prowess to the court as they travelled in a mighty procession to the Flemish border. Here he would fight for control of the Spanish Netherlands, thereby winning his wife's belated dowry. The King had gone ahead with his troops a day's journey, with the court following behind. The court minus one—before leaving the court was astounded to learn that he had discarded Louise—very politely, of course. He made her a duchesse, the ultimate reward, and told her to stay behind while the court left for the front. But the following day—here she was.

"You impudent little baggage, defying the King. He told you to stay behind!" The tiny Queen Marie-Thérèse raged on at Louise. Revenge was hers at last.

Louise quaked before the Queen in an unsteady curtsy, her disheveled dress swelling with her third pregnancy. Athénaïs and the other ladies-in-waiting watched horrified from behind their quivering fans.

"Madre de Dios!" screamed the Queen. "Can't you see my husband wishes this immoral liaison to be over? He made you a duchesse. Surely that was sufficient payment for your services."

Louise flushed red, her mouth set in an angry pout.

The plump little Queen stood as tall as she could and pointed to the door with her fan. "Leave here at once. Go back to the Palais with the fruit of your illicit union." Louise turned and fled.

"¡*Qué puta!*" the Queen yelled at her back.

* * *

Not long after, Athénaïs was riding in the Queen's coach with her, Mademoiselle, and Julie de Montausier, Athénaïs' chaperone with whom she would be sharing quarters. It was hot, dusty, miserable, the Queen still fussing over her scene with Louise. Athénaïs was quiet, examining her conscience and clutching her

bag. In the bag was a note; two notes, actually.

A week ago came the first note from Louis, begging her to meet him at a small door at the newly finished wing of the château. Had La Voisin worked her magic? He wanted her. For what? She knocked, it opened, and there was the King. He kissed her hand and they froze, lost in each other. But with a squeeze of her hand he led her wordlessly down the dimly lit corridor.

"Where are we?" she whispered. "I don't recognize it."

"It's a secret hallway." He flashed a smile. "So I can walk parallel to the salons without being seen." He pulled her over to a dark corner. "Athénaïs," he whispered, and now they were kissing, touching, exploring every part of their bodies. He pulled out her breasts from her bodice, roving over them with his hands, his mouth.

Her body surged, hot with excitement, desiring him desperately. But, oddly, the sharp smell of the wood brought her back to the stage, her role in this drama. "No!" She pushed him away, hastily fixing her clothes. "No, Your Majesty. Have you no respect for my station? No, not like this, not in a hallway, for God's sake." She could see the hurt in his eyes.

"Athénaïs," he whispered, "please, I adore you. I beg you, call me Louis. I know you care for me, say that you do."

She melted. "Oh, God, yes." She embraced him, kissing him tenderly on the cheeks, the eyes, the mouth, then shoved his eager body away again. "Yes, you know I love you. But I am a married woman."

Fighting back tears, she drew herself up tall and stared him down, even though he was her king. "I am a Rochechouart de Mortemart," she declared, her heritage now her talisman. "I must protect the honor of my family. I am not, Your Majesty, someone to be added to your list." She choked on her tears. "Mon Dieu," she stammered, "the cost to us both. I cannot, not like this." And she fled.

* * *

Now in the coach on the road to Avesnes, Athénaïs furtively fished in her bag, her hand finally finding the second note, the one for tonight. "Wait for me, ma douce," it said. She clutched it tight, to make it real, to drown out the angry Queen going on and

on about her husband's disrespectful mistress, the other ladies murmuring condolences.

Athénaïs closed her eyes, returning to that meeting with him, feeling his mouth on her breast, his hands wandering... But dare I believe him? Is it really over with Louise? He has such a tender heart. And then there is his wife, sitting right here. Dare I feel sorry for her?

Then a sound of galloping horses, a coach coming up from behind—she looked out the window. "It's Louise!" Athénaïs cried.

Louise's coach thundered by the astonished ladies, sending a cloud of dust through the coach window. "No," the Queen exclaimed, coughing, "she's trying to reach the King first!"

That putain! Athénaïs couldn't call Louise a whore out loud, but now she was truly jealous of her one-time friend. How *dare* she. She blurted out to the weeping Queen, "If I ever had the misfortune to be the King's mistress, God forbid, I would never have the callousness to face you again." Blushing, she donned her traveling mask and complained about the dust. *Mon Dieu*, she thought, *what have I said?*

* * *

But Louise's maneuver failed miserably. She did arrive first at the King's tent, but he politely shunned her, then made her ride with the others to Avesnes. Hours later, dinner was an exercise in polite discomfort: the Queen glared at Louise, who stared at her plate; the King glanced furtively at Athénaïs, who prayed she wasn't blushing; Papa, who knew what was going on, lifted an eyebrow in amusement. Papa the libertine undoubtedly approved. The others at the table politely ignored the whole scene and would probably compare notes later.

After dinner, desperate to get away from the polite chit-chat, Athénaïs took refuge on the terrace. Louis' note said, "Wait for me." Where? What about Julie, her chaperone? She paced a bit, then sat down to look at the stars.

"Congratulations, madame," came a quiet voice behind her.

Athénaïs turned to find Monsieur and Madame. They sat down next to her.

"Whatever for?" asked Athénaïs with affected innocence.

Monsieur leaned forward with a grin. "You have stolen my brother's heart, madame, and I doubt he will ever find it again."

"Oh, really?" Athénaïs fanned herself rapidly, glad that the darkness hid her blushing face. "Monsieur," she said, "I am a married woman, and I must guard my reputation."

"Don't we all," Madame said with a touch of irony. "We understand, and of course we will be discreet."

They gazed at the stars until Monsieur broke the silence. "I happened upon His Majesty's horoscope the other day." He gave her a sideways look.

"Really. Is that information not a state secret?" she asked. "I heard Milord Buckingham has been threatened with imprisonment for casting King Charles' horoscope."

"Ah, but our Royal Family had its own astrologer that cast my brother's nativity when he was born. As his brother, I am allowed to read it. It is very interesting."

"Indeed." Athénaïs smiled politely, vainly trying to appear blasée.

"My astrologer explained it to me. My brother's Sun is in Virgo, which gives him the ability to be highly discriminating and give great attention to detail. Ah, but the lord of Virgo is flighty Mercury, making him fickle."

"How well we know," Madame pursed her lips. "Indeed, I have observed that at least once every two weeks, he will make his mistress of the moment miserable."

Athénaïs' stomach tightened.

"His Moon is in Leo, ruled by the Sun," Monsieur continued.

"Oh—is that why everyone calls him the Sun King?"

"Vraiment. The lion commands attention, does he not? And His Majesty's leadership is reflected by his Sun and Mercury elevated in his Tenth House. Fittingly, his Moon is conjunct Venus, the goddess of love."

"Such a romantic," Madame sighed, "if inconstant."

"My brother cast my nativity," said Athénaïs. "He said my Sun is in Libra—"

"Aha," said Monsieur. "Ruled by Venus, so naturally you are beautiful. But you are like the scales, always tilting back and forth, unable to make up your mind. What else?"

"My rising sign is Leo."

Monsieur grinned. "How fitting. You do love to be the center of attention."

Athénaïs bit her lip, recalling her brother's worried face at the sight of her chart. "I can't remember the rest. It was long ago. But what exactly is a rising sign?"

"It is the sign rising in the east the moment one is born." Monsieur looked around to see if they were being heard. "I must warn you that His Majesty's rising sign is Scorpio."

"Scorpio? I have heard about Scorpio, rather dark things. What does that mean?"

"It is the Scorpion. As he grows older, he will be even more focused on power and even revenge. Beware the Scorpion's sting and do not offend him, madame. For he will not forgive."

* * *

Athénaïs was alone in the bedroom she shared with the conspicuously absent Julie. Next door was the King's chamber, while the Queen and Louise each had their own rooms on the floor below. She paced the room in her *négligée*, trembling with nerves. A noise—a polite scratching at the door.

"Yes?" She snatched up a blanket from the bed to cover herself.

A Swiss Guard entered, quietly closing the door behind him. She backed away.

"Madame." He lifted his visor revealing familiar dark eyes with a mischievous twinkle.

"Your Majesty." She gasped and sank into a deep curtsy. The blanket fell away revealing the outline of her breasts through her sheer linen nightgown.

Louis stared. "Madame, I..." He removed his helmet, allowing his brown curls to cascade to his shoulders. "Athénaïs, I—" His Majesty found himself speechless.

Her heart pounding, Athénaïs rose to face him. "Oh God, Louis," she whispered. "What are we doing?" Overwhelmed with both shame and desire, she retreated to the window and the soft summer night. Looking up at the stars, she caught the faint whiff of apple blossoms carried by a warm evening breeze. It was unbearably romantic, but— "Am I giving up my marriage to be another of your playthings?"

She heard him stride toward her, but she kept her back to him, knowing what would happen if they stood face to face.

“Ma belle.” Louis gently turned her toward him and took her face in his hands. “You are the only woman in France who has the grace, the style, the breeding to be my companion. If only I didn’t have the duties of a King, if only I could be a simple musketeer, and you my wife.”

He kissed her, her knees buckled, she abandoned all restraint, returning his kisses, moaning as his hands slowly caressed her body and eased their way down her back. Shivering with desire, her hips moved urgently with his—but her wandering hands were stopped by his breastplate. “Mon cher, you have let something come between us.” They both giggled.

“I had help getting into this ridiculous thing,” he complained, pulling his armor off. “Now you must help me get out of it. Can you unfasten that buckle in the back?”

As she struggled with his armor, the utter absurdity of the situation had them giggling as buckles and laces were cast aside into a pile on the floor. The breastplate finally gone, His Majesty refused to wait any longer. Kissing her on the neck, he unlaced her nightdress and it fell to the floor. He lifted her up, carried her to the bed, then hurriedly yanked off his remaining clothes and boots.

“Halt! Who goes there?” A soldier’s rough voice filtered through the bolted door. Athénaïs hurriedly wrapped a sheet around herself.

“Dispatches for the King from the front,” another voice responded.

“Please do not worry,” Louis whispered. “My guards have their orders.”

“His Majesty is with his generals and is not to be disturbed,” replied the guard. “Leave the dispatches with me.” Footsteps followed, then silence.

Louis tried to embrace Athénaïs but she pulled away, still nervously clutching the sheet. “It will be all right, ma belle,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “As you see, the guards have orders to protect our privacy.”

“But what if Julie tries to come in?”

“I have suitably rewarded her husband. There will be no in-

terruptions.”

Athénaïs started to cry. “I’m frightened.”

He softly stroked her hair. “What are you afraid of?”

“My husband,” she whispered. “He will kill me if he finds out.”

Louis took her face in his hands, and even in the dim candlelight she could see the love and concern in his eyes. “Ma chérie. Surely you do not think I would fail to protect you?”

She shook her head and snuggled in to him.

“I will not let him hurt you, and I will do my best to appease him.” He kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “Let us pretend,” he murmured. “We are together now. I can be your husband for this moment, and honor and cherish you. Je t’aime, Athénaïs.”

With that, she finally allowed passion to sweep her into a world of no fear, no guilt, and she abandoned herself to her conqueror.

Much later, exhausted and sweating in the warm summer night, they lay in each other’s arms, legs intertwined, her head on his shoulder.

“Does anyone suspect?” she murmured. “What about the Queen?”

“I told her I had to write dispatches.”

They fell silent, his fingers entangled in her blonde hair. “When is your husband returning?”

“Not for some months, thank God.”

He rolled over to face her. “What is important, my beloved, is that we are finally together. I will not allow anyone, or anything, to keep us apart.” He kissed her deeply, passionately, and she felt herself, again, melting.

* * *

He rose before dawn, and she drowsily watched him get dressed. “Must you go so soon?” She playfully tugged on his doublet, and with a chuckle he was on top of her again.

“You little vixen.” He tossed his clothes on to the floor. He didn’t take long this time, and soon they were exhausted.

“I really must go this time.” He started getting dressed again, then looked around. “What happened to my cravat?” He rummaged through the bed clothes while Athénaïs giggled.

“Where is it?” He tossed the pillows aside and found something else. “What is this?”

Athénaïs blushed scarlet. He was holding a little sachet of rose petals. How to explain? She gave him her prettiest smile. “It’s a love charm,” she whispered.

“A love charm?” He laughed, then immediately stifled himself so he would not be heard. “A love charm? You silly goose, did you think you would need one with me?” He took her face in his hands, tenderly. “I have loved you for the longest time. Do not ever doubt that. Besides—” he frowned at the little sachet. “This is superstitious nonsense. You need to stay away from this kind of business.”

“Yes, of course, I—I agree, I was foolish.” She looked down at the bed, feeling both stupid and relieved. And he was out the door.

* * *

The following few days were a tumult of stolen moments in her apartment. She was protected by her much-rewarded chaperone Julie plus a contingent of Swiss Guards. While the courtiers probably guessed, of course they didn’t ask, and they certainly would not bring it to the attention of the Queen—or the sad Louise.

His Majesty finally, reluctantly, had to join his troops to pursue the fleeing enemy, and the court slowly made its way back to Saint-Germain. They stopped at a church where the Queen decreed they would all go to confession to atone for the many sins of the past days. She was referring to her tantrum over Louise, oblivious to the real reason her husband had been coming to bed so late.

Athénaïs knelt on the cold stone floor of the dim church, offering up her prayers with the smoke of the candles. A shaft of light spilled through the stained-glass window high above, dappling the crucifix before her with iridescence, its purity triggering anxiety and guilt. What price would God exact from her in payment for her sin? Which was worse, adultery or La Voisin’s magic? But the witch had been so kind, so helpful...

* * *

“This one covers you, this one crosses you,” La Voisin whis-

pered that night weeks ago, her voice as silken as the purple cloth draped over the table. One by one she set the cards down on the cloth, the mysterious pictures illuminated by flickering candles.

“Ah! The cards foretell a promising future, madame. See here, The Pope, reversed, upside down.” She gave Athénaïs with a quick smile. “You make your own rules, do you not?” She continued to lay out the cards in the shape of a cross. “You do indeed have rivals. The Seven of Staves says you must be sly to thwart them. This one crowns you, the High Priestess, reversed... Hmm, the Empress, also reversed.” Her eyebrow raised. “Take care, madame. You must endeavor not to get pregnant.” Athénaïs blushed.

All the cards were now in place. “Madame, you have faced financial difficulties, no? But look, the Sun card, and the Two of Staves opening the doorway to abundance. Yes, you will have great fortune, but—” She pointed to the High Priestess, to Judgment, then to the Seven of Swords. “It is Fate directing you, and you must be careful.” She lowered her voice. “You must use subterfuge to disarm your opponents. And I, madame, have the means to assist you. I would like to introduce you to two gentlemen who are skilled in such things.”

The mysterious sessions began with La Voisin’s dear friend, “my man of marvels!” The one and only Lesage wore a musty cloak and a reddish wig that was perpetually askew, but he astounded Athénaïs with his prestidigitation. Give him your prayer on a paper and voila! It disappeared—then voila! It magically appeared in a cupboard. His friend Abbé Mariette obliged Athénaïs with unsettling rituals involving malodorous toads, black candles, and muttered Latin prayers. It was sickening and fascinating and each time she went she swore it would be the last. But she couldn’t stop, not yet, just one more time...

Chapter 5

Magic

March, 1668

La Reynie carefully stepped out of his carriage onto the cobblestones in front of Sergeant Dupont's office, holding a scented handkerchief to his nose. The early morning's stinking slops had been pitched into the street, awaiting La Reynie's new army of street cleaners. Next on his long list was sewers. They couldn't come soon enough.

Captain Desgrez had urgently summoned him with news of an arrest, thank God. The investigation had been going on for a year with too many whispers and not enough evidence. Desgrez and the sergeant—indeed, all the constabulary—had been on the lookout for either victims of sorcery or the witches themselves. While there had been a few more poisoning cases, nothing could be tied to the court.

The door opened, and the portly Sergeant Dupont appeared, brushing crumbs off his uniform. "Ah, Monsieur La Reynie. Captain Desgrez awaits you."

"With good news, I hope." As they walked towards the office, they were accosted by the sergeant's five-year-old daughter bounding down the stairs with tousled dark curls, her simple white shift displaying traces of breakfast.

"Bonjour, Muh-suh La Reynie," she lisped. She curtsied properly then held her arms out to be picked up.

"Ah, ma petite Sylvie." La Reynie scooped her into his arms and gave her a kiss.

"Sylvie," chided her father, pretending to scowl. "Do not bother Monsieur La Reynie, he has an important meeting. Go upstairs to Maman."

La Reynie gave the little girl a hug and she clambered back up the staircase. Then he spied Desgrez waiting for him in the office.

"What news, mon capitaine?"

Captain Desgrez's face lit up with a smile. "Good news, mon-

sieur, we have arrested two sorcerers. And—will you excuse us, Sergeant?”

Sergeant Dupont shrugged and shut the door behind him.

“Why the secrecy?” asked La Reynie.

“Monsieur,” began Desgrez in a low voice, “We are dealing with more than simple fortunetelling. The suspects have a very distinguished clientele reaching all the way to the court.”

“What clientele?”

“The mistress of the King.”

“What? Mlle Louise de La Vallière? Surely not.”

“No, monsieur, she is the *former* mistress.”

La Reynie shook his head. “I’ve been away from court too long.”

“And we found that other ladies have been plotting to replace the mademoiselle in the affections of the King. And one of them succeeded, very effectively—among others, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan.”

“Her? I saw her a year ago dancing with the King. Somehow, I am not surprised. But what does this have to do with—”

“The ladies hired sorcerers to cast spells to depose the mademoiselle. They may even have tried to bring about the mademoiselle’s murder.”

“Murder the King’s mistress? And who are the sorcerers?”

“A priest, Abbé Mariette, and a Monsieur Lesage. However, that may be an alias.”

“Have there been any actual allegations of poisonings?”

“No, not yet.”

“Have they been interrogated?”

“No, monsieur. We await your instructions.”

“Very well. We must proceed carefully, and not let this news spread. They must not be interrogated until we have gathered enough facts to ask intelligent questions. Come with me.”

* * *

Three months later, La Reynie’s hard work led to breathing the stale air of a dank chamber of the Bastille, interrogating this annoyingly recalcitrant suspect. He had the advantage of his high desk allowing him to tower over his suspects seated below on the hard little stool, the sellette. La Reynie was flanked by

Jean Sagot, the Court Clerk, a round little man with round little spectacles supervising his scribe, quill in hand and inkwell at the ready.

"Very well," La Reynie snapped. "Again. What is your *true* name?"

The man in the malodorous grey cloak and reddish wig squirmed like a bug under La Reynie's gaze. "Lesage," he replied.

"Truly? Is not your name Adam Coeuret?"

No answer.

"What about Adam Dubuisson?"

Silence.

La Reynie leaned forward and raised his voice a notch. "Monsieur, as you well know, we are fully ready to use effective means to obtain information. Do you wish to carry this nonsense to that extreme?"

The suspect lifted his nose with an air of importance. "All the names you gave are correct. I prefer to be called Lesage, as I pride myself on the wise counsel I give my clients."

"Very well, Lesage. Exactly what are the services that you perform?"

Lesage smiled proudly. "Astrology, horoscopy, alchemy, chiromancy—"

The poor scribe frantically scribbled, Sagot peering at the transcript with a frown. "One moment, please," asked Sagot. "Would you explain those terms?"

"But of course. I practice all the sciences that originated from the mystical Cabala. Astrology: the study of the movements of the heavenly bodies, and how that affects men."

La Reynie nodded. Astrology was a science—but fortune telling was a crime.

"As for horoscopy," continued Lesage, "that is simply casting an astrological chart to predict the future. Alchemy seeks to uncover the mysteries of matter, and someday, perhaps, to turn lead into gold. And with the art of chiromancy, I can read your palm to predict your future. I interpret tarot cards for that as well."

La Reynie leaned forward with great interest, remembering the comtesse he had seen reading Tarot cards at court. "Now, Monsieur Lesage, who are your clients?"

Lesage shifted uneasily under the gaze of his inquisitor. "Well, there's Mme de Montespan, and..." He fell silent.

"And also who?"

"And the Duchesse de Vivonne, and the Comtesse de Soissons."

Mon Dieu, La Reynie sighed. Mme de Montespan herself; her sister-in-law the duchesse, and the comtesse he saw dealing the tarot cards. "And what did these ladies want from you?"

"Well, mostly it involved their love lives. They were jealous, whatever."

"Was there a particular target of that jealousy?"

"Ah, well, they were hoping to replace Mlle de La Vallière in the King's affections."

La Reynie learned that Lesage led his wealthy clients to Abbé Mariette, a defrocked priest who had recited the Gospels over the poor deluded fools' heads, along with performing some strange ritual involving dead frogs in an earthenware dish. The two sorcerers had met their clients at the house of La Voisin, the famous fortuneteller.

Back in his office, La Reynie sat back in his chair, eyes closed, trying to connect the pieces. Mme de Montespan, herself. Now he really needed to keep an eye on her. And why the Gospels? Why not a magical incantation? Then he remembered the words in the mass said by the priest: "*Per evangelica dicta deleantur nostra delicta*" "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be blotted out." Could saying the Gospels have a magical effect?

* * *

"Ooh..." Athénaïs murmured. "That feels so good. Wherever did you learn that?"

"Years of practice, madame," replied Mlle Claude. "I used to do this for my mother before a performance." Athénaïs lay on her stomach while her maid massaged rose scented almond oil into her naked back, gradually releasing days of nervous strain.

"That reminds me," said Athénaïs, "Is *Andromaque* still playing? Another triumph for Monsieur Racine and Mlle du Parc."

Her maid giggled. "And did you know that Mlle du Parc has become Racine's mistress?"

"Really? What will the hypocrites think?" She laughed. "Now

he is totally corrupted.”

Her maid started on Athénaïs’ buttocks, releasing a sigh. “Oh, right there, yes. His Majesty is wearing me out.”

Mlle Claude smiled. “Certainement. Why, I hardly have time to undress you before he leads you to the boudoir. He must have amazing stamina.”

“Indeed.” Athénaïs burst out laughing. “You won’t believe this. Give me my robe, I can’t tell you this lying down.” She grabbed the robe and wrapped herself, still giggling. “You must be absolutely discreet about this.” Her maid nodded furiously.

“It was last night. Remember, he came in with a grin on his face? Well, he had just taken off his clothes, and he had a wicked smile. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘guess what this is?’ and he handed me a little jar of crème. He said, ‘I got this from my valet, Bontemps. Put it on me.’”

Mlle Claude covered her mouth to stifle a scream. “No. It wasn’t—”

“Yes—it was an ointment of Spanish fly. Well, I didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. ‘Dear Bontemps,’ I exclaimed. ‘A man of many talents.’ I, of course, set to work applying the crème, and, and—” Now Athénaïs and her maid were doubled over in laughter.

“Finally,” Athénaïs continued, wiping her eyes, “when we were through, I asked him. ‘Mon cher,’ I said, ‘I have heard about this magical substance. I thought it was to be taken by mouth, perhaps in a drink.’ ‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘absolutely not! I was warned by my physician that Spanish fly taken by mouth could make someone ill, perhaps even kill them.’”

Mlle Claude’s eyes got very big. “Vraiment?” She grinned. “Bontemps saved you another trip to La Voisin’s, no?”

“Yes, thankfully, I—Oh, I forgot to tell you. Remember those two men she referred me to? Well, they seem to have disappeared. I wonder what happened? They were so odd with their strange prayers and whatever. I had no intention of returning because the last time I went, I was embarrassed. You will never guess who I encountered. My sister-in-law Antoinette, Duchesse de Vivonne herself.”

“Merde,” whispered the maid. “What did she say?”

“She just glared—mon Dieu, her blue eyes turned to ice—

then she smiled politely as if we had met at court. ‘Fancy meeting you here, ma chère,’ she said.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told her that I had heard so much about La Voisin’s friends that I simply had to come see for myself. But at that moment, my curiosity was abundantly satisfied.”

“A wonderful retort, madame.”

“But I should not have been surprised. She was probably there in search of spells to gain a man. She has absolutely no discretion.” Athénaïs dropped the robe to put on her chemise. “Did you know about my nephew, her little boy Louis de Mortemart? The timing of his birth was most unusual. My brother returned from campaign and found himself to be a father, even though he had been gone over a year.”

“No. Then who is the father? What did your brother do?”

Athénaïs tightened her lips into a smirk. “The child bears a remarkable resemblance to my brother’s groom. I must say, she does like to ride—and as for my fat brother, he cares far more for his dinner table than her. He appears to be resigned to the situation.”

She reached for her stockings. “I really should not go back to La Voisin. I don’t need her and God knows who I will meet there. And besides, the King seems to sincerely love me. At least... at least I think so.”

“Madame.” Mlle Claude placed a cautioning hand on her shoulder. “Please consider. There are many ladies who desire His Majesty and hate you as well.”

“I know. I will think about it.”

* * *

The trial of the two sorcerers took place on June 30 in the Châtelet Court, an ugly 12th Century fortress on the Right Bank. The moldering grey heap was feared by every criminal in Paris. Unlike the Bastille, whose spacious tower served the wayward nobility, the dungeons of the Châtelet held the human rubble of society in its dank cells rife with disease. One floor below was the city morgue, where corpses collected from river and street were hauled in to be identified. The courtrooms were damp and cold even in the middle of summer, lit by a few candles and fee-

ble rays of sunlight soiled by barred, grimy windows.

"And over whose head did you say the Gospels?" The elderly judge peered down at Abbé Mariette from over his spectacles. Sorcery was bad, but defiling the priesthood by performing holy rites in abominable ways was a serious crime.

La Reynie leaned forward with interest.

The thin, pale abbé, shivering on the sellette, stared at the floor. "Well, it was for the customers Lesage brought to me. There was Mme de Baugy, and Duchesse de Vivonne, and... and Mme. de Montespan."

The judge frowned at the familiar names. "Who introduced you to them?"

"All of them were brought by Lesage to my house."

"Why did you say the Gospels in your room?"

"Lesage said it was not necessary to go to the church for that, and that a Gospel said by a priest has the same effect in whatever place it is done."

And that was all. La Reynie never forgot the stunned look on Lesage's face when the judge pronounced sentence: to spend the rest of his life (which was bound to be short) below decks on one of His Majesty's galleys, forever rowing hard under the lash.

But then Lesage smiled when the judge announced that by a strange twist of fate, the judge himself was, through his wife, a cousin of Abbé Mariette. To avoid any question of favoritism, he transferred both the abbé's case and Lesage's sentence to Parliament's Tournelle Court where they might be heard impartially—and the suspects not questioned too closely. *There must be more to this*, thought La Reynie as he stuffed his notes into his satchel. *Although the judges might not want to hear it.*

* * *

Summer again, a year since their affair began, a year of hidden caresses, furtive flirtation, and hilarious laughter. Few really knew and whispers abounded. Because Athénaïs was married, poor Louise had to continue posing as the royal mistress, while Athénaïs' friend, the intrepid little Comte de Lauzun, posed as Athénaïs' flirtatious chaperon to keep everyone guessing. The dim Queen was still clueless. But the public giggled and pointed at the royal coach carrying Her Majesty, with Louise *and* Athénaïs

as her ladies-in-waiting, all gorgeously dressed. “Look!” they cried. “See the three queens!”

On this hot summer day in a stuffy Versailles salon, Athénaïs was packed in with courtiers, officials, and riff-raff, waiting for the King’s appearance. Today he received the public, for it was the custom for His Gracious Majesty to allow anyone to present petitions regarding their grievances. The room stank with the bodies of the unwashed public who were too poor to afford perfume.

Athénaïs nervously eyed the rest of the court. Did they suspect? There was her sister Gabrielle, Marquise de Thianges, talking to Louis-Victor, and Antoinette. They had been staring at her, trying to avoid the delicate topic. But then, Antoinette had her own secrets. Time to play the game—Athénaïs turned to Lauzun and winked at him over her fluttering fan. He grinned.

She shifted from one foot to another, irritated she had to stand. Her mind wandered... Was her maid correct that the two sorcerers had been shipped off somewhere?

Amid the droning of courteous speeches, Louis sat at the head of the room receiving each document into his own hand from a courtier, and with a comment or two efficiently disposing of each. Now a new one was handed to him, and his eyes widened. “Why, it’s blank.” The crowd tittered. “Who sent this?”

“I did, Your Majesty.” A frail old woman dressed in black stepped forward, her grey uncombed hair surrounding her thin face like a tangled halo. “My son is dead.”

“My sincere regrets, madame,” Louis murmured.

“He died building this château for you! He fell from the scaffolding to his death. Did you know that? Do you care?”

The courtiers hissed their alarm. The guards moved towards the old woman, muskets at the ready. Athénaïs held her breath.

The crone pointed a bony finger at the King. “Do you know how many men have died for this monstrosity? All for you and your mistresses, you whoremonger!”

Athénaïs paled and took an involuntary step back. Now heads swiveled in her direction.

“You call yourself a king. You and your sluts have brought a curse on your kingdom!”

Shaking with rage, Louis rose slowly out of his chair, grip-

ping his walking stick tightly to keep control. "Have her flogged." His soldiers dragged her away.

* * *

Athénaïs collapsed sobbing onto a chaise. "That horrible old woman! How dare she?"

Mlle Claude rushed over with a handkerchief and a glass of brandy. "There, there, madame. A good flogging will teach her to mind her wretched tongue."

The door banged open and Gabrielle flounced in, a storm of pink rustling silk. "Quel horreur! The nerve of that woman, what an insult to our family."

"An insult to me, you mean." The simmering Athénaïs took a long swallow of brandy. Family reputation and status was everything to Gabrielle, certainly more than sisterly compassion. "More to the point, does the entire world know, or was she talking about Louise? And what about my husband? He will kill me when he finds out."

Gabrielle sat down next to her. "Isn't he in Gascony? When is he due back?"

"He is still fighting the Spanish at the Pyrenees. But he should be returning soon."

"Perhaps our friends might know what to do with him," Mlle Claude suggested with a pert smile. The ladies turned to stare.

"That will be all, mademoiselle," Athénaïs said sharply.

Her red-faced maid went to the door and was nearly run down by Louis-Victor and Antoinette, followed by Papa, who headed to the sideboard and the brandy.

"How disgusting," Antoinette sputtered. "Outrageous."

"My dear sister," cried Louis-Victor, "the stories we are hearing. Are you the one being accused? And Louise—was that terrible woman talking about her, or you, or both?"

"Well, I suppose you could ask Louise." Athénaïs got up to get her bag. "Where is my bag? I need my snuff."

"Chérie," chided Gabrielle, "you really must give up that habit."

"Athénaïs!" Her brother plopped down into a creaking chair. "Are you having an adulterous liaison with His Majesty?"

Papa, drink in hand, looked up with interest.

Athénaïs found her bag and started poking around in it. "Yes, I am."

Antoinette glared.

"This is immoral," Louis-Victor proclaimed. "You will bring shame on our family."

Athénaïs finally found her snuff and inserted a pinch in her nostril. "Would you be ashamed of the promotions, preferments, and honors that His Majesty will certainly bestow on our prestigious, but unhappily impecunious, family?" She sneezed delicately.

"Athénaïs," said her brother, "Where are your morals? You are a married woman, and the King is a married man. What would Maman say if she was still alive?"

Athénaïs blushed. That hurt.

Louis-Victor hefted himself out of the chair and took Athénaïs by the shoulders. "My dear sister, we may be impecunious, but we cannot bargain away our family's reputation." He lifted his fat chin in defiance. "I will tell His Majesty that I am renouncing my right to succeed Papa as First Gentleman of the Bedchamber." He stalked out to a chorus of dismay.

Papa tossed back another swallow.

"Athénaïs, how can you do this?" exclaimed Gabrielle.

Athénaïs poured herself another glass of brandy.

Antoinette turned on her. "Unhappily impecunious indeed. Your family was lifted from debt with my dowry. And my father, the President of Parlement, will be most displeased with your disgusting behavior."

Athénaïs slammed the glass down. "Ma chère," she snarled, "by being in the good graces of the King, I am aiding in the advancement of our family, and you should all be grateful."

A long pause, then Antoinette raised an eyebrow in disdain. "I can see that the matter is closed. I have better things to do with my time." She headed for the door.

"Going riding again, dear sister-in-law?" called Athénaïs to Antoinette's back. "On a horse—or on the groom?"

Antoinette whirled around and swung at Athénaïs, her hand stopped by the horrified Gabrielle. "Sisters, please!" she implored.

Antoinette jerked her hand back, bared her teeth in a smile

and walked out, leaving Athénaïs in stunned silence. Gabrielle fled in tears.

“Come here, mon petit chou,” called Papa from his settee.

Athénaïs, now all grown up but still her Papa’s little cabbage, sat down and cuddled up next to him. Papa’s tender warmth, his familiar smell of tobacco and brandy opened the floodgates, and she began to sob.

He put his arm around her, holding her close. “Do you love him?”

“More than life itself.” She fished a handkerchief out of his waistcoat.

“And he loves you.”

“Does he really?” As First Gentleman of the Bedchamber, Papa *should* know.

“Yes.” He kissed the top of her head. “And that is all that matters.”

Chapter 6

You Asked for It July, 1668

The specter of that old woman, her bony hand raised in a curse, mingled in Athénaïs' dreams with Antoinette's scornful laugh and her brother's turned back. She had to appease her family. If she was going to imperil her immortal soul by committing adultery, at least she could advance their interests.

She soon got her chance. On a hot afternoon after an exhausting bout of lovemaking, Louis was putting on his clothes when a paper fell out of his waistcoat. Out of curiosity she grabbed it—it was a list of nobles nominated by War Minister Louvois for advancement.

"Mon cher, my brother's name is not here. Whatever was Louvois thinking?"

"It—it must have been an oversight."

"An oversight, indeed. By whom? Both of you must think very little of me or my family's reputation." She burst into tears.

"Ma belle," he said soothingly, taking her into his arms. "I will see that it be remedied."

"Remedied!" Athénaïs pushed him away. "My brother was your childhood friend, and now! Now he is humiliated, ashamed of my scandalous situation."

"Yes, I agree," he sighed. "Your situation is somewhat delicate."

"Somewhat delicate? I have to pretend to either be faithful to my absent husband or flirt with that cocky little Lauzun. But my family." Her chin quivered with tears of humiliation and guilt. "The way they look at me." She flourished the paper like a regimental flag. "You must correct this, please, at once."

Louvois was scolded for his egregious oversight, and Athénaïs' brother, the Duc de Vivonne, was made Captain-General of the Galleys. Her family was appeased, but Louvois did not forget the slight.

* * *

“Ah, Monsieur de Lauzun!” Athénaïs called as she made her way through the milling crowd. Everyone was headed for the terrace, then down the stairs to the vast gardens where delights awaited, a magnificent fête. Louis had signed the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle on *his* terms, and to celebrate he would display Versailles to the world.

The courtiers spotted her and conversation stopped. The afternoon light reflected off of Athénaïs’ honey blonde hair, coiled into a golden braid in back, soft ringlets cascading down about her face. Her gown of creamy silk and lace revealed as much of her ample bosom as was legally permissible, drawing the eye to a pearl necklace buckled with diamonds on loan from His Majesty. The King—secretly—was also presenting *her* to the world.

She presented her hand to Lauzun, her pretend chaperon, and they descended the stairs.

“I got a letter from your husband,” Lauzun whispered.

Athénaïs took a breath. “What did he say?” she whispered to her short friend. “Is he coming back soon?” Athénaïs kept on smiling as they drew closer to the crowds below.

“Not likely. He is complaining the King keeps giving his troops more duties. But he is grateful I am keeping an eye on you.”

They joined the milling throng at the foot of the terrace, then they all climbed into carriages, delighting in one event to another: the new ménagerie with its assortment of exotic animals, a tour of Le Nôtre’s spectacular gardens, then off to the theatre for a comedy by Molière followed by a ballet.

At dusk the crowd set off again for supper in an enchanting pavilion of trees and flowering plants surrounding a model of Mount Parnassus complete with waterfalls. Three hundred candles twinkled like fairies’ eyes illuminating the huge repast of fifty-six dishes. The King, the Queen, and Louise (still the pretend Royal Mistress) proceeded with their party to their table; lesser mortals were ushered to banquet tables under the trees.

“Madame Scarron, how are you?” Athénaïs embraced her friend, the widow of the renowned poet Paul Scarron. “How wonderful to see you again—look, we can sit together.”

Mme Françoise Scarron was five years older than she, a

plump brunette with black eyes that sparkled as much as her wit. She had been nursemaid and secretary to her horribly crippled poet husband until his painful death. When M. Scarron died, the late Queen Mother herself prevailed upon Louis to grant the widow a pension. She had only that, and a talent for making herself indispensable to high-born ladies, to keep her from having to live in a convent.

“What an incredible fête.” Françoise was wide-eyed. “Surely the kingdom of the gods was not as elegant as this. And the gods undoubtedly lacked violins,” she said as the wine servers arrived escorted by strolling musicians.

“Indeed, madame,” laughed Athénaïs. “Tell me, what did you think of the new ménagerie? I could have spent the rest of the afternoon there. There are camels and monkeys, and even an elephant.”

“Yes, madame, it was interesting. It looks rather like an old château with those turrets, but I am afraid that seeing the animals behind bars reminded me that a ménagerie is actually a prison for animals. Fascinating, but rather sad.”

Athénaïs nodded. “Helas, yes, but I loved the birds. Did you know I have a parrot? He is most amusing.”

“You have a parrot? How exotic. Somehow, madame, I am not surprised.” She took a sip of wine. “What did you think of the play? I found its wit rather immoral.”

Athénaïs paused to think. She had giggled along with the audience at Molière’s comedy, *Georges Dandin, or the Astonished Husband*. Poor Georges had married above his station, hoping thereby to gain wealth, only to find himself cuckolded by his cynical wife. The sophisticated audience laughed. How common, to be distressed by something so ordinary as adultery. What did he expect? They joined the refrain: “You asked for it, Georges Dandin!”

Athénaïs took a breath. “Well, madame, I—”

A shadow fell across their table, the setting sun blocked by a quite large gentleman. It was War Minister Louvois.

“Mesdames,” he said with a bow to the ladies. “Madame Scarron, a pleasure to see you again. And Madame de Montespan.” His smile evaporated. “Are you enjoying the fête?”

Athénaïs flicked open her fan to flutter about her face, a la-

dy's best weapon for an uncomfortable conversation. "Indeed monsieur, Colbert could not have created anything finer."

He smiled with tightened lips, bowed again, turned his back and left.

Françoise turned to Athénaïs. "He does not seem to care for you, madame."

Athénaïs opened her mouth to tell her about the scolding he got over neglecting to appoint her brother, but that would reveal her immoral position. She fluttered her fan faster. "The man and his family are bourgeois. The Le Telliers bought their status, and now he is Minister of War and boasts of his prowess."

Françoise gazed at Louvois chatting at the next table. "Yes. But I would not want to have him as an enemy."

At a nearby table sat La Reynie and Colbert. La Reynie looked around, stunned by the magnificence. "This is amazing," he said to Colbert. "All this for the court."

"Not quite," Colbert replied with a smile. "It really is for..." He looked around. "For them." He nodded toward two gentlemen seated nearby. Their heads were together, whispering.

"Who are they?"

"Ambassadors. England and the Palatinate. His Majesty is spreading the word that France is to be reckoned with."

"I see." He turned his head, and there— "Ah, Mme de Montespan." La Reynie caught Colbert's rather cynical smile, and he shifted his gaze back to her. *The King's new favorite*, he thought. *And a client of the witches. Look at her, waving her fan like a queen.* He frowned. *I really do not like this woman, and I don't know why. I need to have Desgrez keep an eye on her.*

Supper over, Athénaïs danced with the dutiful Lauzun until the chill of early morning when the exhausted nobles emerged from the ballroom into the darkness. At that moment the sky erupted as fireworks shot thousands of flaming jets reflected in the ponds, the fountains, so that none could tell the difference between fire and water. With a thunderous roar, rockets shot into the air, tracing the royal monogram of interlaced L's in the night sky. Lauzun retreated, leaving Athénaïs and Louis close to each other watching the spectacle, oblivious to the crowd. Their fingers touched in the dark, a promise. This was their night; this was the only acknowledgment of his love he could give her. But

all too soon the fireworks faded away, dawn streaked the now quiet sky; time for Versailles' sophisticates to return to the real world.

* * *

But Athénaïs' façade was crumbling. At Fontainebleau, she came face to face with the power of her husband's family. Furious, she barged into the King's study, interrupting a meeting with Colbert. "Your Majesty, I have been disgraced. My husband's uncle, the archbishop—" she stuttered, then began to cry. Colbert came over to soothe her.

"The Archbishop of Sens?" asked Louis. Sens was only a few leagues away.

"Yes, I just found out." She dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "It happened this Sunday, my sister was there. She said the archbishop pointed to a notorious woman in the congregation, accusing her of adultery and sentencing her to public penance."

"But was this really about you?"

"Indeed yes. It must have started with the Marquis de Termes, my husband's fool of a cousin. Both he and my husband are nephews of the archbishop. He was there smirking."

"His name sounds familiar," said Louis.

"Yes, you remember him, the odd one with the funny voice. That poor man talks like a goose and has about as much sense, playing with strange potions, searching for the Philosopher's Stone or some such thing in that moldering château of his. You sent him to the Bastille years ago. He should have been kept there."

Louis sighed. "Chérie, what does this sermon have to do with you?"

"Please understand. He not only accused her, he went on and on about what a terrible sin adultery was for any woman. He meant *me*. Then, the next day, he published the old canons against adultery. And that means any adulteress in his see can be prosecuted." Athénaïs collapsed into a chair, sobbing. "I have to leave Fontainebleau, or the Company of the Holy Sacrament could report me to the police."

Louis looked at Colbert, eyebrows raised. The Company of

the Holy Sacrament was a highly influential group of lay people who considered it their duty to enforce Church laws. They hounded prostitutes, suspected witches, adulteresses, and any other sinners (usually female).

Colbert spoke the unthinkable. "Yes, Your Majesty, they would report her to La Reynie."

"Who?" Athénaïs looked up.

"Our new Lieutenant-General of Police. He would be compelled to act on the information." Louis pondered. "The archbishop is a Jansenist, is he not?" His lips pursed. The pious Jansenists—too much like Calvinist Huguenots—were in ill repute. "Ma chère, you married into quite a family, no?"

Athénaïs reddened.

"Monsieur Colbert. Do you have a recommendation?"

Colbert thought a moment. "Well... constrain the archbishop. Not only did you appoint him, but our treaty with the Vatican gives the Crown certain powers."

"Precisely." Louis turned to Athénaïs. "Chérie, leave immediately and go to Saint-Germain. In the meantime—" He turned to Colbert. "Monsieur, please draw up the necessary orders, confining the Archbishop—and his authority—to Sens, and no farther."

Frightened and humiliated, Athénaïs and Mlle Claude with their possessions piled into their coach fled Fontainebleau, headed for safety.

* * *

Summer melted into fall, and the cool autumn mists brought the court to Chambord, far from the annoying archbishop and a perfect spot for His Majesty to go hunting. It also happened to be the childhood home of Louise, who had taken to bitter silence and reproachful glances at the sight of Athénaïs and the King together. They politely ignored her. The King came to Athénaïs late at night in the apartments she supposedly shared with her chaperone, Julie. Gossip, whispers, but no one dared talk about it publicly.

Athénaïs was dozing in her lover's arms when a wave of nausea hit. She couldn't delay telling him any longer. "Louis," she whispered. "I am carrying your child."

Louis looked at her for what seemed an eternity. Finally, he

grinned. "Well! That's marvelous." He took her into his arms. "Ma douce, are you worried about your husband?"

"That is the other problem. He wrote demanding that I join him immediately at his château in Montespan. It was that stupid Roger, Marquis de Termes again, telling him terrible stories about me. If I do not move there at once, he will take our son." Tears came to her eyes. "What do I do? Louis, he threatened to have me locked up in a convent."

"Not without my permission, he can't." Louis got up and reached for his clothes. "Why not give him your son? Perhaps that will appease him."

"Give up my son?" Athénaïs had not seen her children in weeks, and yet... "I would rather die than give him up."

"Very well, then. We will deal with it when the time comes," he said, stepping into his drawers. "He should listen to reason." He paused. "And we must plan who will care for our child. Is there anyone you can trust? We need someone very discreet."

"I don't know. Wait, I think I do. I will ask Mme Scarron. She will be perfect."

* * *

Two weeks later, Athénaïs paced the terrace of Saint-Germain anxiously awaiting news from La Grande Mademoiselle, who was going to try to reason with her husband. Henri had got word that not only was his wife the King's mistress, she was pregnant as well, and he had been shouting vile imprecations against her and Louis all over Paris.

"Ma chère!" cried Mademoiselle as she embraced Athénaïs. "Wait a minute," she said, "don't sit down. What an interesting dress. Please turn around."

Blushing, Athénaïs displayed her costume, a dress of chiffon flowing from a high waist topped with a brocade waistcoat. She hoped it would disguise her new pregnancy.

Mademoiselle lifted a critical eyebrow. "I have heard about your dress. It may actually become a fashion, it is so flattering and sweet. Some are calling it l'Innocente."

Athénaïs bit her lip. Sweet and innocent? Hardly.

They sat down, Mademoiselle looking decidedly glum. "My poor dear," she said, patting Athénaïs' hand.

“Did Henri not listen to you?” asked Athénaïs. “You are his godmother, after all.”

“I did attempt to reason with him. But the fool—the monstrous things he said when I tried to calm him. He shouted like a madman and flew into a veritable passion. I told him that if he didn’t hold his tongue he would be locked up. Athénaïs, you must be discreet. He will stop at nothing to harm you.”

“I, discreet? He is a disgrace to his family, spouting the most ridiculous things, just like my parrot, giving entertainment to the rabble.” Athénaïs pouted, annoyed. “I don’t want to discuss it any longer. Why don’t we go inside? It is almost time to dress for dinner.” They rose to go and were almost at the door when they heard a shout.

“Mon Dieu!” cried Mademoiselle. “Athénaïs, it’s your husband!”

Athénaïs looked past the terrace and there—her husband’s coach. “Merde!” She rushed into the château and up the stairs, nearly knocking down her erstwhile chaperone Julie.

“Julie, my husband is here,” hissed Athénaïs to the bewildered matron. She ran into her room and shut the door. Should she lock it? What should she do? What would *he* do?

Then she heard his voice and Julie’s screams—what was he doing to her?

“Where is she?” Henri’s boots echoed down the hall. “Where is my *faithful* wife?”

The door banged open. “Ah, my sweet, I hear you have been busy since I left.” His large frame filled the doorway, blocking her only escape. He strode in, his face red, eyes glaring, breath sour, reeking of brandy. He kicked the door shut with the heel of his boot.

Athénaïs backed away, terrified.

“What?” he cried. “Is this my welcome? Give your husband a kiss.”

He pulled her towards him, but she turned her mouth away. “Bitch!” He slapped her. The blow propelled her to the bed where she lay, head whirling, too stunned to resist.

Yanking off his waistcoat, he climbed on top of her, pulled her skirt up above her waist and forced her legs apart with his knees. “What’s this?” He felt her swollen belly.

“Stop it! Get off of me, you beast. Don’t hurt the baby!” Athénaïs tried to push him away but his strong arms pinned her to the bed.

“What? Hurt my faithful wife, carrying *my* unborn child? But it’s not my child, is it?” He grabbed her jaw, forcing her to look at him. “It’s the King’s baby, no? Well now, by law, it’s mine. You are still my wife, and this is *my* child.”

Holding down both her wrists with one hand, he used the other to rip away her bodice and roughly fondle her breasts. “Tell me, did the King caress you like this?” Then his hand was groping her between her legs, and she thought she would die of disgust. “Did you like it as much with him as with me? More? Did His Royal Majesty please you?”

Still gripping her, he started to pull down his britches. “Well, I have something for you. I too had some fun in the last few months, something I am dying to share with you.”

“No, *please* don’t!”

“You little whore—here is a nice dose of the clap for you to give the King.”

“No!” Athénaïs screamed, trying frantically to knee him in the groin. Then a thunder of boots and shouts and a contingent of guards charged in and pulled him off her.

“You have no right!” yelled the marquis. “She is my wife!” But they dragged him off yelling foul curses at poor Julie who had collapsed, clutching her heart. “You call yourself a chaperone!” he screamed. “You’ve been running a whorehouse.”

Julie, near dead with fright, was carried off to her bed. Athénaïs’ apartment was soon filled by curious courtiers clucking over her, while Mlle Claude dabbed at her swollen face with a handkerchief soaked in brandy. She could hear her outraged husband being hauled away, his shouts fading into the distance, followed by the guffaws of his one-time friends, exclaiming:

“You asked for it, Georges Dandin!”

Chapter 7

Beasts October, 1668

Sipping a glass of his favorite Armagnac, La Reynie gazed out the window watching the autumn mist swirl through the chestnut trees, cooling the cobblestone streets, the poisons case occupying his thoughts. Thirty years ago, the city of Loudon was seized with fear of devils, and smoke from witch burnings obscured the sky for days. But thankfully this King will not tolerate such hysteria. Were it not for the poisonings, he'd much prefer to avoid the prosecution of witches altogether. But Parliament's leniency of Lesage and the abbé was suspicious.

His reverie was interrupted by the thump of boots, then a knock. "Entrée."

"Monsieur!" In strode Captain Desgrez, wet and out of breath. "I have news, monsieur." He tossed his dripping plumed hat and cape onto the rack. "I have been doing some checking on the sorcerers' clients, and on the judges. You may not like this."

La Reynie swirled the contents of his glass then took another sip, determined to enjoy it no matter what Desgrez said. "Go on."

"Lesage and Abbé Mariette's two most notable clients have been the King's new mistress, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, and her brother's wife Antoinette, the Duchesse de Vivonne. Neither name was mentioned in their appeal before Parlement—probably because the presiding judge of Parlement, Président de Mesmes, is the father of the duchesse. Lesage got sent to the galleys, and the abbé was consigned to an asylum."

La Reynie shrugged. "I suspected a connection."

"There's more. My contacts told me an unsavory story about the Vivonne family."

La Reynie pulled a side chair to the fire. "Have a seat. Brandy?" He poured his captain a drink then drew his own chair closer to the hearth.

"Merci." Captain Desgrez took a sip, settled back, and put his

wet boots up on the fire guard. “On Easter, 1659, the Duc de Vivonne hosted a party at the château owned by his wife’s father, now the President of Parlement. By Good Friday the party was in full swing. Rumors abounded, stories that a priest had performed a black mass, that the Holy Eucharist had been desecrated, even that a man had been killed and his thigh eaten, but—”

“Don’t tell me. Nothing proven.”

“Exactement. However, the Duc de Vivonne and his noble guests were all disgraced, at least for a time, banished, temporarily, to their estates.”

La Reynie leaned back in his chair, summing it up. “Recently, the King made the Duc de Vivonne the Admiral of the Fleet, possibly because they had been boyhood friends. More likely, it was because the King’s new mistress is the duc’s sister Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan. Her again. Gorgeous, but—did she snare him with the help of Lesage? And now the rest of the family. Mon Dieu. It seems that half the people at court are involved in witchcraft, or plots, or conspiracies of silence.”

Desgrez downed the last of his brandy. “The judges sent the abbé to an asylum, and Lesage went to the galleys. But wait—” He looked up with a frown. “The Duc de Vivonne was also made Captain-General of the Galleys.”

La Reynie nodded. “That’s why I want you to keep an eye on Mme de Montespan.”

“Of course. Tell me—do you think justice was served?”

La Reynie, though close to the fire, felt a sudden chill. “Justice? I wish I knew.”

March, 1669

“Push, madame, push!”

Athénaïs needed no instructions. With a loud groan, she gripped the arms of the birthing chair and bore down hard. With a final push, the agony was over.

“Formidable!” cried the doctor crouched at Athénaïs’ feet as he received the red, squirming baby.

“It is a little girl, madame.”

“Oh, no... a girl?” Athénaïs was helped back into the cot where she had labored for the last several hours. Exhausted and

covered with sweat, she lay back, letting the doctor inspect her. The midwife with white cap and apron bustled about in the candlelit room, cleaning and swaddling the baby.

"Madame, here is your little one." The doctor presented her with the infant, now clean and tightly swaddled. She took the baby into her arms, holding her tenderly. *Poor little thing, born into sin. And worse, a girl.*

She heard the doctor talking to Louis, hiding behind a screen. Secrecy was imperative since Athénaïs' husband could claim the child as his. The door clicked shut—the doctor left—and here was her lover.

"Oh, mon coeur, I have given you a girl." She burst into tears. "I hoped for a son."

"Ma belle," he said, "I already have an heir, you know that. Give her to me." He took the infant into his arms and smiled. "She looks like you."

The door opened, and in strode the Comte de Lauzun, who bowed with a sweep of his cloak. "At your service, Sire." Louis handed him the fussing baby.

"Promise she will be safe!" cried Athénaïs.

"Believe me, she will. Madame Scarron is in the coach awaiting her arrival, and we have taken every precaution." He threw his cloak around himself and the crying infant and rushed off.

Athénaïs succumbed to a flood of tears.

"Hush, chérie," said Louis with a reassuring kiss. "You know Mme Scarron will give her the best of care. In the meantime, try to compose yourself. You must be back at court soon." And he was out the door.

Of course. In a few hours, she would have to return to Saint-Germain where she would tighten her corset, get dressed for court, and make an appearance as if nothing had happened—protocol for the King's mistress. Just like Louise with her three royal bastards, she had to keep up the pretense. Louise. Poor Louise, who must pretend she is still the Royal Mistress.

* * *

"Did you hear?" Athénaïs joined her sister Gabrielle and their friends, Lauzun and La Grande Mademoiselle, on a lovely May morning. "The rest of the animals have finally arrived at the

ménagerie. We now have a giraffe.”

“C’est merveilleux!” they exclaimed, and they set off in an open carriage down the long gravel road through a fairyland of flowers and fountains, hundreds of tulips: yellow, red, pink, white, striped, waving back and forth in the breeze as if gently brushed by an invisible hand. The perfume of tuberoses scented the warm air, an occasional gust of wind blew mist from the fountains onto the garden paths.

“Thank goodness we can ride there,” said Mademoiselle adjusting her parasol to shield herself from the sun. “The King’s gardens have miles of walks but, alas, little shade.”

“My dear Mademoiselle,” declared the little comte, “the sun is eclipsed in its radiance only by your charm.” Lauzun, Athénaïs’ pretend chaperon, was now pursuing the wealthiest woman in the kingdom.

“Why, you terrible flirt.” Mademoiselle rapped him with her fan.

The proper Gabrielle, to whom rank was everything, turned to Athénaïs and rolled her eyes. Athénaïs had to stifle a giggle. Poor La Grande Mademoiselle had turned forty-one and Europe had run out of prospective husbands, not a single king or even a prince suitable for a granddaughter of Henri IV. And here she was flirting with the enfant terrible of the court. But then, Lauzun was oddly popular with the ladies in spite of his short stature, greasy hair, and nose like a hatchet. There were whispers he used witchcraft.

The carriage halted before the castle towers of the ménagerie and they headed for the sitting rooms circling the cages. A valet brought wine and cheese and they sat back to watch the show. A peacock strutted before the group; paused, then unfolded his iridescent feathers.

“Que c’est magnifique!” Athénaïs exclaimed. “Displaying his grand tail before his audience. And all those gaudy colors are worthy of a painting.” She smiled mischievously. “Like a member of the court, n’est-ce pas?”

The Comte de Lauzun pondered, then grinned. “A certain prince, perhaps?”

Mademoiselle gasped in mock alarm. “Surely not Monsieur.” She fluttered her fan. “What possible resemblance—”

“But of course, the elegant attire,” said Athénaïs, with one eyebrow raised.

“No, the strut,” replied the comte, sending the four of them into fits of laughter.

“You know,” he said, eyeing his wine, “the court is like this ménagerie, with the Sun King as the gamekeeper. Here we are in our cages, parading in our costumes, begging for food and favors.”

Mademoiselle frowned. “I believe that you have me to blame for that.”

“You?” they exclaimed.

“Ever since the Fronde, Louis has kept his thumb on us all.”

“I believe I know what you mean.” Lauzun contemplated Mademoiselle with a smile. “I was there during the Fronde des nobles. It was years ago, but it seems like yesterday. You arrived in Paris coming to the aid of the nobility against the Crown. An Amazon you were, dressed in helmet and breastplate, riding up to the Bastille—”

“Oh, yes!” Gabrielle exclaimed. “That was when you turned the cannon of the Bastille onto the King’s forces.”

“You were magnificent,” said Lauzun, his intense dark eyes focused on Mademoiselle.

She blushed. “Oh,” she stammered, “monsieur, please.” The great précieuse La Grande Mademoiselle, who could out-talk anyone, was speechless. Magic, indeed.

Athénaïs came to her aid. “It is sad that your noble goal did not succeed.”

“Hélas,” said Mademoiselle. “It is indeed a shame. The rebellion fell apart when our soldiers wanted their pay, the food supply dwindled and Paris fell under mob rule. The Fronde ended and we never obtained the rights and recognition we deserved.”

“And we have been imprisoned at court ever since, beasts on display.” Lauzun tossed back the last of his wine.

“And you know,” said Mademoiselle with a wistful smile, “something else has changed. Women used to be respected and our ideas listened to. Oh, the conversations we had at the Hôtel Rambouillet—such refinement of discourse, such a glorious interchange of ideas.”

“Men do not seem to respect those ideals, do they?” re-

marked Athénaïs bitterly. "We are the prisoners of our fathers, our husbands, sold into marriage and packed off to convents if we dare disobey." She glanced at Lauzun, who studiously ignored her. "But you, monsieur, are neither a father nor a husband, so please do not take offense." He shrugged.

Loud grunts from a nearby cage attracted their attention.

"What is that vociferous creature?" asked Mademoiselle, peering at it. "Is that a monkey? No, I believe it is an ape of some kind."

"Hmm," said the comte, "It looks familiar. Madame," he smiled wickedly at Athénaïs. "You must see a resemblance to someone you know."

Athénaïs stared. "Oh, no," she cried. "My husband."

They laughed hysterically when the ape grabbed the bars of the cage and hooted.

"His Majesty should have kept him longer in the Bastille," said Mademoiselle. "Perhaps that would have improved his temper."

Athénaïs stared at the ape in angry silence. After his release, her fool of a husband grabbed their son Louis-Antoine and dragged him off to join his sister Marie-Christine. Theatrically announcing his cuckoldry, he staged a mock funeral mourning the death of his marriage, even parading around in a black coach adorned with stag horns. And now he was threatening to kidnap Athénaïs and carry her off to Spain.

"Good riddance, ma chère." Mademoiselle patted her arm.

"Indeed—if he can stay away from me."

Athénaïs tossed back the last of her wine and rose. "I beg your pardon. I would love to stay and chat, but I am meeting His Majesty before the ballet."

The comte and Mademoiselle glanced knowingly at each other. "Might I accompany you?" he asked with an unctuous smile. "I have a matter of some urgency to discuss."

As if on cue, La Grande Mademoiselle indicated her desire to stay, while Athénaïs and the comte hailed a carriage for the ride back to the château.

"Madame," began Lauzun, "are you aware of what happened to my appointment as the Grand Master of the Artillery?"

"Did not His Majesty promise you the position?"

“Indeed, he did. However, Louvois found out and persuaded him to retract the offer.”

“How unfortunate.” *Oh no*, thought Athénaïs. *Here it comes.*

“You have been my dear friend, madame,” Lauzun continued with an oily smile, “and it is an honor to be of service to you and the King, especially in ensuring your child’s safety.”

Safe, she thought. *Mme Scarron is keeping her safe—I hope. Would Lauzun betray us?*

“You have my deepest gratitude, monsieur, and I assure you that the King feels the same way.”

“Then could you speak to His Majesty? Perhaps if he were reminded of my qualifications he would reconsider.”

Athénaïs paused. She avoided asking the King for favors for her friends, knowing this was a privilege easily abused. While the intrepid little comte had been of great service, first posing as her chaperon then transporting her child to Mme Scarron, his erratic behavior and wicked tongue had offended half the court.

Balancing all this in her head, she smiled sweetly. “I will speak to His Majesty and remind him of your many accomplishments.”

They arrived at the château and Lauzun took her hand, kissed it, then looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Do I have your word on that, madame?”

“Mais bien sûr, monsieur.”

He bowed low, sweeping his plumed hat before him. “I knew I could rely on you, madame. I bid you adieu.”

An hour later, Mlle Claude ushered Louis into Athénaïs’ apartment. The afternoon was drawing to a close and this was their time together.

“You would not believe who has been nagging me for favors,” said Athénaïs, unlacing her bodice.

“I can’t imagine.” Louis flopped down on the bed, pulling her next to him. “I desire your favors as well.” He drew her close and kissed her, his hands roving under her chemise.

Athénaïs laid back with an inviting smile. “I will spare you that idiot’s entreaties.”

“Whose?” asked Louis, who by now was completely undressed and far more interested in her body than in court politics.

“Who is the most annoying person at court?”

“You, if you don’t be quiet and let me possess you right now.”

Soon the lovers were rhythmically rocking the large feather bed.

Louis finally fell back onto the pillow and Athénaïs lay in his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. “Eh bien, chérie,” he murmured. “Tell me who had the temerity to annoy you.”

“Who else? The Comte de Lauzun.”

“What, again? I wish I had never promised him that post.”

“Why did you?” Athénaïs raised herself up on her elbow to look at her lover.

“Well, you know how charming and persuasive he is.” He chuckled. “People even talk about him using spells. I promised him the position, but I warned him not to discuss it with anyone so I could figure out how to handle Louvois. But the fool bragged to everyone. Soon it was all over court, and Louvois came to me in a rage.”

“One does *not* deceive the Minister of War.”

“Most definitely not. Louvois persuaded me—reminded me, to be more precise—of Lauzun’s many failings.”

“Failings? Monsieur le Comte has failings?” She laughed. “Did you hear the latest story from that ridiculous man’s household? Mlle Claude reported that our would-be Grand Master of the Artillery paraded about his residence wearing—would you believe it—a dressing gown, and a huge wig, *and* a nightcap on top of the wig, and—”

“No, no, spare me!” cried Louis, laughing uncontrollably.

“And, on top of it all, a plumed hat.”

“Good Lord, why?”

“Perhaps to dare the servants to laugh at him. He paced back and forth in front of them, and woe betide anyone who even smiled.”

“With lanky hair like his, I would have covered it too.” His Majesty sat up and reached for his clothes. “But you know,” he said ruefully, feeling the incipient bald spot on his own head, “One of these days I am going to need a wig myself.”

Athénaïs came up behind him as he sat on the bed, wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the top of his balding head. “I love you just the way you are, mon cher.”

She slipped into her scented chemise and began to brush her hair. But she paused, her brush in midair. *Something is amiss. But what?*

"I will see you at the ballet," Louis said as they parted. Athénaïs went to her dressing room to make herself beautiful for the occasion. But still she felt wary.

When she left her apartments, she found waiting for her at the door none other than Lauzun. He bowed low, took her hand and kissed it.

"Dare I flatter myself that you remembered me with the King?" he asked with a sly smile.

"But of course, monsieur. We discussed your situation at length."

Still grasping her hand, he walked with her slowly on the way to the ballet. "Madame, I know the truth. You called me a fool. You ridiculed me. You lied to me, you little baggage!"

Athénaïs turned white.

The little comte shook with rage, his red eyes fixed on hers. "You even revealed the secrets of my household and made me appear a buffoon to His Majesty!"

They had reached the entrance to the theater. He gripped her hand until it hurt and hissed into her ear, "Madame, you are a dog's whore." Then he was gone.

Athénaïs walked in a daze to her seat near the King. *How does he know? Could he be in league with the devil?* She finally reached her seat and stood gripping the chair, remembering La Voisin and those strange men... The room went black and she slipped to the floor.

When she came to, she found the worried King and half the court hovering over her. She could not explain, but that night she told Louis what had happened. "By all the saints, only the devil himself could have told him what we said."

A few days later as the King was making his grande entrée at court, Lauzun appeared and bowed low before him and Athénaïs. "Your Majesty, you promised me the position of the Grand Master of the Artillery, then you went back on your word."

Athénaïs backed into the crowd, trying not to be noticed.

The King turned red, the muscles in his jaw rippling like a lion's. "Monsieur, you broke your promise of silence. You left me

no choice.”

The comte turned his back on Louis. He drew his sword, broke it across his knee, and flung the pieces to the ground. “I could never serve a monarch who had foresworn his word for a whore!” The crowd gasped.

Beside himself with rage, Louis gripped his walking stick tightly and raised it above his head. The entire court hushed, waiting for the deserved attack.

But the King marched to the window and threw out his cane. “I would be sorry to strike a gentleman of quality.” His bearing now completely calm and suitably majestic, he resumed his royal progress. The next morning, the Comte de Lauzun awoke in the Bastille, swearing revenge on Athénaïs.

Chapter 8

The Devil Card January, 1670

“This one covers you. This one crosses you...” Whispers on a bitter night in front of a roaring fire at Saint-Germain, bored courtiers huddled round in search of amusement. The latest arrival at court, Giovanni Battista Primi Visconti, fortuneteller extraordinaire, spread out his tarot cards attracting a crowd clamoring for readings. Again, Athénaïs watched the cards tell a story, a prediction, a promise. But this time it was Primi Visconti dealing the cards, and Henriette who had shuffled. One by one, the tale unfolded—batons and swords, power and pain. Athénaïs hovered nervously behind Henriette. The cards did not bode well.

Finally, Visconti drew the outcome card. His smile froze. He laid down the card—a black tower collapsing into ruin with people falling to their death.

“The Tower!” Henriette gasped. “I have heard that is terrible, no?”

Visconti blinked, his fluttering black lashes belying his polite smile. “Ah, not necessarily, Madame.” He took a breath. “There will be important changes in your life...”

Her irritation rising, Athénaïs watched Visconti babble on in an attempt to reassure the alarmed Henriette. She backed away in search of brandy.

* * *

Indeed, it seemed as if a dark cloud was descending on the royal family. A few weeks later, Athénaïs—pregnant again—was visiting Louise in her apartments at Saint-Germain. Henri was stalking her like a lion after a gazelle, and it was one of the few safe places she could go. They were having café au lait when a valet announced His Majesty. The ladies looked up in surprise—His Majesty, balding at the old age of thirty-two, was wearing a large, dark, wig.

“Sire,” said Athénaïs with her brightest smile, “you look—wonderful.”

He cut her off. “Mesdames,” His Majesty announced, “I have made a decision in the interest of safety.” He turned to Louise. “I desire that Athénaïs move into your apartments.”

“What?” Louise reached for a chair to steady herself.

“You can’t be serious!” cried Athénaïs. “Why didn’t you discuss this with me first?”

But the King turned to Louise. “Ma chère, Mme de Montespan is pregnant and her husband is still at large. We have not been able to locate him and I fear for her safety. If the two of you are together the chances of an attack are minimal.”

Athénaïs opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off.

“My mind is made up. Do not fuss about this.” He turned on his heel and walked out.

Stunned, Athénaïs turned to see Louise sink into the chair, tears falling on her blue silk dress. She put an arm around her shoulders. “Louise, I’m sorry. I had no idea—”

Louise rose abruptly. “Pardon me, madame,” she said, and fled.

* * *

The royal family took note. A few days later, Athénaïs found Henriette alone in a corner of a deserted salon, weeping.

“Madame!” Athénaïs rushed over to her. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I am so humiliated,” said Henriette, blushing. “The chevalier has pulled Monsieur down to the very depths.”

“The Chevalier de Lorraine has insulted you again?”

“Again.” She took out her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. “But now it is worse. You know, I have never complained about my husband’s appetites. In fact, I would much rather that he attend to his own amusements and leave me alone. Perhaps then I—” She caught herself. She had just recovered from yet another difficult childbirth.

Athénaïs clasped Henriette’s hand, so pale and cold. “Have the insults become worse?”

Henriette paused. “The chevalier has finally achieved ulti-

mate ascendancy over Monsieur. He has demanded—" She took a breath. "My husband declared to me that he could never love me unless I allowed a third in our union. He wants a ménage à trois."

"Quel horreur!"

"I told him that was outrageously immoral." She turned her head away. "He said that since His Majesty had a ménage à trois, he could have one as well."

"But, but—that is different." Ashamed, Athénaïs let go of Henriette's hand. "I am sorry. Have you told His Majesty?"

"Yes, of course, and I wrote my brother Charles as well." Henriette looked up with a hint of a smile, a little of her old spirit returning. "This will now become a matter of state."

* * *

Athénaïs found Monsieur in his apartments, drunk. "I gather you talked to my wife. That bitch! So this is a matter of state? She is going to get her beloved brother to take away my chevalier? He is the only one I have ever loved." He collapsed onto a settee, weeping.

"Please, mon cher." Athénaïs sat next to him and grasped his hand. "Please understand her position. This is difficult for her too."

"Difficult? What could be difficult for her? Daughter of a king, sister of a king, and once she was the lover of the King of France behind my back. My own brother! She never stops. She even stole Guiche from me. I will make her pay for this."

And the next day Monsieur dragged his wife off to Saint-Cloud, and exile.

* * *

La Reynie tried to relax, eyeing his fellow ministers and His Majesty. *How much should I tell the King? After three years perhaps I should have found more—but he might not like what I have found. Well, at least I'm last on the agenda.*

Who would have the upper hand today? Cool Colbert seemed pleased; perhaps he had raised enough in taxes to finance this latest campaign. War Minister Louvois was spreading his plump lips in a smile; he would be leaving for the front where he could lay siege, attack fortifications, and kill soldiers and peasants with

abandon. The elderly Foreign Minister Hugues de Lionne was unusually quiet, thinner and paler than the last time they met. Was his very new, very pretty wife causing him worry? There were rumors. And the King now has a wig. He's getting older, just like the rest of us.

His Majesty fiddled with a stack of papers, arranged them into carefully aligned piles, then smiled. "First, the secret treaty with King Charles is going according to plan. His need for money seems to outweigh any doubts about declaring himself a Catholic. He is promising to publicly proclaim his faith once he can be sure of our monetary support."

"But won't Parliament oppose him?" asked La Reynie.

Louis turned to Foreign Minister Lionne, who spun the web of diplomacy and bribery. "Since the English Protestants take a dim view of Charles' religion," said Lionne, "we have a public treaty that does not mention this pertinent fact. Just as important, his country will join ours in defeating the Dutch." Lionne's weak smile seemed to be hard won.

His Majesty's moustache curled in satisfaction. "We have found the perfect ally in England to negotiate the public treaty: Milord Duke of Buckingham."

Louvois' lips tightened into a slit. "I have finished checking on Buckingham, and I still wonder if he can be trusted. I have heard that he seems to divide his time between alchemy and debauchery—and worse."

"Really?" La Reynie leaned forward. "Alchemy and debauchery? Buckingham's name sounds familiar, not to mention his habits. Has he visited Paris in the last few years?"

"Frequently, as a matter of fact," replied Colbert. "His family took refuge here during Cromwell's reign. Indeed, his sister is one of Madame's ladies-in-waiting."

Now La Reynie remembered him—the gentleman in the tall wig cornering Madame.

His Majesty chuckled. "I can understand your concerns, but Buckingham is perfect for this. I know the man well. He is almost—" He paused. "Almost the only English *gentleman* I have ever met: charming, witty, perfect French. In spite of his religion—or actually the lack of any—I have found I can trust him. What do the English call a man with loose morals?"

"A rake," replied Colbert with a smile, "reckless and immoral."

"Yes," said Louis, "but he does have a code of honor. And besides, in addition to being the perfect gentleman, Milord Buckingham is a fool, prone to wild fancies and schemes."

"Not to mention," added Lionne in hushed tones, "that the private treaty will be negotiated with Charles by Madame Henriette."

La Reynie frowned, puzzled.

His Majesty explained with a smile. "Buckingham has been madly infatuated with Madame for years. She has been taking advantage of his interest in her and is corresponding with him. I am sending her to Dover soon to conduct the negotiations." He laughed. "Buckingham thinks the treaty is all about an alliance against the Dutch and hasn't a clue why we are really financing Charles."

"But we must be careful," said Lionne. "As you are aware, there is strong opposition in England to the Catholic Church."

"Is King Charles really agreeing to become a Catholic?" asked La Reynie.

"Yes," said Louvois, "and my agents have found those in Charles' court who would stop at nothing to prevent this treaty from being carried out. It is imperative that we keep this arrangement secret from the Protestants, and of course from the Dutch."

La Reynie noted that Louvois was, as usual, turning a council session to his advantage. He sat back, studying the young Minister of War, a military genius who had risen very far very fast. He was big, with broad shoulders and a large belly. La Reynie caught Louvois' expression as his dark eyes assessed his arch enemy, Colbert. He was like a bull ready to charge.

The King called him back to attention. "What is the status of your investigation, Monsieur La Reynie?"

La Reynie took a breath. "Your Majesty," he finally said, "our investigation into poisons and spells continues. The two sorcerers Lesage and Abbé Mariette were convicted of selling spells and perverting the mass, and we are currently pursuing the leads generated by their testimony. Some of their clients were people at court."

"What kind of spells? What were they used for?"

“They seem primarily to be rid of one mate and acquire another.”

“Indeed.” His Majesty’s eyes narrowed. “Such as love charms?”

“Yes, though that seems to be the least of it.”

The King pursed his lips tight, picked up his pen knife and quill and started sharpening.

“And the poison?” Lionne lifted a white eyebrow. “Are there any leads on that?”

“Not yet, but the Paris police have been alerted to report any rumors.”

Lionne looked down at his papers with a frown.

“Gentlemen—” Louis had their utmost attention. “I am seriously considering removing the criminal sanctions against fortune telling and sorcery. All this silliness about love charms, and spells, and tarot cards. If people want to make fools of themselves, well, let them. I will not tolerate my kingdom in the hands of the Inquisition.”

“I agree with you completely, Sire,” La Reynie replied, “but please do not forget the allegations about poison that we are still trying to trace.” He paused, about to remind the King that perhaps Mme de Montespan was involved, but—no. Not now.

Louis rose. “Send me frequent reports. We are leaving soon to escort Madame to Dunkirk to bid her farewell, then we will proceed to the front in Flanders.”

Leaving the King’s Chamber, La Reynie was motioned by Lionne to step aside for a private chat.

“I am afraid I may have made some enemies,” said Lionne in a hoarse whisper. “I must speak with you privately. It’s either my wife, or...”

* * *

On this warm spring night, Athénaïs tossed about in her bed, unable to sleep. Soon the King would be off to war and she would have to face Louise alone. *Why doesn't he understand? I finally gave him a son, why can't I have my own home? Surely there is no danger now. The baby is safe with Mme Scarron.* She fluffed her pillows and lay back, staring at the canopy of her bed, the only light from the waning moon. She drifted off to sleep.

"Athénaïs? Athénaïs, please help!"

"Louise?" she said groggily. "Louise, what is the matter?"

No answer. She fumbled her way through the darkness to Louise's room and found her retching onto the floor. "Mon Dieu, Louise, what happened?"

"I don't know, I'm so sick... the food."

"Louise, have you been poisoned?" Athénaïs ran to the door. "Mademoiselle!" she called to her maid. "Fetch the doctor quickly and call the Captain of the Guards." She returned to Louise and wiped her pale, sweating face.

Soon the room was filled with servants cleaning the mess, soldiers to investigate—was it poison? Then the black-robed doctor arrived, bag in hand, to do what little he could.

Finally, thank God, the King arrived and rushed over to Louise, lying nearly unconscious. He took her hand, squeezed it with affection, then whispered to the doctor. Athénaïs reluctantly turned to leave the room but he came over and put his arms around her. "It will be all right, ma chérie. I won't let anyone hurt her, or you."

* * *

La Reynie met with the worried King the next morning, finding him pacing about his study. "You sent for me, Your Majesty? I have been briefed by the Captain of the Guard. How may I be of assistance?"

Louis dropped wearily into the chair at his desk. "Sit down, please, Monsieur. I need both your help and your discretion."

"Of course, Sire."

"I am concerned about Mlle La Vallière's illness. It may have been poison."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He just shook his head. He doesn't know."

"Why do you believe it might have been poison?"

"She had been attacked a few years ago at the Palais Royale. Someone came through the window in the middle of the night. I increased the guards, but we never found the assailant." He sighed. "And now, she may not be the intended target. Mme de Montespan's husband had threatened her, so I thought it advisable to confuse any possible adversary about her living arrange-

ments. I had her move in with Mlle de La Vallière.” Louis’ face clouded. “But I may have risked the life of the mademoiselle in doing so.” He fell silent.

“If I might say, Sire, the mademoiselle may have her own enemies. Please remember the stories we have heard about ladies at court plotting to depose her in your affections.”

“What do you recommend?”

“Increase the security around the ladies’ apartments, making sure the windows and doors are always locked. Their food should probably be tasted before being served. And above all, restrict the number of people who know exactly where they sleep.”

“Yes, yes, certainly...” The King’s voice trailed. “And there is something else, I just remembered. A few months back, the mademoiselle reported to me an attempt to bribe her servants for information about her household. It is probably silly female rivalry, but—”

“Were you able to find out who was the source of the bribe?”

“Yes. It was Madame la Comtesse de Soissons.”

* * *

Athénaïs was truly frightened. Had Louise been poisoned? What was Henri doing? She seemed to be surrounded by enemies. She slipped away, avoiding the guards, desperate to see La Voisin before the long trip with the court to Dunkirk and beyond.

“I—I need your help,” she told the witch, drawing off her gloves.

“Of course, madame, I understand. You know I can help you.” La Voisin gestured for Athénaïs to be seated. “The cards, again? All will be well, madame.”

The reading began, La Voisin laying out the cards one by one in the candlelight. “Aha! Madame, this card crowns you. It is the Empress again, but not reversed. *Voilà*, her power, and pregnant. You had another child, yes? A wonderful card. And—” She laid down a strange card, three half-human creatures clinging to an upright wheel: one on top wearing a crown, plus one going up the wheel, the other falling down. “The Wheel of Fortune, upright. Your luck is turning for the better.”

Athénaïs could finally relax and she settled back, watching the cards being laid out one by one on the purple cloth. She

gaped. "The Devil Card?"

The winged devil lay facing Athénaïs, grinning at her like an imp. Below him were male and female figures with ropes loosely binding them. Oddly, they did not seem concerned.

She hurriedly crossed herself. "Mon Dieu, am I cursed? What does that mean?"

"Ah, madame, do not be alarmed. The card is reversed, so he is there to help you loose your bonds. And you have bonds that trouble you, no?"

"Yes, yes I do, but..." Athénaïs remembered Maman's dire warnings about the devil's power—he was waiting for her if she strayed. "Does foretelling the future involve the devil or black magic? If it does, then I will have nothing to do with it." She gathered her things to leave.

"No, madame," said La Voisin, patting Athénaïs' hand. "I assure you, there will be no black magic. Many times to help my clients I say prayers, good Christian prayers, novenas to help them with their troubles." She smiled, again a loving mother.

"Do not lie to me! Do not act like those obsequious courtiers who bow and scrape and pretend all is well when it is not. I saw a—a friend's reading. It ended with the Tower. That was bad, wasn't it? Please tell me the truth."

La Voisin paused. "Yes, madame, it did not bode well."

Athénaïs began to cry and she fumbled in her bag for her handkerchief. They sat silently for a while, Athénaïs under La Voisin's steady gaze.

"Madame," said La Voisin, "I would never lie to you." She looked closely at Athénaïs, as if she was seeing her for the first time. "In some ways," she said softly, "we are alike, you and I." She squeezed Athénaïs' hand. "Such pride we have." She returned to the cards.

Athénaïs looked back down at the devil. He did not seem so terrible now. "Release my bonds," she whispered.

Did he just wink?

Chapter 9

Henriette Spring, 1670

Monsieur kept Henriette confined to Saint-Cloud, but like cream rising to the top of a pitcher of milk she made her way back up. Henriette was going to England to finalize the treaty.

His Majesty would first say goodbye to her at Dunkirk then set off on an inspection of his conquered territories, for his glory demanded that his new subjects should see what sort of king he was. And so, like the Israelites trekking with Moses to the Promised Land, hundreds of courtiers and thousands of servants with luggage, furniture and chandeliers lumbered slowly down the muddy roads toward Dunkirk and thence to Flanders.

Meanwhile Monsieur, desperate to take the spotlight, busied himself with amusing the court. If a barn were handy, he would arrange an impromptu ball—one had only to clear out the hay, call His Majesty’s ubiquitous musicians, and the fête would begin.

But under the gay exterior, the household of Monsieur and Madame festered like an open wound. Monsieur was jealous that his wife was the one in the spotlight, and worse, the King had banished his lover. No longer being able to take refuge in the arms of his beloved Chevalier de Lorraine, he pouted like a spoiled child and insulted his wife at every opportunity. While he fretted and fumed, the alarmingly thin Madame Henriette languished, unable to eat or drink anything other than milk.

Finally, the court reached Dunkirk, and they bade a tearful goodbye to Madame as she sailed for England. Not long after, Athénaïs, Mademoiselle and Monsieur found themselves sharing a coach on the way to the front.

“Do you two believe in astrology?” Monsieur suddenly asked, pulling out his snuff box. “Well, I do.” He took a pinch and inhaled. “I recently consulted my astrologer, who told me that I should have more than one wife. Given Madame’s condition, I

can believe it." He sneezed delicately into his lacy handkerchief.

The two women could only stare.

The court continued its bumpy, water-logged journey to Flanders, and finally a triumphant Madame rejoined them, bringing news of the successful treaty with her brother Charles. The King showered her with praise and gifts and staged fêtes in her honor. Her husband sulked. When the court returned to Versailles, he dragged Madame off to Saint-Cloud and out of the limelight.

* * *

Five days later on a warm summer evening, Athénaïs and Louise found themselves in a line of carriages behind the King galloping northeast toward Saint-Cloud. "Madame is dying!" the messenger had cried as he dismounted from his sweaty horse. Then in a low hiss, "She says she has been poisoned."

"Who could have done such a thing?" Louise pulled out her rosary as their coach thundered on.

"Who indeed?" Athénaïs joined Louise in prayer, the familiar beads calming her. "Ave Maria, gratia plena," they repeated again and again, as Athénaïs' mind wandered... Madame had been such a reckless flirt. Did her lack of restraint lead to this?

The shadows of the plane trees lengthened, then enveloped the road as night fell. Death seemed to be riding with them.

"Driver!" Athénaïs called. "Can you go no faster?"

* * *

They arrived late that night moments after the King's coach and rushed to Madame's boudoir. Courtiers and servants wept loudly outside the ruelle, the gilded railing separating the bed from the rest of the room. The courtiers furtively stared at La Grande Mademoiselle. Athénaïs realized with a start that the King's spinster cousin was the obvious candidate to replace Madame as Monsieur's wife, and they must already be calculating how best to benefit.

Monsieur was snarling at the elderly court physician carrying a bottle of leeches. A glass of chicory water—Madame's last drink—sat on the sideboard next to them.

"Please, Monsieur," the doctor huffed. "I can answer for her recovery."

Monsieur glared back. "I've heard that before from you doctors. You once answered for the health of my son, and you know what happened to him—dead." He turned to kneel at his wife's crowded bedside next to their sobbing little girl.

The plump Bishop Bossuet, his usually jolly face now drawn with grief, knelt beside Henriette and placed a crucifix into her white hands. Louis knelt at her other side joined by the weeping Monsieur. Henriette's faithful spaniel Mimi whimpered beside them.

Athénaïs and Louise sank to their knees at the foot of the bed next to Mademoiselle and took out their rosaries. "In nomine Patre, Filii et Spiritu Sancti..." they recited as they made the Sign of the Cross.

"Why isn't the antidote working?" cried Henriette. "Who would wish to poison me?" Pale and moaning, she reached out to embrace her husband. "Hélas! Monsieur, it is so long since you have loved me. You have been unjust. I have never been unfaithful to you." Tears came to his eyes as he pressed her hand.

"Tell my brother Charles good-bye, since I cannot." She cried out in pain—a moment of relief—"I have loved him better than life itself... Now my only regret in dying is to be leaving him." She gasped, then fell silent. Her eyes stared into nothingness.

Louise put her face in her hands and sobbed. Athénaïs put her arms around her and they wept together. The King got up, his eyes moist, teeth clenched, and quit the room. Protocol and superstition forbade his presence in the same room as a corpse. Monsieur followed, but Athénaïs grabbed him by the sleeve.

"How did this happen?" she hissed. "Was she poisoned?"

"I don't know," Monsieur answered loudly, blinking back tears. "It was hot. She had a drink of cool chicory water to refresh herself, then she cried out in torment. But I am sure the water is not poisoned. Look, I will give it to the dog." With that, he poured the glass of water into a dish and gave it to Henriette's little Mimi. The dog lapped it up then trotted off.

Biting her lip to keep from weeping, Athénaïs led the stricken Louise out to their carriage. Before getting in, she turned to look up at the Château de Saint-Cloud, Henriette's domain. The Tower Card! Yes, with Henriette falling, falling, from the highest window.

* * *

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity,” Bishop Bossuet thundered, his words soaring past the candle-lit casket of Madame Henriette-Anne of England, reverberating over the crowd of hushed courtiers. Clouds of incense wafted up to heaven mingled with the perfume and sweat of fastidiously dressed but infrequently washed bodies.

Now was Bossuet’s chance to turn his blasé audience from the things of this world, so ephemeral, to face the things of the next. “O vanity, O nothingness, O mortals ignorant of their destiny!” His hand swept over the casket covered with cloth of gold, his emerald ring given to him by Madame glinting with green fire. He was her confessor; she, his beloved penitent.

La Reynie contemplated the crowd packing the cathedral of Saint-Denis. *There is Foreign Minister Lionne. He still doesn’t look well, he mused. The heat? Or the strain of the secret treaty? Over there, the contingent from England. The gentleman in the huge wig must be Milord Buckingham, weeping into his sleeve. He doesn’t have a clue that the treaty he had negotiated was a sham.*

* * *

Buckingham. La Reynie had nearly run into him on his way to the autopsy.

“Monsieur!” the Englishman exclaimed, “you must find the truth. Was she poisoned? Our king—her brother—demands an answer!”

La Reynie sighed to himself. “Milord Buckingham,” he said, “your English doctors are here to assist our finest surgeons. We will find the cause of her unfortunate death.”

La Reynie politely shoved his way past Buckingham and opened the door of the morgue. It stank. Henriette’s body had been kept on ice for two months awaiting the English doctors. He joined the crowd peering down at the corpse, all holding their noses. When they sawed through the breastbone and yanked back the rib cage, the sickening sweet smell of death overcame him and he ran from the room to retch. The physicians then pulled out her intestines, peering at them like the pagan priests of old divining the future from the entrails of a sheep. After lengthy discussion, they finally came to the diagnosis of death

by natural causes: “cholera morbus, aggravated colic and excess bile” exacerbated by her “grievous sorrows.”

* * *

Poor Henriette, La Reynie mused. She cried out that she had been poisoned and begged for a counter-poison, but the antidotes were of no avail. Was it poison, or not? Doctors. First they purge you, then bleed you, then cluck over your corpse.

“The grandeur and the glory!” thundered the bishop. “It is time to see that all that is, is mortal.” His jaded audience continued fanning themselves.

La Reynie spied Monsieur looking bored. Is he capable of murder? There’s a rumor that his beloved chevalier had sent poison from Italy to an accomplice in Madame’s household. And there, the King’s current mistress, Mme de Montespan, sitting right next to Mlle de La Vallière, the former one, forced to live together. Could they be friends?

“O disastrous night!” Bossuet exclaimed. “O dreadful night, where resounded suddenly, like a clap of thunder, that astonishing news: Madame is dying, Madame is dead!”

* * *

Two rows in front of La Reynie sat Athénaïs. She trembled, trying to attend to the sermon, but looking around the crowded church at her so-called friends. She probably should be nicer to these people, but most were hypocrites, moralizing over her behavior but begging her for favors. How dare they judge her. So she practiced the art of hauteur: she kept her nose in the air and her back turned to friendship. Her hand holding her rosary was shaking. Henriette was only twenty-six when she died. It could have been herself—could someone want her dead too?

Chapter 10

The Curse December, 1670

“Did you hear?” Mme Françoise Scarron exclaimed to Athénaïs on this cold winter morning. “La Grande Mademoiselle is going to marry Lauzun! He has no breeding, he practically bought his title. What could the poor woman be thinking? She could marry any of the crowned heads of Europe.”

“Have pity on her.” Athénaïs handed Françoise a cup of hot chocolate. “The crowned heads of Europe are already married.”

“Although I am glad, she insists on marrying her lover. At least to her, morality is as important as duty.”

“Morality, or amour?” Athénaïs raised an eyebrow as she picked up her own cup. Her friend disapproved of adultery and consented to become her children’s governess only after the King himself begged and her confessor approved. Passion was not in her vocabulary.

“But how could His Majesty possibly approve of this mésalliance?”

Athénaïs took a sip before answering. “He approved because I asked him to. They are both my friends—well, she is, and they are so much in love.”

Françoise put down her cup with a clink. “Did Lauzun ask you to intercede with the King?” Athénaïs averted her eyes. “That was most unwise, ma chère.” She took Athénaïs’ hand. “The royal family is growing angrier each minute. And then there’s Louvois.”

“Louvois? But why should the Minister of War—”

“You know how he hates Lauzun. Worse, Louvois doesn’t like you either.”

Athénaïs nearly choked on her chocolate. “Him? I do not fear that cochon.”

Françoise gazed at her seriously. “Indeed, he does resemble a pig, but I think a wild boar is more apt. You do not need him as an enemy. Besides,” she continued, “a marriage such as this is bound to fail, and when it does you will be blamed. Please speak

to His Majesty again and advise him to withdraw permission.”

“But I promised Lauzun. I don’t dare.”

“Madame, what is the hold he has over you? Are you afraid of him? I heard about the last time you broke your promise to him.”

Athénaïs shivered. “He knows too much. He was a friend of my husband and he knows where the children are. And somehow he found out about my private conversation with the King. He knew it word for word. If I offend him—” Athénaïs pondered. Who was more powerful, this scalawag or Louvois? Curse Lauzun. “No, you are right. I will speak to His Majesty at once.”

She forced a smile. “In the meantime, how are the children? I haven’t been able to get away for days.”

Françoise beamed. “Little Louis-August is getting so big. And he smiled at me today.”

“Oh, I wish I had been there. And my little girl? Is she any better?”

“She is as well as can be expected.” Françoise said quietly. “My poor little one. The doctor is doing the best he can.”

“Doctors! Useless. Do you think anyone else has found out yet where the children are? Is there any chance my husband can find them?”

“No. Hiding them in separate locations will surely keep them safe.” Françoise sighed. “I must confess, I am exhausted. I have to supervise two wet-nurses in two locations, running back and forth all day long, caring for both households.”

Athénaïs took her hand with a smile. “His Majesty and I are grateful to you for your diligent service. If there is anything we can do to make this easier for you—”

But then Louis was ushered in and Françoise made a graceful exit. Athénaïs had to discuss this with him, and found he was having his own doubts about the marriage.

Minister of War Louvois was happy. Lauzun was not. And poor Mademoiselle was devastated.

* * *

“Monsieur!” A sweaty Captain Desgrez appeared at La Reynie’s doorstep, his exhausted horse wheezing at the curb. “Foreign Minister Lionne is in a coma. It may have been poison!”

“Merde.” La Reynie summoned his coach, and they were off at a gallop. “What do you know? Any details?”

Desgrez shook his head. “Not yet.”

La Reynie looked out the window, remembering. “Lionne confided in me some time ago that something was not right. He looked ill, tired. He said his young wife had taken a lover, and worse, she was flaunting her liaison. When he confronted her she laughed at him. He said he was so angry he struck her, then she swore she’d take revenge. Ever since then he was not well, his stomach hurt.”

“Did he suspect poison?”

“He refused to say that. He said he didn’t know what to think.”

“What about a lettre de cachet to get her locked up?”

“That was my suggestion. Finally, in July he agreed, and she was arrested, charged with adultery and sent off to a convent.” He shook his head. “How...?”

Their carriage pulled up to Lionne’s mansion next to the doctor’s carriage, its four horses sweating from the heat. Desgrez headed to the kitchen to question the staff while La Reynie went upstairs to the bedroom. He found Lionne lying unconscious on the huge canopy bed, the sour smell of vomit in the air. His scant white hair, no longer hid by wig or nightcap, clung in wet tendrils to his head, his face pallid. The physician was taking instruments out of his bag preparing to examine him.

Lionne’s son rushed over to La Reynie. “Grâce à Dieu, you have arrived.”

La Reynie led him to a quiet corner. “What happened?” he asked.

“It must have been my stepmother,” hissed the young Lionne. “That putain is responsible for this.”

“I suppose that is possible, but she is in a convent, no? There may be other suspects.”

“How can that be? My father is a respected minister of the state.”

“Precisely. A little over a year ago, he helped to negotiate a sensitive treaty with the King of England. There are parties, such as the Dutch, who have been trying to learn the secret details. If they did find out they might have plotted revenge.”

"No, I don't believe it. You don't know that woman, she is capable of anything. It could have been her lover, or an accomplice, or—"

"That is possible, but do you recall your father mentioning Madame Henriette's death? You know there were rumors of poison. Did he ever speak of this with his wife?"

He frowned. "No, I don't think so. My father and his wife haven't spoken much at all in the last year."

"Please have your physician contact me as soon as he has a firm diagnosis. After all, it might *not* be poison. And please do not hesitate to summon me if there is anything I can do."

Riding back to his office, La Reynie and Desgrez tried to put the pieces together. The problem was, they didn't fit.

"It gets worse," said La Reynie, looking out the window. "It seems every neighborhood has reports of plots and poisons and it is spreading like a plague. Lionne could have been poisoned by his wife, or a foreign agent, or perhaps not poisoned at all." He turned to Desgrez. "What is the gossip at court? Any leads there?"

"Well, not about poison, but a lot about Mme de Montespan. She is so thoroughly disliked she could be either a potential victim or an actual suspect."

"Ah. Her again. What have you heard?"

"Lots of jealous backbiting and moralizing. The lady has a reputation for being haughty and everyone pities Mlle de Vallière for having to live with her rival. But it came to a head this summer when the court went off to the front. The King has tried to hide the affair, but it all came unraveled when the Queen left on a trip to a nearby abbey."

Desgrez tried to suppress a smirk. "The King and his mistress were alone together when a soldier called from downstairs. They went out to the balcony to hear that his little Duc d'Anjou was dying, and the doctors were urging him to return to Saint-Germain immediately. Then, as luck would have it, the Queen pulled up in her coach. She got out and looked up, and there was her husband with Mme de Montespan, her clothes in disarray."

"But didn't the Queen know by then?"

"Apparently not. Her Majesty had to take in the terrible news

about her son, plus the fact her husband's mistress was not Mlle de Vallière, it was Mme de Montespan. Their Majesties did not make it in time before their son died. And when they returned from Saint-Germain, Her Majesty proclaimed that she believed her child's death was in payment for her husband's sins. That was the second child of the King and Queen to die in less than two years. Plus, the little girl that was the first child of the King and Mme de Montespan has also died."

"Don't they also have a son?"

"Yes, and he is healthy. So far. And so far, the children are supposed to be a secret."

* * *

On a chilly November afternoon, Athénaïs was summoned to the King's study. His Majesty and Louvois looked worried.

"Shocking news," said the King. "We have learned that Lauzun has been saying vile things about you, and—"

"Yes, I know," Athénaïs interrupted. "He blames me because you broke his marriage plans."

"Yes, madame," said Louvois, "but he has also been threatening you."

"Threatening me?" She blinked. "What did he say?"

"My sources tell me he got drunk last night and was talking about you insulting him to the King. He said he was going to make you pay, that he knew how to hurt you."

Athénaïs paled. "But how could he know what I said?"

"He bragged that he had bribed a chambermaid to let him into your room and he hid under your bed. He listened to your conversation with His Majesty."

"What? That bastard!"

"We have a serious problem," said the King. "He knows too much. He brought our little ones to Mme Scarron for safety, and now—"

"Oh God, Louis, I trusted him." She burst into tears. "What if he reveals the location of our children?"

"Do not fear, ma chère." He turned to Louvois. "Tell madame our plan."

"We have already arrested him," said Louvois with a gratified smile, "and he will be placed in the most secure prison possible,

in Pignerole at the foot of the Alps. It is our preferred location for, say, our most sensitive prisoners. Fouquet is lodged there too. He may not see the light of day again.”

* * *

The winter wind whipped through Paris and Saint-Germain, pursuing Athénaïs, chilling her with regrets, forebodings. Her little girl, dead. Louis’ son, also dead. And now she was kneeling at the bedside of dying Julie, Duchesse de Montausier. Four years before, Julie had allowed Athénaïs to share her apartments as a cover only to be viciously attacked by Henri. She had been ill ever since.

With a wave of her frail hand, Julie dismissed everyone but Athénaïs. She motioned her closer. “It is because of you that I die,” she whispered. “And the King.” Athénaïs shrank back, but Julie’s chill hand clutched hers. “Kings demand, and they receive,” she hissed. “All their pleasures must be satisfied, and the righteous must succumb or pay the price of being disgraced and neglected.” She glared at Athénaïs, her eyes as cold as her gripping hand. “You seduced the King, pulled him away from Louise, then the King seduced my husband to persuade me to use my apartments as a meeting-place. My husband was well rewarded for his compliance.

“Did you think this could stay a secret? The Queen hates me,” Julie whimpered. “And I was punished. Your husband found out. He nearly killed me.”

Athénaïs was now in tears. “Please, Julie, I am sorry.”

“You were there, you know what he did to me. My life has never been the same. Listen to me!” She gripped Athénaïs’ hand, hard. “I go now to appear before God. I beg of you, Athénaïs, grant me this, or I will call upon God to punish you, I swear—” She began to cough.

Athénaïs turned cold.

“Leave the King! Leave him, a slave to his passions, the ravisher of others’ good. He has seduced you with pomp and grandeur that surround and intoxicate you. If you could only see it all as I do on my deathbed. It is... all of it... really a very little thing.”

* * *

That night after supper, determined to be amused, Athénaïs

headed for the gaming tables. She had money now, which her wastrel husband never had, and she needed excitement, not guilt. Yes—especially roulette, the intoxicating wheel, so like the Wheel of Fortune.

The clock struck 11:00. The King announced, “We bid you good evening,” as he and the Queen retired. All pretense of decorum left with them. No sooner had the door shut behind Their Majesties than the courtiers erupted, yelping with glee, hurling curses, and Athénaïs could indulge.

She leaned over the roulette wheel, brandy in hand, stray curls falling onto her perspiring face, eyes gleaming, watching the spinning wheel devour her gold. She was determined to ignore the whispers of the courtiers who shook their heads sympathetically over both the poor Queen and Louise, the abandoned mistress.

“Quanto va, mesdames et messieurs, quanto va?” The croupier called for bets as the wheel spun round and round. The ball landed.

“Merde. Still not my number.” She shoved even more louis d’or towards the grinning maw of the wheel. “Oh, what does it matter? I know I can win it back.” Of course, His Majesty would guarantee her debts.

She was starting to recoup her losses when Mlle Claude rushed up and tugged at her sleeve. “I must speak with you, madame,” she whispered.

“Oh, what *is* it?” Athénaïs didn’t even look up, still focused on the spinning wheel.

“Madame, *please*,” her maid hissed in her ear. “It’s the children’s house. The chimney is on fire and Mme Scarron needs to summon help. Can she call the authorities? You told her no one is supposed to know.”

“A fire in the chimney? Well, it will soon be out.” Athénaïs laughed gaily, remembering an old superstition. “Besides, won’t that bring the children good luck?” She shoved more money over to the wheel. Mlle Claude glared and dashed off again.

Athénaïs lost 1,000 *écus* that night.

* * *

Plagued by nightmares and whispers behind her back,

Athénaïs couldn't stay away from La Voisin any longer. "I need your help again. I think there is a curse on me." She shivered, clutching her wrap around her. The fire in La Voisin's parlor was burning low, with flickering shadows dancing on the wall.

La Voisin handed her the cards with a reassuring smile. "Shuffle the cards, please, while you tell me what is happening."

As Athénaïs shuffled she told the witch about Julie's curse, the dead children, her bad luck at cards. And would the King always love her?

La Voisin's pleasant face creased into a frown. "That sounds serious, madame." She laid out the cards. "This one covers you, this one crosses you. This before you, this behind you. Hmm... this is beneath you."

Here it was again, the Wheel of Fortune. But this time it lay upside down, a bad sign. "The Wheel of Fortune, madame, goes around and around. Sometimes we win, sometimes not."

"Ah, yes." Athénaïs replied. "What is Fortuna, a goddess that can be placated? I know other gamblers who use—well, charms and things to improve their luck. What can I do?"

"Fortuna is like the Moon, waxing and waning. The card is reversed, madame. That is not good. Plus, you may have a curse, so that will call for extra measures on my part." She smiled sweetly.

Chapter 11

Suspects

September, 1671

Five years after La Reynie had begun the investigation, His Majesty returned from the interminable war to news of danger—not from Holland, but from one of their own. La Reynie rushed to tell the King.

“Your Majesty, we have finally been able to link a poisoner to the court.”

“Indeed. Louvois just told me. Mon Dieu, it’s all over court. The Marquise de Brinvilliers? That sweet little blonde?” He shrugged. “One can never tell. Louvois said she fled the country. Do you know where?”

“Captain Desgrez is on her trail. She may be behind enemy lines in the Lowlands.”

“Good.” His Majesty sighed. “I *told* you,” he said. “This incident proves my point. We should concentrate on poison, not chicanery, spells, and such silliness. I will make this simple. We must end the legal prosecution of sorcery and focus on the real crimes.”

* * *

La Reynie left the King’s study worried. Tricksters like Lesage, who played at being magicians, would no longer be prosecuted. But the sorcerers might lead to the source of the poisons... He was passing a crowded salon when he heard his name being called.

“Monsieur La Reynie!” called Athénaïs, waving him over with her fan. “Perhaps you could tell us the latest news about the marquise?”

“But of course, madame.” La Reynie forced a pleasant smile. Mme de Montespan herself, summoning him like a servant. But he dutifully went over to greet the small flock of chattering nobility and the effusively polite introductions ensued. He kissed Athénaïs’ jeweled hand and bowed to Monsieur and to Mon-

sieur's new Madame, the heartily plump Elizabeth-Charlotte (Liselotte) of Bavaria, whose broad grin revealed bad teeth. Rumor had it the couple was quite happy.

Moving on, he kissed the hand of Mme de Sévigné. He had heard about her fascinating letters, eagerly passed along to others. "Mme de Sévigné, what a delight to see you again. How is your daughter, Mme de Grignan?"

"She is doing well, so kind of you to ask." Her blue eyes sparkled with the prospect of news. "But please tell us all about the marquise. Is it true what they say? Did she really murder her entire family?"

"Not quite, madame, but she certainly tried."

Athénaïs was on the edge of her chair. "Monsieur, didn't you arrest her valet yesterday?"

"Yes, he is now in the Bastille. We are attempting to extract information from him."

"How many did the marquise poison?" Mme de Sévigné asked. "Was it really a dozen?"

"That is a rumor, madame. Unfortunately, we may never know how many people the Marquise de Brinvilliers killed. She began her career as a poisoner testing her potions at a hospital, pretending to care for the unfortunate, all the while perfecting the dose that would ultimately kill her father."

They gasped. "Why her father?" asked Monsieur. "Why not kill her husband?"

"He came later." Jaws dropped. "Some years ago," La Reynie went on, "her father, Monsieur d'Aubray, found out she was having an affair with Godin de Sainte-Croix. He became upset. Her husband the marquis was not concerned. The marquise, her husband, and Sainte-Croix were, shall we say, very good friends. But her father got a lettre de cachet and had Sainte-Croix imprisoned for a time. That was the last straw for the marquise, and she plotted revenge. She was also after his money. When Sainte-Croix was released, she used his store of poison to kill not only her father, but also her two brothers who would have inherited the fortune."

"And her husband?" asked Mme de Sévigné, eyes wide.

La Reynie smiled. "It seems Sainte-Croix couldn't handle a woman more evil than himself. Whenever she tried to poison

her husband, her lover administered an antidote. The poor man is barely among the living.”

“No! What about the rest of the family?” asked Madame Liselotte, her French heavily accented with German. “Are there any left?”

“Fortunately, yes. We suspect she also tried to poison her two sisters-in-law, her daughter, and her husband’s mistress. Then there was her other lover—”

“*Other* lover?” they exclaimed.

“Yes, a man named Briancourt, her child’s tutor, has been heavily implicated. We are questioning him now.”

Monsieur took a large swig of wine then carefully set down the glass. “You found the poisons?” he asked.

“Indeed, and other evidence. When Sainte-Croix died he left a red coffer containing not only arsenic but documents incriminating his lovely mistress and their accomplices. She tried to get the coffer using bribes and threats. When that didn’t work, she fled the country.”

They fell silent. La Reynie’s eyes fell on Athénaïs. Did the King stop prosecution of sorcery to protect her? “I beg your indulgence,” he said, rising. “I must return to my office.”

Monsieur also rose. “I will accompany you to your carriage.”

“I must leave,” said Mme de Sévigné as she finished her wine. “I owe my daughter a letter, and this tidbit is too fascinating not to share.” She hurried off.

When La Reynie and Monsieur were finally out of earshot of the others, Monsieur finally spoke. “Can you tell me something about the origin of the poisons?” he asked, nervously blinking. “I heard they came from Christophe Glaser. Is that true?”

“Yes, Sire. They came from your own apothecary.”

“But—but how?” Monsieur stuttered. “The man has many honors. He is a brilliant scientist. And as you must know, he is also apothecary to His Majesty.”

“Not any longer, Sire, by the order of the King.” La Reynie’s analytical gaze bored into Monsieur. “I recommend you have no further contact with him until we can determine how deeply he was involved.”

Monsieur pulled out his lace handkerchief and dabbed at his moist brow. “Thank you for your time, monsieur,” he said with a

perfunctory bow and hurried off.

Poor Monsieur, mused La Reynie on the bumpy carriage ride back to Paris. *He knows how close he came. If his wife had been poisoned, he would be a logical suspect. And Glaser used to be the apothecary to Fouquet. Thank God, Fouquet is locked up—surely he has no further influence—or does he? And what about Mme de Montespan?*

Summer, 1672

The hunt for the marquise dragged on into the following summer when the court, as usual, was lodged in a château near the front; and where Athénaïs, as usual, delivered another baby. The courtiers were on edge, eyeing each other. Who else was using poison?

Then came news from the Rhine.

“Gabrielle, did you hear?” Athénaïs found her sister writing letters.

“Oh, what is it, Athénaïs? More gossip?”

“The Comte de Soissons is dead. They say it is from a sudden illness.”

“Dead? You don’t think—”

“Yes, I do think.” Athénaïs plopped down in a chair and fanned herself. It was hot, she’d just had a baby last week, and she felt fat. Gossip was a welcome diversion. “His wife Olympe and her sister were only a few leagues away with their lovers.”

“Yes, of course. The Mancini girls. Italians.” Gabrielle put down her quill. “Aren’t the Mancinis related to the Medici? Or to the Borgias.” She shook her head.

“Actually, to the late Cardinal, but yes, poison rings may perhaps apply. I wonder if there is any connection between them and the Marquise de Brinvilliers? That horrid woman is still on the run. Is anyone safe?”

“Ask the King.”

But he was not much help.

“Mon cher,” Athénaïs asked Louis, “Do you think the comtesse poisoned her husband? I wouldn’t put anything past her.”

Louis’ face was inscrutable. “I don’t have any proof. However, the comte did say before he died he thought he had been

poisoned. By whom, we don't know."

"What are you going to do? Surely his wife was the only person who wanted him dead."

"Possibly, but remember her husband never questioned the fact she had lovers. Why should she have killed him? I am not going to do anything about this. Not only do we have no proof—she wasn't anywhere near him at the time—she is Superintendent of the Queen's Household, *and* the niece of the late Cardinal."

Athénaïs bit her lip. The comtesse also used to be his first *amour*. Was he playing favorites?

* * *

La Reynie stood helpless at a bedside watching a lovely young woman dying, her scarlet blood seeping out onto the white bedclothes. The doctor put his instruments back into his bag, murmured something to the weeping family, and left.

Captain Desgrez held her hand, blinking back tears. She was his niece. "Catherine," Desgrez whispered, "please tell Monsieur La Reynie what you told me. It is important." He squeezed her hand in encouragement.

She looked up at Desgrez, her pale, sweating face contorted with pain. "I am so ashamed," she whispered. "Please, uncle, tell him for me."

Desgrez turned to La Reynie. "She had an abortion. Her husband was coming home from the war and she found herself pregnant by someone else."

"Who did this to her?"

"She said she cannot remember the woman's name."

La Reynie put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Please madame, what do you remember? How did you find this person?"

"The other ladies told me about her. They had done it too. I went with one of them. She was a witch..." She gasped, let out an agonized scream, then fell silent.

As the family rushed toward her with cries of grief, La Reynie took Desgrez gently by the arm to speak with him alone. "Who are the ladies she referred to?" he asked.

Desgrez clenched his jaw to keep control, now back to being an enforcer of the law. "My niece was one of Her Majesty's ladies-in-waiting. This behavior must be prevalent at court."

“Yes, and those ladies are supervised by the Comtesse de Soissons.”

Desgrez sighed. “Of course.”

* * *

“Mesdemoiselles!” Athénaïs railed. “Scandalous. How can this be true? I have learned that some of you had abortions. Who? Which of you could have done such a thing?”

The delectable young ladies-in-waiting to the Queen lined up before Athénaïs in deep curtsies, their eyes fixed on the parquet floor, the light pouring in from the tall windows mercilessly illuminating their guilt.

“Who would dare disgrace the Queen’s household?” Athénaïs paced up and down, staring each one in the face before moving down the line. “You!” She stopped before a sniffing brunette. “Mademoiselle, I heard about you.” She pointed to her with her fan. “Tell me the truth. You had an abortion, did you not? And who performed this service?”

The door burst open. “How *dare* you.” Olympe, Comtesse de Soissons stalked in, high heels clicking on the floor. “I am Superintendent of the Queen’s Household, and these ladies are in my charge. How dare you interfere. They are my responsibility—”

“Responsibility?” Athénaïs tossed her head back and laughed. “Aha! Madame, you claim responsibility for their licentious and immoral behavior? Under your direction, no wonder they found themselves in this condition.”

The ladies tittered behind their fans, relieved that Athénaïs’ fury had found another target. Olympe turned on them. “Leave us!” she barked, and they fled in a flurry of silk. Her slanted dark eyes narrowed as she circled Athénaïs. “Licentious, you say?” hissed the comtesse, her pale skin now flushed red. “Immoral? *You* dare to accuse them? Putain!”

Athénaïs counterattacked. “You call *me* a whore, with all the lovers you’ve had? You are as notorious as your sisters.” Olympe froze. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?” Athénaïs announced, languidly fanning herself. “I know you were the King’s first mistress, but he’s *mine* now. You know he will never touch you again.”

The comtesse shook with rage, her diamond earrings flashing. “You arrogant bitch. I see you putting on airs, acting like a

queen, wearing the crown jewels, for God's sake! Do you really think you can hold him forever? Do you really think he'd stop making love to every woman who winks at him, just for *you*?"

"Mon cul!" Athénaïs charged, her fan ready to strike.

The door banged open. "Enough!" His Majesty marched in and both women dropped into deep curtsies, recovering their sophisticated façade. Athénaïs looked up at him appealingly, while the comtesse smiled sweetly as if nothing had happened. He glared at Olympe. "Madame," he said quietly, "would you be so kind as to leave the room?"

"But of course, Sire." The comtesse glided off.

"Did you hear her?" fumed Athénaïs. "Did you hear what she said? How dare she!"

"Athénaïs, please be quiet. Mon Dieu, what a temper. You scream like a fishwife."

Athénaïs fanned herself furiously, trying to calm down.

"Look," he said, "I agree. They must be dismissed, of course."

"And the comtesse as well."

"No, chérie. You know it's not that simple. I can't take it away from her."

"But why? And why can't I be Superintendent of the Queen's Household? You know I could perform those duties—"

"Athénaïs, please be realistic. As my maîtresse en titre, you cannot have that position. It would be an insult to Her Majesty."

"Oh, c'est odieux!" She threw down her fan and went to the window seat to sob.

Louis gave her fan back to her and sat down. He hated tears. "Ma douce," he whispered. "Must you cry? I'm sure this problem can be solved."

But Olympe's taunts resounded in Athénaïs' head. "Louis, it is a disgusting situation. You must ask Her Majesty to replace those wicked girls with respectable married women."

"I agree, but—" Louis sat back, his face a mask, contemplating her. "Do you know why I love you? Now I realize why. You are so like me—arrogant, selfish, and ruthless. Half the court hates you and the other half pretends to like you, just as they do me." He got up and turned to leave. "God help us both," he said, and walked off.

Chapter 12

The Heart Has its Reasons Fall, 1673

Athénaïs pulled the heavy drapes aside, watching the last of the leaves fall gently through the autumn mist onto her comfortable house on the Rue de Vaugirard, home to the royal bastards for the past two years. The apple trees were bare now of fruit. The only sound was the dripping rain, the crackling fire, and the voice of Françoise Scarron reading to the children. Now six years after the beginning of their affair, Athénaïs was only a bit safer from her erratic husband. Separation proceedings were underway, but he could still make serious trouble.

Athénaïs finally found some kind of contentment with Louis as queen of his harem. His Majesty and His Mistress were for all the world a married couple, making love and babies, quarreling often, both obsessed with transforming Versailles into the most beautiful royal residence in Europe.

The courtiers took note. When Athénaïs swept into a room she was greeted—warily—like a merchant ship laden with treasures. Was the day warm? “Madame, may I fetch you your fan?” Perhaps it was chilly: “Madame, please allow me to loan you my muff.” Tentatively they would inquire about a vacant post, all the while complimenting her vociferously. Louise was a nonentity, the Queen ignored, and Athénaïs’ pride swelled into overweening hauteur. His Majesty found it ironic.

Athénaïs had been visiting her children more often ever since three-year-old Louis-August fell seriously ill. After fighting a high fever and delirium he could hardly walk. Over the next few weeks one leg contracted, becoming progressively shorter, leaving him with a limp. The doctors tried everything and accomplished nothing. His anxious parents gave him a nickname, Mignon: their darling.

The rain came harder now, bending down the apple trees, pulling her back to Louis’ interminable campaigns against the Dutch. Every summer, heavily pregnant, she made the trek to

Flanders with dozens of coaches, cannons, soldiers, all for the glory of France. "Damned herring merchants," the King declared. "*This time we cannot be stopped.*"

But when the French army took Maestricht the rest of Europe was alarmed. Who would the Sun King invade next? So the Grand Alliance was born—the United Netherlands, the King of Spain, the Duke of Lorraine, compelling Louis to sign a treaty. The promise of spring had turned into the grey skies of autumn.

Athénaïs turned toward her children and their governess cuddled together on the large settee in front of the hearth. Françoise was animatedly reading La Fontaine's story of "The Lion and the Gnat" to Athénaïs' new baby girl on her lap, with Mignon and his little brother Louis-César snuggled next to her. She joined them at the fire and settled down to embroider.

A jangling of spurs—the parlor door swung open, and here was the King, cape dripping and boots muddy. Overjoyed, Athénaïs rose to greet him, but his expression made her pause. He was smiling at the tableau before him, the pretty picture of domesticity of the dark-haired governess lovingly reading to his children. Louis' expression startled her; his dark eyes were wistful, as if he wished he could also be on that settee, a recipient of that motherly love.

"Your Majesty!" The ladies exclaimed. Athénaïs rushed over and Françoise, black eyes sparkling, started to rise.

"No, please, madame, stay with the children." Louis swept off his dripping cape, tossing it to Mlle Claude hovering behind him. Ignoring Athénaïs, His Majesty went straight to the little ones and tenderly picked up the frail Mignon.

"Papa!" the little boy cried, throwing his arms around his father's neck.

"Mignon," gently chided Françoise. "You will address your father as 'Your Majesty.'"

Louis chuckled and tousled his son's dark hair. "Thank you, madame, but 'Papa' will do for now." He carefully felt his leg. "Does that hurt?" he asked him.

But the little boy was intent on His Majesty's gold buttons. "Look madame," he cried with delight, "eagles!" and pulled hard on one.

"Enough, monsieur, I need my buttons." Giving him a kiss,

His Majesty gently returned him to the settee so he could pick up Louis-César who was clamoring for attention.

Athénaïs forced herself to be gay. “Your Majesty, have you noticed the children bear an astonishing resemblance to you? Mignon has your eyes and certainly your wit.”

“He may have my eyes, madame, but I believe he has *your* wit.” Louis smiled indulgently and kissed her hand, his warmth dispelling the chill she felt in the pit of her stomach.

Mlle Claude brought in a tray of café au lait and pastries and set it before the fire. She raised a flirtatious eyebrow at Louis.

“Leave the tray, mademoiselle,” Athénaïs snapped. “I will pour.” Her maid hastily withdrew.

Françoise handed over tiny Louise-Françoise to the wet-nurse to be fed and the two boys were sent off to supper, little Mignon limping away. Athénaïs began serving coffee.

“How is our Mignon?” asked the King. “What can be done?”

“I am inquiring into some spas,” answered the governess. “I have heard good reports about the efficacy of the waters in various locations, especially at Baden. But of course, that is out of the question.” The women glanced at each other. War was a delicate subject.

Françoise took a sip of coffee, gazing at His Majesty from behind her cup. “We heard the news about the alliance of your enemies against France, Your Majesty,” she said with a frown, “and your armies’ subsequent reversals. Are France’s borders safe?”

Louis scowled and Athénaïs rose to his defense. “Oh surely, madame, with His Majesty leading the troops alongside Condé and Turenne, our borders are secure.”

“Mme Scarron is astute, as usual.” Louis gazed into the governess’ serious black eyes. “It is like chess. The enemy has taken more of my men than I have captured of theirs, forcing me to assume a defensive position. Grâce à Dieu, I have Vauban.” He leaned forward, confident. “I have planned a line of fortifications, anchored by Maestricht and the Meuse River.”

As Louis explained his tactics to the enthralled Françoise, Athénaïs stopped listening. They were seriously discussing the fate of France and she was ignored. Arts and letters and décor were her métier, writers and artists vied for her patronage. Why is he talking to *her*?

* * *

The New Year brought piety, or perhaps middle age, descending like a grey fog on the court. It was now 1674 and the King's flagrant affair had been going on for years, but His Majesty no longer danced in ballets and his mood was more somber. The priests, especially Bossuet, frowned at His Majesty and His Mistress and inveighed at the jaded courtiers, pleading with them to repent, threatening them with hellfire.

But even with all that, Athénaïs was startled one chill winter morning at the sight of her sister. "Ma chère Gabrielle, are you ill?"

"I am perfectly well, thank you," Gabrielle sniffed.

"But you are so pale. Why, you are not wearing rouge."

"Your powers of observation have not diminished, Athénaïs."

"But your neckline is covered as well," said Athénaïs. "I have never thought of you as being particularly religious. Have you become a *dévote*?"

"I suppose I have become more pious. I have been watching the morals of this court sink lower than a snake's belly, and I am tired of powder only accentuating my wrinkles, and I am forty-two years old, Athénaïs. It is time I began to value my immortal soul rather than my very mortal complexion."

Athénaïs felt irritation inexplicably rise, and she reached into her bag for her snuff. "I suppose you will next tell me that I should also mend my ways." She inhaled a pinch of snuff.

"How ironic. Maman would be appalled, but the fortunes of our family seem to rise and fall with yours, ma chère." Gabrielle pursed her lips in a perfect imitation of Françoise. "I must simply pray for my own soul and leave yours to God." Her back stiff with rectitude, she walked off to mass.

* * *

"You are going to a convent?" Stunned, Athénaïs sat down in the nearest chair. "Louise, how can you?"

"It is time for me to leave the world." Louise gazed at her steadily.

"But your position at court, your responsibility to your family—"

"My children have their futures provided for. Plus, your chil-

dren are safe since His Majesty has recognized them. Your husband has made no more threats.”

“Bon Dieu,” Athénaïs sighed. “Which convent have you selected?”

“Convent Sainte-Marie de Chaillot, in Paris.”

“What?” Athénaïs’ jaw dropped. “But they are Carmelites. They are so... austere, with rough brown clothes, and rope sandals, and no meat, and they are cloistered. You will only be able to see your visitors through a grille in the parlor. Praying at all hours, and work? How can you give up your beautiful gowns and your jewels?”

“Where is the penance in that, Madame? Things—clothes, jewels, position—mean nothing to me now. For months, all I have thought about is devoting the rest of my life to God in payment for my sins. I keep thinking of what Christ would want.” She blinked back a tear. “Do you remember what he said to the woman at the well? He saw into her heart, saw everything she had done, and all He asked of her was that she stop sinning.”

Athénaïs flushed with shame. “But His Majesty. Have you told him?”

“No. Bishop Bossuet is speaking to him.”

Athénaïs contemplated her friend for a long moment. “You have changed, Louise. I used to think of you as a shy violet, but... perhaps now you know what you must do.”

She struggled not to cry. “I know I need to change. Every time I feel guilty, I run off to pray, but nothing seems to help. I give to charity, to hospitals and schools, and I still feel... lost.” She embraced her friend. “You loaned me Pascal, and I read him this past Lent. Now I see why. ‘The heart has its reasons, which Reason knows nothing of.’” She smiled wistfully. “There is nothing logical about the love of God, is there? Or anyone’s love, for that matter. I envy you.”

Louise gave her a light kiss on the cheek then walked towards her room. She paused for a moment at the door, and her eyes met Athénaïs. “I will pray for you,” she said, and shut the door behind her.

Athénaïs sank into a chair and wept.

* * *

When Louise took her leave of the court, all were astonished when she threw herself at the feet of the Queen. "Your Majesty," she said weeping, "please forgive my offenses toward you. I most humbly beg your pardon." Marie-Thérèse gasped. The two had almost become friends in the past few years, allied against their rival Athénaïs. The Queen took Louise by the hands and helped her to her feet. "Pobrecita," she whispered, embracing her. The King, tears streaming down his cheeks, averted his eyes and said nothing.

Athénaïs suddenly realized every prying, hypocritical eye in court had turned on her. Now officially *maîtresse en titre*, she was the guilty one. She swallowed hard and glared back.

* * *

"Louis, I want my own château. I am tired of being stared at like some creature in the *ménagerie*. Regardez." Athénaïs pointed with her fan to the strolling courtiers below her balcony who, in turn, were warily eyeing His Majesty and His Perennially Pregnant Mistress above.

"Have you noticed," she said, "the way those poor fools behave around me? They either stare, or fawn on me, or avoid me. Hypocrites and gossips. I need privacy, a place away from everyone. Since my children and their governess have moved in with me it is terribly crowded."

Louis sat back in his chair, eyeing his mistress. "What do you have in mind?"

"I do not know. It needs to be near Versailles, but not *too* near."

He thought a moment. "I think perhaps Clagny."

"Yes, of course, how convenient, and how charming. It has woods, and a pond, and it is just down the road from Versailles. And that is where you found that lovely property for Mlle Claude. She is grateful." *And very accommodating*, she mused. *And just how accommodating is she?*

She shoved that idea aside. "And I should have a château to rival Versailles!" she exclaimed. "Yes, it must be grand indeed, large, imposing, with the finest of interiors."

Louis was quiet. He had that look, that pained look he would get when faced with her gambling debt.

“How can you worry about what it will cost? Mon cher, am I not worth it? Colbert can find the funds, he always does.”

“Yes,” he sighed. “He always does.”

Her excitement built as she stared into the distance. “And I want to design my own garden. Right now, over there, near the woods.” She gestured with her fan. “There, past the paths to the bosquet where it is shady and almost wild. It would be perfect for a miniature marsh with a pond and reeds. Building my château will take a while, so for now, *that* is what I want.”

Louis looked, sighed, then finally shrugged. “As you wish.”

* * *

On a July afternoon courtiers and guests were treated to the beginning of a magnificent fête celebrating His Majesty’s victories. Athénaïs proudly unveiled her little bosquet, a magical marais nestled among the trees. A glistening bronze oak tree, its branches festooned with rustling tin leaves, was surrounded by arching metal reeds in a pond complete with graceful swans. To the strains of His Majesty’s ever-present violins, the signal was given and thousands of tiny jets of water sprayed forth from the reeds to the applause of the court.

The fête went on for six days of banquets, fireworks, displays of new gardens and statues, and above all, the heat. Athénaïs and Françoise were sniping at each other, squabbling over control of the children’s bedtimes and meals. Worse, Louis often found Françoise’s company appealing. How could Athénaïs rid herself of this annoying woman? She finally thought of a solution, and one evening she cornered Françoise taking refuge from the heat on the balcony of the children’s apartment.

“You want me to marry the Duc de Villars-Brancas?” Françoise was aghast. “That decrepit old lecher? Mon Dieu, he has already worn out three wives.”

“You should be honored, madame,” Athénaïs snapped. “He is a duc, and as governess of the King’s children, you deserve a title.”

“But not that way,” said Françoise with an aggrieved sigh. “Madame, I appreciate the gesture. You are correct that I need a title. But more than anything else, I desire security. And to be at the disposal of that unsavory duc, or any other gentleman, is far

from being secure.”

“And how do you think you can gain security without a profitable marriage?”

“Madame, I already have a singular position, envied by the whole world, without seeking out one which makes three-quarters of the human race unhappy.”

“But *ma chère*,” she said, “the duc is very wealthy.”

“No, madame. I do not wish to marry, nor do I need to. His Majesty promised me 100,000 livres in return for caring for the children. I plan to purchase an estate that carries with it a title. The marquise of Maintenon is for sale.”

“A marquise? You, a governess, a marquise.” Françoise would have the same rank as Athénaïs without having to marry. “His Majesty is generous,” she said tersely.

“Madame?” A tearful Mignon came limping over to clutch Françoise’s skirt. “Madame, my leg hurts.”

“Ah, *mon pauvre cher*,” said Françoise. She scooped him up into her arms and gave him a kiss. “It’s late, and you are tired. Come along, it’s past your bedtime.”

“You blame me, don’t you?” Athénaïs’ frustration overflowed. “You think it’s my fault his leg hurts. I told him he could stay up late. He was having fun and he begged me.”

“Madame, *please*, the children need a strict bedtime. And furthermore, they do not need sweets all the time. They do need nourishing meals on a firm schedule, not *bon-bons* stuffed into them every time they ask.” She stalked off to the nursery.

“You are insufferable!”

There was no reply.

Chapter 13

The Tower April, 1675

Athénaïs awoke with a start on the morning of Maundy Thursday, her nightgown damp with sweat. That nightmare, again. Running, running, guilt pursuing her like a vengeful ghost, running up the tower stairs, then trapped, ready to fling herself into space...

She breathed, hard, and reached for her snuff. She needed to go to confession before Easter. She had been putting it off for days, all the while rigorously observing the Lenten fast and abstinence. A few nights before at supper she wistfully stared at her tempting plate, the latest in a succession of countless courses. She pushed the plate away.

Her dinner companion was much amused. "What, madame," laughed the duchesse, "Does the King's mistress observe Lent?"

"Eh quoi, madame!" Athénaïs threw down her napkin in a pique. "So what? Because I commit one sin, must I commit them all?"

Lent was intensifying a grey cloud of repentance that settled heavily on His Majesty. He never missed going to mass but took communion rarely because of his relationship with Athénaïs and the scarcity of understanding confessors. He frequently succumbed to attacks of the vapours—headaches, melancholy, lack of appetite, which the royal doctors dutifully bled and purged. The nightmares had him crying aloud in his sleep, reminding him of the peril to his soul. And now the Jubilee of 1675 was here, touted by the bishops as an opportunity for spiritual renewal, time to mend one's ways. The dévots were praying that the King would mend his.

Athénaïs lay in bed trapped in indecision. Which church? Which confessor? How can I—again—confess a sin that I have no intention of avoiding? She sighed. Face it. Go to confession. But will the priest recognize me? Perhaps if I wore something plain.

* * *

Three hours later, Athénaïs stormed down the garden allées of Versailles searching for Louis. She finally found him with Le Nôtre delightedly inspecting the latest harvest of asparagus. "Your Majesty!" she gave a perfunctory curtsy. Le Nôtre took one look at the angry maîtresse en titre and made himself scarce.

"Chérie, whatever is the matter?" Louis led her to a stone bench, but she refused to sit, pacing up and down. "That accursed priest knew who I was."

"You went to confession, didn't you?" said Louis with a sigh. "What happened?"

"To be precise, I tried to be discreet and go to confession at the parish church in town. But that stupid little priest recognized me. He told me before I even started that he couldn't give me absolution unless I stopped being your mistress. He absolutely refused." Athénaïs sank onto the bench, sobbing. "What are you going to do? You must go to confession too."

"I already tried. My confessor is now telling me he has no time to hear me. I suspect after all these years the priests have joined forces to separate us. And I am off to the front next week, and they want my soul prepared." He rose abruptly. "Meet me in my study in an hour. I will summon Bishop Bossuet."

But the good bishop was no help.

"No, Sire." Like an avenging angel, Bossuet drew himself up to his already formidable height, white hair floating like a halo. The King gasped. Athénaïs felt sick. "Under no circumstances, Sire, can you or madame receive absolution unless you end this adulterous relationship." Athénaïs bowed her head, curtsied, and fled.

The Maundy Thursday evening service was packed, the air heady with incense. That "stupid little priest" Père Bourdaloue delivered the sermon, and the court soon learned why the King was somber and his mistress tearful.

"Pluck this sin from your heart, Sire!" Bourdaloue thundered, "And not only this sin, but the cause of it; go even to the root." All eyes turned to Athénaïs. "In your triumphant march amongst people whom you constrain to recognize your right, would you consider yourself secure of a rebel fortress if your enemy still had influence there?" He leaned over the pulpit, gaz-

ing directly at the King. “What would it avail you to be dreaded and victorious without, when you are captive and vanquished within?”

Louis looked at the floor. The Queen smiled. Françoise, now Madame de Maintenon, smoothed the folds of her grey silk dress and pursed her lips. And Athénaïs, clutching her rosary, wished she could disappear.

The following morning of Good Friday, Athénaïs had a visitor—black-clad Bishop Bossuet, wearing a huge gold cross. Athénaïs didn’t even have the time to offer him a seat before he came to the point.

“Madame, His Majesty asked me to speak with you.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“For the good of his soul; for the good of the kingdom; and certainly not in the least, for the good of your soul, madame—”

“No! No.” She gripped the back of a chair to steady herself.

“You must separate,” he said gently. “Madame, you must leave the court.”

Athénaïs gritted her teeth, fighting to maintain some semblance of control. “Whose idea was that? His Majesty’s, or yours?”

He opened his mouth to answer but paused a moment too long.

“It was your idea, wasn’t it?” she hissed. “How dare you try to manipulate the King in this manner. What were you expecting to gain from this effrontery? Power? Position?”

“Madame, I assure you—” Bossuet sputtered.

“Perhaps being Bishop is not enough? Perhaps your appointment as preceptor to the Dauphin is also not enough?” Athénaïs smiled sweetly. “A man of your talents deserves greater things. I am sure that His Majesty could be persuaded to—”

“*Enough*. I have only the best interest of the King at heart. He is not only committing adultery, he is committing adultery with a married woman. His immortal soul—”

“The best interest of the King?” she spat. “Indeed. He is the King, and he may do as he pleases, with any woman he pleases. You know that every man in the nation considers it his duty to oblige His Majesty if the King desires his wife. You have interfered only from your lust for power and your desire to dominate him.”

He glared. "Whatever the laws and customs of the kingdom, His Majesty must obey God's laws and set an example to the rest."

"Really. My dear Bishop, what *is* it you want? I am sure that I can arrange—"

Bossuet towered over her like God Himself at Judgment Day, the gold cross on his chest declaring the authority of the mighty Church. "You forget yourself, madame. I want nothing but the salvation of the King's soul and yours as well." He took her hands and gazed down into her eyes, into her heart. "My only concern is for the immortal soul of the King, and for yours. Reflect, please, on your conduct. It cannot continue." And then he pleaded, softly. "My child, do you not fear the wrath of God, the fires of Hell?"

Her rage melted. "God forgive me, I can't let him go!" She fell to her knees and covered her face with her hands.

"My child," he said, gently placing his hand on her head in a benediction. "Please. For the love of God."

"But to leave the court too?" She looked up at him, eyes filled with tears. "All my friends—my life is here. And am I forbidden to ever see His Majesty again? Ever?"

His expression, once so stern, softened. He pulled up a chair and took her bejeweled white hand in his. "It may be a long time, but it may not be forever. His Majesty needs a time apart from you to become strong."

* * *

That night she collapsed. "No! He can't do this to me, after all I have sacrificed."

"Athénaïs, perhaps he will change his mind," Gabrielle patted her hand.

"But not according to the bishop, and Louis is off to war this week." She jerked away and paced the room, weeping.

"Mademoiselle," Gabrielle called, "get her some brandy."

Mlle Claude brought over a bottle and poured a glass. Athénaïs downed it in one swallow, grabbed the bottle and poured more, then more again, grief and rage and sheer terror consuming her. She paused, staring at the glass. "I have lost everything," she whispered. "My marriage, my children, everything. My whole life is here at Versailles. What am I going to do?" She tossed back the entire glass.

“Athénaïs, I think you have had enough.” Gabrielle tried to take the bottle from her.

“No. Leave me alone.” Athénaïs shook off her sister. “I need more brandy, damn it, the bottle is empty.”

Mlle Claude glanced nervously at the two then went for a new bottle.

“My dear sister, you have had too much already.”

“Stop moralizing with me, you sound like Maman.”

“And you are acting like Papa.”

“Salope!” Athénaïs hurled the bottle—and the worst insult she could utter—at her sister, narrowly missing her and crashing into the wall. Gabrielle fled.

* * *

That night of Good Friday she was alone—terribly alone, kneeling at her prie-dieu. There was no place to hide from her sins. It all flooded back: Lesage and Abbé Mariette reading the Gospels over her head, promising the King would love her forever—or, if his love faded, there were potions, spells—No, not that. Reading the Holy Gospels is one thing, aphrodisiacs, but magic spells? Potions to slip into Louis’ drink? No. She buried her face in her hands, unable to look at the crucifix.

Then she remembered her mother’s scourge and she searched her drawers until finally—there it was. She grabbed the whip with its many tails designed to mortify sinful flesh, tore off her bodice, yanked down her chemise, and whirled the scourge around to strike herself hard on her back. She flinched, but gritted her teeth and did not cry out, just like Maman taught her. Very discreet, the long tails can go where no one can see. Soon she lay exhausted and bleeding, the pain in her heart assuaged—for now.

* * *

On Holy Saturday she received Bishop Bossuet. He swept off his great grey cloak and gave it to Mlle Claude, who shut the door behind her.

“Are you ready to make your confession, my child?” he asked.

“Yes, Father,” she whispered. She knelt on the floor before him, head bowed, fighting back tears. He donned his purple stole. “Bless me Father, for I have sinned...”

The iron gates of morality had clanged shut.

* * *

Spring, then summer, saw letters flying back and forth between the two lovers: Athénaïs, confined to Clagny, and His Majesty in Flanders.

“Mon cher,” she wrote Louis, “it was only a few weeks ago that you said goodbye, but it seems like an eternity. My days are empty, in dark shadows from the lack of your radiant sunshine. During Louis-César’s illness I felt terribly alone, without even resourceful Mme de Maintenon to support me. I wish I could regale you with the latest gossip from court; but alas, that amusement is also denied me.

“Mme de Maintenon writes that wherever she and our little Mignon travel, they have been received warmly. At every stop on their journey, he has been given the respect due the son of a King of France. I hope this trip to Barèges will not be in vain and that he will be cured.

“The empty days stretch before me, longing to see you again, wishing that the happiness we shared, the dreams we had, could somehow return. I miss you terribly, and I miss the delights of Versailles. But, I know, it cannot be helped. We must do what we must.

“I remain, of course, ever devoted to you...”

Athénaïs

Chapter 14

The Double-Trained Dress July, 1675

“**Y**ou summoned me, monsieur?” La Reynie found Louvois behind his desk leaning back in his creaking chair. His sweaty host did not bother to get up, his office windows open in a vain attempt to lure a breeze inside.

“Yes, have a seat. Brandy?” Louvois handed him the bottle and a glass, then he opened a drawer. “And take a look.” He retrieved a gold bar and shoved it across the desk to La Reynie.

La Reynie held the heavy bar up to the light. The surface shimmered with promise of wealth and it had the right marks, but?

“Looks real, doesn’t it?” Louvois tossed him a penknife. “Try this.”

La Reynie scratched the bar—copper underneath. “Where did it come from?”

“Lyon. My agents got a tip. They found quite a distillery, all sorts of chemicals and equipment, and the bar was left behind. Look there, see the scratches? Someone else figured out it was counterfeit. Good try, though.”

“Indeed. Do you know who might be responsible?”

“No. But I suspect one or more banks may be involved, because the bar—or bars—would have to be redeemed at a bank, either in France or elsewhere. And all that equipment cost a lot of money. Someone is financing this venture.”

“I see. I will alert the Paris police. Hmm. Tell me about the chemicals. Did you find any poison, such as arsenic?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact we did. We have no suspicious deaths in the area; although, come to think of it—Did you know the Duke of Savoy died recently?”

“No, I hadn’t heard. Was his death suspicious?”

“Perhaps. His government hasn’t said anything, but it was rather sudden.” He chuckled. “You know who he was related to, don’t you? The duke was the cousin of Madame la Comtesse de

Soissons' husband. You remember, he died rather suspiciously back in 1673. She wasn't there, of course." He smiled as he poured himself a drink. "She's too smart for that." He chuckled. "What a family. The comtesse's sister Hortense was the duke's mistress, and now is on the run again."

"Ah, Hortense Mancini. Where is she headed?"

"I heard she has gone to England. There is really nowhere else for that whore."

La Reynie was silent, nursing his own drink. Louvois was a boor, and it looked like the brandy was removing what little tact he had.

"Oh, yes. You probably heard Mme de Montespan and the King have parted ways. Or, should I say, he got rid of her?"

"Have you heard why?"

"Well, the excuse was that he needed to receive communion before going off to war. But he probably got tired of her temper. She can be a real bitch."

That remark caught La Reynie in mid-swallow. He contemplated Louvois over the rim of his glass, glad the drink gave him an excuse not to respond.

"I just remembered," Louvois was now sputtering with laughter. "The Duke of Savoy, the one who just died? What he said about His Majesty a few years back—he said the King uses women like post horses, that you mount once and never see again." He threw back his head and guffawed, nearly spilling his drink.

La Reynie shifted in his chair. "I need to return to my office," he said, forcing a pleasant smile. "Any final instructions about the counterfeiting?"

Louvois was again the King's best tactician. "Yes. I really am worried about this counterfeiting and the possible role of foreign banks, especially in Holland. The war has damaged their economy and they are getting desperate. Do you know what they could do to us by counterfeiting gold and silver on a large scale? It might take down the country."

He stared off into the distance. "As for the arsenic, you are quite right to remind me. We need to dig deeper. So many unexplained deaths, and those stupid doctors, they can't tell if someone died due to poison or not. And the problem is that it is legal

to manufacture arsenic for rat poison. Then there are the rumors about witchcraft, that witches may be involved in poisoning. Have you developed anything on that?"

"No, but Captain Desgrez is making good progress. It's amazing how many of his sources at court are whispering about witches, and poison, and abortion. But no names yet, other than the Marquise de Brinvilliers who is still on the run. But we are getting closer."

Louvois smiled slightly. "I wonder which of those noble ladies might be involved in this affair." He shook his head. "Women are so stupid." He belched. "Let me know immediately if you find anything interesting."

* * *

The love affair that had been a sparkling minuet faded into an autumn *pavane triste*, a slow and mournful dance. The King had returned from the war when the word came: His Majesty's bravest, most capable general, Turenne, had been suddenly killed by a stray cannon ball. All France mourned. Then the whispers, that Turenne's death was by the hand of God, punishment for the double adultery of Louis and Athénaïs. It did not matter that they were no longer sleeping together, for Athénaïs was back at court. The less virtuous young ladies of the court began circling the King like wolves, waiting.

But Louis' only thoughts were of Turenne, and he sank into deep melancholy. One evening, their chaperones at a discreet distance, he stared into the fire. "I had a nightmare last night," he whispered. "Turenne. I saw him. He was blown apart. France, too..."

"Oh, Louis, I—"

"I don't know what to do," he mumbled. "I am surrounded by blackness." But his voice became firmer. "I am very tired. I haven't been sleeping well, and my headaches are back."

He stood, preparing to leave. "Have you heard from Mme de Maintenon?" he asked rather distractedly. "She sent me a most charming letter. She said the treatments seem to be working and our little Mignon is much better."

"Indeed. She has not written to me."

"I thought you were friends with her, and now all I hear is

complaints. Why can't you two stop quarreling?"

"Tell *her* to stop." Athénaïs' voice rose, then dropped to a hiss as she noticed the stares. "Tell her to stop trying to manage me and the children."

"Enough. I will hear no more of this."

* * *

Mlle Claude announced she had the remedy for His Majesty's reticence.

"Mademoiselle, are you stupid?" Athénaïs looked up from powdering her face. "First of all, the problem is not the King, it is the Church. What would you do, put a spell on Bossuet? And—well, supposing it was up to His Majesty, and you really did have efficacious powders, how could they be administered?"

At that, Mlle Claude smiled, knowingly.

Athénaïs thought a long moment. "Possibly," she whispered, "but we are never alone." She turned to the mirror. "Oh, look, my hair is a mess, and it is almost time for Appartement."

Mlle Claude set to work, tying up blond curls into tiny black ribbons and diamond clips. "Do not fret, madame, you look beautiful."

"I don't feel beautiful. Pour me some brandy, will you? My nerves." Athénaïs took a long sip as she watched her maid do her hair. "I do miss Louise. She did such wonderful arrangements of my hair."

Mlle Claude frowned. "Do I not arrange your hair to your satisfaction, madame?"

Athénaïs pursed her lips in irritation. A maid asking for praise, what effrontery. But she needed her. "Is that a new dress? I don't recall seeing it before."

Her maid smiled. "Yes, I picked it up from my dressmaker in Paris. Do you like it?"

"Hmm. Turn around, *ma chère*, let me see."

Mlle Claude twirled around so Athénaïs could admire the dress, tastelessly bedecked with flounces and lace.

"Why, it has two trains," said Athénaïs. She raised a critical eyebrow. "How ingenious."

Indeed, the dress had two large flounces in the rear, side by side, with cascading short trains trailing behind. Oblivious to any

possible criticism, Mlle Claude turned this way and that, smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

Athénaïs opened her mouth to say something catty, then shut it. She noticed that the flounces in back were an attempt to distract from what was in front and took a closer look.

“Mademoiselle, you are becoming very plump. In fact—”

Mlle Claude blushed. “Yes, madame, I am expecting.”

“And, pray tell, who is the father?”

Her maid shrugged, cast her eyes to the ground, then looked up at her like a pitiful puppy desperate to please. “A—a foolish indiscretion, madame. I am not really sure.”

“Really. You must be more discreet about your indiscretions. When it becomes more obvious, you must retire to have the baby.”

“And... and after, madame?”

Athénaïs sighed. She needed her, badly. “You may then return to your duties.” *But*, she thought, *who could be the father?*

Chapter 15

Just You Wait March, 1676

“The most incredible news!” exclaimed the hefty Madame Liselotte, rushing up with Monsieur close behind.

Athénaïs and Françoise looked up from their cups of hot chocolate, surprised. And relieved—their conversation this afternoon had been as chilly as the salon.

“Finally!” announced Monsieur, mopping his brow with a frothy handkerchief. “The Marquise de Brinvilliers has been captured.”

“No!” Françoise rose to make room. “The woman who poisoned her father?”

“And her brothers.” Madame sank into a chair. “And you will never guess what they found on her—a written confession. I wonder if she had any accomplices at court?”

“No.” Monsieur shook his head. “No, certainly not. Who among us would be capable of poison?”

Athénaïs looked down at her cup, silent.

* * *

Finding the elusive poisoner had been nerve-racking. Rumors, false leads, then finally came word that she was in Liège. Captain Desgrez galloped off with his musketeers, and they found her hiding in a convent behind enemy lines. Desgrez whisked her back to France one step ahead of both the advancing Spanish troops and her servants trying to rescue her. La Reynie and a Councilor of the High Chamber were waiting for her in Rocroi.

“Messieurs!” Desgrez had announced with mock grandeur, “I have the honor to present to you Marie-Madeleine d’Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers.” He swept off his plumed hat and bowed. The haughty marquise spat on her captor’s boots. “Madame la Marquise made numerous attempts to escape. As usual, her accomplices were her loyal servants.” He grinned. “When

that failed, she tried to stab herself.”

“Quel oeuf!” she spat again in his general direction as the guards escorted her to her cell.

* * *

“Madame, how do you answer the charges?” Like a flock of hungry crows, President Lamoignon and his fellow black-robed justices stared down at the petite blonde Marquise de Brinvilliers, ready to tear her apart.

She curled her pretty lip in a sneer. “I am not guilty of any of these ridiculous charges.”

La Reynie, sitting up with the judges, was fascinated. *Incroyable*, he thought. *She is either completely innocent or utterly evil. How could that pretty little thing be capable of such crimes?*

“Madame,” boomed the judge, “we have found your signed confession, detailing the poisoning of your family, your unspeakable crimes against nature—”

“My confession? I was delirious with fever when I signed that. Besides,” she hissed through her pert little mouth, “what right do you have to treat me this way? How dare you. I am a marquise, not a commoner. I am related by blood and marriage to the oldest, most distinguished families in France.”

The judges glanced at each other. These judges—the cream of Parisian nobility—had to deal with the crimes of a noblewoman they knew all too well. One of them may have warned her of her impending arrest; and another judge was now in the Bastille, suspected of complicity in her ghastly crimes. Knowing the pressures on them, the King had told the court that justice must be done, regardless of rank—and to ensure that it was, he commanded that her initial interrogation be performed in Rocroi, far from her Parisian cronies.

* * *

“Monsieur!” called the jailer as La Reynie was just leaving his office. “La Brinvilliers has attempted suicide!”

He rushed down hallway after dank hallway shouting orders. “Did you get the doctor? Is there a weapon?”

“Yes, monsieur! No, monsieur!”

He finally found the scraggly-haired physician hovering over her bloody, writhing body, with two guards holding her down.

“Leave me alone!” she screamed, kicking at the doctor.

“Where is the weapon?” La Reynie demanded of the jailer. “Did she use a knife? How did it get into her cell?”

“No knife, monsieur,” stammered the jailer. “Look, that’s what she used.” He pointed to a stick lying next to the prisoner’s cot. It was stained with blood.

A stick? But how—” La Reynie turned to the doctor, who was forcing her knees apart.

“Monsieur,” the doctor announced, near-sightedly peering through his spectacles between her bloody legs, “it seems madame has taken vengeance on the part of her anatomy that has most offended her, and society.”

Blushing in spite of himself, La Reynie backed away. “Will she live?”

“Oh, indeed yes,” he laughed. “A few stitches and she will be as good as new.” The doctor reached into his bag for needle and thread.

“For her to be as good as new is not my concern, doctor. She must be able to stand trial. Please see to it.” Irritated and weary, La Reynie headed home.

* * *

“That was quite an adventure, finding her. Not to mention keeping her alive.” Desgrez leaned back in his chair at La Reynie’s office at the courthouse and put his boots up on the fire fender. “When we broke into the room to arrest her, she smashed a glass pitcher and tried to eat the shards, and she kept on trying with hairpins. How many others were involved in this?”

“There were three others,” La Reynie replied, “and thank God they betrayed themselves. We learned about the plot when her lover Sainte-Croix died—”

“Murdered?”

“Actually, no. Apparently of natural causes. He knew he was dying so he left a written confession to be given to a priest. That, along with a locked box. When he died, his widow brought in the family priest, her lawyers, and a commissioner. They searched the house and not only found the box, but bottles and vials and powders, all later determined to be poison.”

“The confession must have nailed it.”

“Sadly, no. They found the final confession before the poison, and the priest burned it. Then they found a letter asking whoever found all this to give it to the marquise. The police confiscated all the evidence, the chemists determined it was poison, and then—the marquise showed up at the widow’s door asking for the items.” He chuckled. “The widow knew who she was and happily sent her to the police officer who was holding the evidence. The marquise tried to bribe him to release the evidence to her. Of course, that failed, and she fled the country.

“Then her valet showed up trying to get the evidence. He realized the same thing and tried to disappear, but we found him. And that cracked the case open.”

“Tortured?”

“Yes, and it didn’t take much to make him talk. He said he too had slept with the marquise. She had threatened suicide before while attempting to extort incriminating letters from her one-time lover and accomplice, Sainte-Croix. She had even tested a counter-poison on herself.”

“How many victims?”

“We don’t know for sure. The marquise had tested her formulas carefully on indigent hospital patients she was pretending to nurse. When they died in excruciating pain, the hospital was not alarmed because those patients were expected to die. No one ever suspected her. Then the marquise told La Chaussée to administer the poison to her family. It took her eight months to slowly murder her father with careful doses. Her brothers inherited the family fortune, so they were her next targets. She then plotted the deaths of all those next in line for the inheritance: her brothers’ wives, her own children, and her husband; all the while sleeping with Sainte-Croix, her valet La Chaussée, and her children’s tutor Briancourt.”

“Mon Dieu. What happened to her accomplices?”

“La Chaussée told us that even Sainte-Croix could stand it no longer. If his mistress’s husband died, Sainte-Croix would have to deal with this little monster alone. While she dosed her husband, Sainte-Croix helpfully administered the man antidotes. And although La Chaussée was successful and highly rewarded, he said he saw how delighted she was at her family’s sufferings, and he soon came to hate her.”

La Reynie looked at the clock. "Time for the next session."

* * *

La Reynie took his place high up on the bench with the judges while Desgrez found a seat in the audience.

"Tell us, madame," the Prosecutor General announced with raised eyebrow, "about incest with your brothers." Her written confession had detailed incest starting at the age of seven, along with sodomy. The audience tittered.

The marquise flinched as if she had been struck. But she caught the leers of her judges and sat up straight. "You surely could not believe that I, a woman of quality, would do such a thing? You gentlemen, who are of course so innocent of such matters."

The eminent judges shrank back. *Touché!* La Reynie recalled the infamous Good Friday debauch of several years ago. Who here is truly innocent?

Failing to pry any more out of her, they brought in their star witness, her one-time lover and children's tutor, Briancourt. The marquise coolly eyed the pale young man standing trembling in the dock.

"Monsieur Briancourt," boomed the prosecutor, "tell the court what happened the night of the shooting." The courtroom stilled.

Briancourt gripped the rail of the witness stand, staring ahead, not looking at the marquise. "Madame was—upset. Sainte-Croix had letters of hers, agreeing to pay him for the poison. He refused to return them. She was hysterical, so I followed her to his house." He paused, his fingers digging into the railing.

"And why did you follow her?"

"She was going to kill herself," he whispered.

"Speak up, monsieur!"

"She was either going to kill him, or herself! She never listened. I begged her to not poison her sister-in-law and her sister, so she commanded me to do it instead. When I refused, she and Sainte-Croix tried to poison me."

"Yes, yes," said the prosecutor. "Now, monsieur, what happened that night? You said you followed the marquise to the home of Sainte-Croix."

“When I got there, they were arguing violently. She said she was going to kill herself if he didn’t give her the letters. I grabbed her and begged him to give her the letters, when suddenly he pulled out a knife—”

“A knife? Was it concealed on his person?”

“No, it had been hidden in the chimney. He raised the knife to stab me, then she tried to grab it and turn it on herself. Then Sainte-Croix pulled out a pistol, and fired.”

“And what happened then?”

“He fired twice, but he missed, and I escaped. That was the last time I saw her until—until now.” Briancourt collapsed in sobs.

All eyes turned to the marquise, glaring at her one-time accomplice. “Your tears betray your lack of courage,” she hissed.

* * *

“Madame, how do you answer the charge of poison?”

“Hypocrites!” she spat. “Half the people I know, people of quality, are involved in the same sort of thing. I could drag them all down with me should I decide to talk. If,” she said smiling, “I decide to talk.”

The audience gasped. La Reynie felt his heart drop to his stomach. *There are more.*

Finally, it was time to pronounce sentence to the Question—or give her one last chance. *Please*, thought La Reynie. *Don’t make this worse. You don’t know how horrible it will be. Talk!*

“Madame, have you no pity?” President Lamoignon pleaded. “You have committed crimes beyond understanding. You murdered your family and innocent hospital patients you were pretending to nurse. You plotted the death of many others, and seduced your servants into becoming your accomplices. The suffering you have inflicted on your family, the public, is enormous. Confess, madame. Name your other accomplices, or this court will be forced to have you submit to the Question.”

The courtroom hushed, the specter of the dreaded Question floating in the air—would it be water torture? The rack? But the marquise only picked up her fan and waved it, back and forth. It was, after all, a sultry day.

* * *

"I don't know what else to do." Lamoignon paced back and forth in the judges' chambers. "She won't confess. She must be tortured. Her crimes must end with her. The very thought of accomplices, other poisoners lurking, is horrifying. Yes, torture is the only way." He finally sank into his chair. "So much testimony and nothing to show for it. Mon Dieu, I'm tired."

"Yes," said La Reynie. "Torture is the only way. We must find her accomplices. I am worried about her using Glaser's poisons and his connection to the royal family. How deep into the court is this traffic in poison? It's like a noxious weed that must be pulled out, roots and all."

"But she is a gentlewoman, well-bred, delicate, refined." Lamoignon finally shrugged. "At least, as a gentlewoman, she will be beheaded, rather than drawn and quartered."

He paused, lost in thought. "Wait a moment," he said, going through papers on his desk. "Take a look at this." He handed La Reynie a letter. "It's from her sister, a Carmelite nun. She asks for a confessor to be provided to the marquise, someone who would adequately prepare her soul for death. What do you think?"

"Yes. Perhaps the right priest could persuade her to talk. Do you know of anyone?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Père Edmond Pirot, a Jesuit. I hear he's both brilliant and kind. That's the man we need. If anyone can soften her up, it would be he." He headed to the door. "Come, monsieur, it's time for us to sentence her to the Question."

* * *

Two hours later, La Reynie ushered Père Pirot into the marquise's cell while the torture chamber on the floor above was being readied. *Will the priest make her reveal any more?* he thought. *Who else is involved?*

La Reynie stationed himself in the hall near her cell, out of earshot. When he met the elderly Pirot, he was struck by his eyes, Christ-like in their gentleness. How could this old priest stand up to that hellion?

Père Pirot put on his purple stole and smiled with infinite kindness as he approached the defendant, who had retreated to a corner of her cell. A moment before she was snarling at her jailers that she would rather die than talk. She stared defiantly

at the priest, but he put his left hand on her shoulder, raised his right hand in benediction, and whispered to her.

Her face softened like a clay mask that has reverted to its earlier, primal state of wet earth. She gazed at Pirot for a long moment, then tears began to course down her cheeks. "No!" she cried. "God will never forgive me." Sobbing, she sank abjectly to her knees before the priest and made the Sign of the Cross. He pulled up a rough-hewn chair, and together they whispered for a long time.

Finally, Père Pirot made the sign of absolution over her head. "She's ready," he announced as he left the cell. His face was gray in the torchlight, his eyes sad.

La Reynie looked at him questioningly. "How...?"

"I told her that no sin is beyond redemption. If she makes a full confession, God will have mercy on her soul."

La Reynie motioned to Court Clerk Sagot and his scribe to join him in the cell. Could this be the same person? No longer a coldly defiant monster, this ordinary woman offered him a chair with a wave of her manicured hand. "I will tell you everything, monsieur," she whispered.

Grâce á Dieu, at last. The scribe busily arranged inkwell, quill pens, sand and paper on his little desk. The marquise seated herself on her bed, hands primly folded, the priest nearby.

The interrogation took hours. She detailed the many times she had administered poison to her father until it had the desired cumulative effect; then her brothers, the attempts on her sisters-in-law; the entire sordid story.

"What kind of poisons did you use?"

She stared straight ahead, expressionless. "The only poisons I had were arsenic, vitriol and venom of toad, Glaser's recipes."

"What was in the recipes?"

"I don't know. I heard Fouquet sent Glaser to Italy to procure an herb, but I don't know what kind. I never saw it. It was many years ago, before Fouquet was arrested."

Fouquet, Italy, and poison... La Reynie mused on the irony. When the King's grandmother Marie de Medici had arrived years ago as a bride, she not only brought the world's finest chefs, she also brought courtiers with the Italian reputation for intrigue, ruthlessness—and poison.

La Reynie wearily led her through all the questions she had heretofore refused to answer, but learned little. "Your accomplices, madame?"

"Beyond the ones you know about, Sainte-Croix and my servants, none."

"Madame, you boasted in court that you were aware of many others who used poison. Who are they?" He leaned forward in anticipation.

She was quiet for a moment. "I lied," she finally said.

"You *lied*? Or are you lying now?" He had no more pity. He was done with her.

She saw the look on his face. "I have told you everything," she cried, her eyes wide with fear. "Why must you torture me?"

"Guards!"

When her cell door opened, and the grave-faced guards took her by the arms, she looked up at her confessor with an air of complete tranquility. "I know," she whispered. "I must pay for what I have done." She left quietly, accompanied by Père Pirot, who would not leave her side until she died.

* * *

The door clanged open to the torture chamber, the sound reverberating against stone walls. They filed in: La Reynie and the priest, Sagot and his scribe, guards and the prisoner. Here was the dreaded rack in a corner; on the other side of the room was a short anvil-shaped post next to large vats of water. Fading light from a high window revealed a huge brown rat sipping a drink from one of the open vats. As it scurried off, the little marquise contemplated the water. "They must be planning to drown me," she said wryly. "I am so tiny, they could never make me drink it all."

While the guards roughly stripped off her clothing, Sagot and the scribe stationed themselves nearby while La Reynie took his place at the high desk. Stark naked, she was placed spread-eagled on her back with only the short, wide post to support her. Her hands and feet were stretched out and bound, then the burly torturer shoved a tube down her throat with a funnel attached and started pouring. La Reynie blushed at the sight of her naked body. This was not a common criminal: this was a lady

of his class, reduced to an object, like an expensive doll stripped of its finery and cast aside, naked and limp. He tried to focus on her face, not the rest of her, the priest sitting next to her did the same.

Soon her stomach was distended with huge amounts of water, and she screamed. The priest grimaced as if it was he who was being tortured. The irritation La Reynie had felt towards her melted into pity, and now he had to steel himself against his urge to put an end to the torture. He had a job to do. "Speak, madame," he urged. "Who else was involved?"

The torturer removed the funnel so she could speak. "No one!" she choked. "Mercy, for the love of God." She vomited, then the funnel was shoved back into her throat.

"Did you have mercy on your victims?" shouted La Reynie, frustrated at the whole process. "*Speak.*"

Hours crawled by. Night came and torches were lit, casting flickering shadows on the prisoner's face. She moaned, she screamed, she begged. More water was funneled down her throat. The scribe sat poised, pen in hand, waiting for some revelation from the mouth of the condemned. La Reynie cringed at her suffering, but—it was the law.

The water reached her intestines, distending her belly even farther. And then the dainty marquise, a spitfire in court then abjectly ashamed for her sins; the marquise who finally faced her sentence with Christian resignation; this creature finally revealed her alter ego, the Other who had killed her family. Evil itself bubbled up from the depths of her soul; her face, contorted in pain, slowly transformed into a ferocious mask. She bared her teeth and snarled.

The priest gasped and crossed himself. La Reynie felt as if a cold hand gripped his heart. He shrank back.

Her cold blue eyes bored into his soul, where she spied his fear. She grinned. "Just wait, La Reynie!" she cackled in triumph. "It has only just begun for you. Just you wait!"

"May God preserve me." La Reynie instinctively made the Sign of the Cross.

Père Pirot dropped to his knees beside the marquise, held up a crucifix, and began to fervently pray the Pater Noster. Her face quieted; she was now just an ordinary woman, exhausted

and in excruciating pain. The only sound came from the slow drip, drip of a leaky vat, echoing against the cold stone walls.

Shaken, La Reynie paused to compose himself. What did she say? It's as if—No, it must have been my imagination. He returned to the task at hand. "Resume."

Finally, dawn's gray fingers stretched through the high barred window, reflected in the puddles of water on the stone floor. It was time. The marquise was untied, and the gentlemen left while she was allowed to expel the water she had consumed, then dressed. Followed by La Reynie and the priest, she was led stumbling to the chapel to hear her last mass. But they were astonished to see the group who awaited them—dozens of courtiers from Versailles with perfumes and chatter, silks and fans, craning their necks and jostling each other to see one of their own in her final humiliation.

The still-haughty Marquise de Brinvilliers walked resolutely through the crowd to the chapel but paused when she recognized the head of the Versailles delegation—Olympe, Comtesse de Soissons—Italian by birth—her own husband dead by poison. Blue eyes locked onto black ones as the marquise sneered: "What a morbid curiosity." Olympe glared, lifting her fan to cover her reddening face and her growing reputation.

Mass over, the marquise was stripped to her shift and taken in a lumbering cart through a teeming throng to the Cathedral Notre Dame. She mounted the steps barefoot, candle in one hand, crucifix in the other. She knelt at the door and recited her sins in a wavering voice along with her act of contrition. As she struggled to her feet, she looked above the doorway to the statues lining the façade. She gasped. La Reynie followed her eyes, and with a start he saw the statue of Saint Denis, beheaded on that spot by the Romans, the headless statue cradling his severed head in its arms.

Then off to the Place de Grève. The condemned, the priest, her executioner and the executioner's valet bearing a huge sword all piled together in the cart along with the logs and straw for her funeral pyre.

"I *should* be burned alive, as a sacrifice for my sins," she declared. Then fear clouded her face. "But at the Last Judgment, I will have no body to be glorified—" her voice caught, and she

turned to the priest.

“Never mind,” he said gently. “Your body will rise glorious from the ashes if your soul is in a state of grace.”

They arrived at the Place de Grève. Cheering crowds hung out of windows and swarmed around the scaffold; thousands of Parisians, rich and poor, courtiers, ragged beggars, romping children, food peddlers, a riot of humanity eager for the ultimate in entertainment. They cheered, jeered, cat-called at a noblewoman they could publicly despise.

The barefoot marquise and the priest followed the executioner up the ladder to the scaffold. For a quarter of an hour she sat patiently, holding a crucifix, while her head was shaved and the pyre lit.

She knelt at the block and was blindfolded. She said her prayers and bowed her head.

The headsman raised his sword, swung with all his might, and sliced through her neck. Her severed head, eyes staring into oblivion, rolled toward La Reynie. The crowd roared as her body, and her head, were tossed into the fire.

“Messieurs!” declared the executioner, “Have I not struck a fine blow? I commend myself to God on these occasions and He has never failed me.” He downed a flask of wine.

La Reynie had enough; he turned away from the burning pyre and headed home to bed. But that night her words stalked him in his dreams. “Just you wait, La Reynie. Just wait...” He awoke in a cold sweat.

Chapter 16

The Gold Dress Summer, 1676

The marquise finally dispatched, Captain Desgrez strode into La Reynie's office, grabbed a chair, put it directly in front of La Reynie, then sat down with a smile.

"Well," said La Reynie, "you look rather pleased with yourself."

"Indeed. You asked me months ago to get more on Mme de Montespan, and I finally have a source. Nothing really exciting, but it's a start."

"And?"

"A few months ago, Mme de Montespan was becoming increasingly irritable. Her irritability seems to be focused on her children's governess, Mme Scarron—or should I say the newly exalted Mme de Maintenon. The governess has become quite a good friend of the King, who rewarded her with the property and the title. Mme de Montespan has reacted with much anger and lots of tears and took off to Bourbon."

"Why Bourbon?"

"She was taking the waters for her knee. And while there she was visited by Fouquet's wife, who was petitioning for a visit to her ill husband in prison. Mme Fouquet was also caring for Mme de Montespan's legitimate son, placed with her by her ne'er do well husband. Apparently the only contact she has had with her son is through Mme Fouquet whose husband is in prison for life."

"I see. How ironic, that the wife of France's most notorious prisoner visited Mme de Montespan." La Reynie leaned forward, intrigued. "I must ask, where are you getting this stuff? It's not exciting, but it is intriguing."

"Believe it or not, from my Maman." He laughed at La Reynie's astonished face. "Maman is a dear friend of Mme de Sévigné, and that lady is a confidante of Mme de Maintenon. Although there are many other beautiful women fighting for the King's bed, Mme de Montespan sees the governess as another rival."

"Is she? A rival, that is."

"Not in the usual sense, surely. Mme de Maintenon is pious. But she is a wonderful conversationalist, and presumably that is the attraction."

La Reynie shrugged. "Gossip," he said.

"Yes, but there is more. Maman just got a letter from Mme de Sévigné who said that Mme de Montespan left Bourbon and has arrived at Fontrevault where the King stopped on his way back to Versailles. There could be quite a reunion."

* * *

Athénaïs stood trembling at the door of the salon, her heart in her mouth. *Please God, let it be now.* For the past month there had been a surge of letters back and forth between her and Louis at the front, passionate, poignant. She sensed that his frustration was becoming desperate. He needed conquest, both of his enemies and of his woman's body. Now was her chance.

Finally, the door swung open, Athénaïs' presence was announced, the chatter hushed; then whispers. There was the scarlet woman! She had lost weight at Bourbon, the healing waters had lifted her spirits, and her usual guise of hauteur was replaced by an irresistible blushing modesty. She curtsied demurely while inwardly cursing the gaping ladies, her rivals.

Abandoning all manners and custom, Louis ran to her across the crowded salon, but was restrained from embracing her by the horrified dévots. Recovering his dignity, he bowed with great formality; she looked up at him from behind her fan; the Queen wept and stormed off.

Guards were posted that night to watch over Athénaïs, none other than her sister and the alarmed Françoise, Mme de Maintenon. They decided that the next day the court would journey to Versailles, for the King; and Clagny, for Athénaïs. A suitable separation, but—His Majesty announced that he would see her at Clagny. Athénaïs could not have been more protected than if she were hiding behind a veil in a harem surrounded by eunuchs.

The next morning, the King's presence was announced to the chaperones. Louis swept off his plumed hat and bowed low. The ladies curtsied primly and glared. He went over to Athénaïs awkwardly, like a schoolboy. "Chérie," he announced gravely, fid-

dling with his hat, "we must guard ourselves..." and he went on, and on, just like Bossuet.

She stopped him with a flick of her fan. "It's useless to read me a sermon," she replied, her blue eyes welling with tears. "I understand my time is over."

His Majesty's firm expression slowly melted. He took her by the hand and led her to the window alcove, as far away from the chaperones as they could get. Athénaïs was determined that he not see her grief.

Louis shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Have you been well?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And the children?"

"They are very well, thank you."

"I am sorry I had to do this, but you know I had no choice. You heard Bossuet."

She forced a smile. "Our dear Bishop Bossuet. Did he give you reading to do? He said I spent too much time on the classics, so he made me read the lives of the saints."

Louis nodded. "Myself as well."

"Have you read St. Augustine yet? That poor man." She laughed at the recollection. "He had to choose between being a Christian and having the mistress he adored. Even though she was the mother of his child, he had to give her up. Do you know what he said, when he was making up his mind what to do? He said, 'Oh Lord, give me chastity, but please, not yet!'"

Louis started to chuckle, she giggled, and then they were both laughing hysterically, holding onto each other.

"Mankind has not changed, has it?" he said with a smile.

"No." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you remember our first night together?" she said, her voice shaking. "You came to me disguised as a soldier."

"How can I forget?" He smiled wistfully. "And now your soldier has returned." He gently stroked away a glistening tear on her cheek then was overcome with tears himself.

"You are mad," Athénaïs whispered.

"Yes, I am mad," he said. "Because I still love you."

Louis hesitated; then could stand it no longer. "Athénaïs," he murmured, and now they were in each other's arms. "Ma belle

chère." He kissed her mouth, her eyes, her lips.

"Mon Dieu, Louis, I have missed you so much." She clung to him, feeling his hard body against hers, urgently desiring her.

Louis turned to glare at the ladies. "Enough of this," he hissed. "Come with me."

Together they bowed deeply to the shocked chaperones and retreated to her boudoir, bolting the door behind them.

* * *

"Oh, what a triumph at Versailles!" exclaimed Madame de Sévigné as she joined Athénaïs and the King at the Salon de Guerre. The place was packed that warm summer night for *Appartement du Roi*, the King's thrice weekly open house for the court.

"Do come sit with us, madame." Athénaïs turned to Louis at her side. "Look, Your Majesty, Mme de Sévigné hasn't been here in so long, she is absolutely dazzled."

Dazzling indeed: silver tables holding silver punch bowls and silver baskets of fragrant roses, flanked by silver candlesticks. Two huge silver and cut-glass chandeliers illuminated the room, their light reflected by three large silver framed mirrors above the gaming tables. The entire room glittered.

Mme de Sévigné curtsied deeply to His Majesty and joined him and His Mistress at their table, and the game of *reversi* continued with Athénaïs holding his cards.

"Your Majesty," said Mme de Sévigné, "every time I return to Versailles, there are new wonders to be found. And speaking of wonders—Madame," she turned to Athénaïs. "You are wearing *the* dress everyone is talking about."

For the Wheel of Fortune had turned yet again. Athénaïs was wearing a gown made entirely of gold: gold embroidery on gold lamé fabric with gold lace, shimmering in the light, accenting her golden curls caught up in diamond clips.

"It must have been made by fairies," Mme de Sévigné laughed. "But who? How?"

"Monsieur Langlée, madame." Athénaïs nodded to the notorious gambler Claude de Langlée across from them dealing the cards. "An outrageous plot. I went to my dressmaker who presented me with a ridiculously ill-fitting dress. I complained of

course, and he scurried off and brought me back—this.” She gave the King a sideways smile. “And of course, His Majesty was in on the scheme.”

“I see,” said Mme de Sévigné, eyeing the notorious gambler. “Monsieur Langlée must be a very good friend.”

Athénaïs shoved a handful of louis d’or toward the center of the table where they were swept up by Langlée. Before him, glinting in the candlelight, sat a stack of gold louis worth thousands. The deadpan Langlée put in his own bet and examined his cards. Louis de Vanens, certainly one of the luckiest of the regulars, caught Athénaïs’ eye and smiled.

“I fold.” Primi Visconti laid his cards on the table. “I have lost enough.”

“Perhaps you should stick to tarot cards, monsieur,” laughed Athénaïs as she examined her cards (actually His Majesty’s). Reversi was Louis’ only card game, and she found it truly boring, preferring hoca that made her heart pound with excitement. But Louis had been complaining about her heavy losses recently, so for once she would show prudence. “I think we should fold,” she murmured.

Louis checked the cards, then the faces of the other players. Langlée met the King’s gaze for a fraction of a second, lifted a bristly eyebrow, then retreated behind his cards. “A wise decision, madame,” His Majesty declared, and Athénaïs put down the cards.

“Bonjour, Your Majesty.” They turned to see the plump English ambassador bowing low. As he rose, his eyes stayed transfixed on Athénaïs’ swelling bosom, barely concealed by the cloud of gold lace. “Ah, madame,” he said kissing her fingers, holding on to them just slightly longer than protocol required. “You are particularly lovely this afternoon.” Beads of sweat emerged from the edge of his tightly curled black wig. “As beautiful as the day.”

Louis’ thin moustache lifted in amusement. Little did the ambassador know that His Majesty’s left hand, hidden from view by the green velvet tablecloth, was caressing Athénaïs’ knee. Athénaïs knew he loved for her to be admired, especially by ambassadors who would relay the news of the King’s prowess to their own monarchs. She blushed, remembering their romp between the sheets only an hour before. But she must be polite

to the leering ambassador. "You are as charming as ever, monsieur—"

A rustle of grey silk interrupted. "Madame de Maintenon!" exclaimed the King with a broad smile. He forsook Athénaïs' knee to rise and kiss the hand of the demure governess. Athénaïs' smile froze. "I came to say au revoir, Sire. I will be leaving soon to visit my château."

Louis' face fell. "I will miss our delightful conversations. You will write, I pray?"

"But of course." She smiled, her black eyes sparkling. "And I am grateful that you could spare Le Nôtre to design my gardens. I will send you a full report on his progress."

"Ooh, I won!" His Majesty's attention was diverted to the next table, where the lovely Princesse de Soubise was fairly bouncing with delight. "I have the knave of hearts," she called. Philippe de Courcillon Dangeau, Langlée's rival as professional gambler, shoved a stack of gold louis in her direction. Next to the princesse sat the Queen frowning as she put down her losing cards. Her plump little face brightened as she spotted her husband approaching the table—only to have him walk right past her to stand behind the princesse, his hand on the back of her chair brushing her bare shoulder.

"Congratulations, madame," he said leaning over her, ostensibly to examine her winning hand. Louis' eyes were caressing the fair bosom of the lady, whose smiling elderly husband peered near-sightedly from across the table. Mme de Sévigné cocked an enquiring eyebrow while Athénaïs' stomach clenched.

Langlée came to her rescue. "Mesdames et messieurs," he called, "another round of play?" It was now back to business. The courtiers returned their cards to Langlée so he could shuffle and deal again. He shot Athénaïs a brief, reassuring smile and assumed his usual nonchalance.

Athénaïs began to relax and she motioned to a lackey to bring her brandy. His Majesty returned to her side and play resumed, Langlée dealing the cards as if nothing had happened.

At 6:00, it was time to leave gambling behind for an excursion on the Grand Canal. The summer day's heat had dissipated and the vast, shadeless expanse of the formal gardens of Versailles was bearable again. The courtiers followed the King

and Queen in a procession of carriages past the huge fountain of Apollo to the Grand Canal and the gondolas, gift of the Republic of Venice.

As they climbed out of their carriages, a bevy of ladies with giggles and fluttering fans surrounded His Majesty, each vying for a seat on his gondola. Athénaïs simmered. With a pang, she realized her competition was younger than she. Athénaïs was thirty-five, a beautiful, full-blown rose, but heavy and aging nonetheless, while the ladies arrayed before His Majesty were all in their twenties, fragrant little buds.

She watched with mounting frustration as the King surveyed the tempting morsels of female flesh. He finally spotted the Princesse de Soubise, her rose-colored dress reflecting her blushing face. He offered her his hand, she curtsied, and they stepped into the royal gondola. To the strains of His Majesty's ever-present violins, they sailed off. Athénaïs was left standing there in her gold dress, the gift of a grateful gambler she had enriched by thousands.

* * *

The days crawled by into September. He made love to her. He ignored her. He consulted with her on the décor. Perhaps Spanish fly would work—she brought out his favorite arsenal of concoctions, but he abruptly declined and left. Athénaïs suspected that Louis had decided that she was much more of a threat to his soul than casual seductions. The afternoons that Athénaïs and her lover had always called their own were now devoted to intellectual conversations with Françoise. Should Athénaïs fear her, or the others?

After a sleepless night, Athénaïs sent Mlle Claude to make discreet enquiries of the servants. Then she retreated to her canopied bed, fighting anxiety and nausea.

Her maid returned downcast. "Madame," she said haltingly, "I learned, ah—"

Athénaïs sat straight up in bed. "Speak. What happened? Tell me at once."

"One of His Majesty's chambermaids told me..." She took a deep breath. "His Majesty sent Bontemps last night to fetch Mme de Soubise from her bed." She pouted. "The staff is laughing be-

cause her husband was snoring so loud, she hardly heard Bon-temps knocking.”

“No!” Athénaïs wailed, then nausea overtook her and she began to retch. Mlle Claude rushed over with a basin. “Madame, are you—”

“Yes. I’m pregnant.”

“But madame, that is good news.” Her maid solicitously wiped her mistress’s mouth. “Would not His Majesty be delighted with another child?”

“He would, if, if—” Athénaïs began to sob.

“Madame,” she soothed, wiping Athénaïs’ face, “I know someone who might help. Perhaps you might confide in Monsieur de Vanens.”

Athénaïs stopped crying and stared. “How do you know him?”

“I know his valet, La Chaboissière. He tells me his master is proficient in solving difficulties between lovers.” She took away the towel and basin and plumped up the pillows. “You met Monsieur de Vanens, no?”

“Yes. No! I mean, I met him, but I have learned about his reputation. I will not speak to him.” Athénaïs settled back in the pillows, remembering...

* * *

She had been playing hoca—or trying to—but His Majesty’s latest paramours had been taunting her with their sly remarks and superior airs to the point where she had lost badly. She retreated from the gaming table in disgust, heading toward the balcony and a cool breeze. Finally alone, she heard Louis de Vanens’ voice, low and silky, behind her.

“Madame,” he murmured, “perhaps I may be of assistance.”

Athénaïs turned and glared. “You are assuming I need assistance, monsieur?”

He took her hand and kissed it his dark eyes boring into hers. “With luck, madame. Luck in cards, luck in love. Especially luck in love. Whichever you wish. You know the Wheel of Fortune card, do you not?”

Athénaïs reddened.

“There are ways of making Fortuna smile on you. La Voisin

is but an amateur in such matters. I have, shall we say, recipes to help you gain your ends.”

“Recipes?” Now she wanted to run. “Really monsieur, I—”

A noise behind them, and Vanens vanished. Athénaïs looked around in confusion.

“Bon soir, ma chère cousine,” came a familiar nasal voice.

Oh, no, not him. It was her husband’s fool of a cousin, the Marquis de Termes, the poor man destined to talk like a goose because of his misshapen mouth. His extravagantly curled mustache didn’t help. “Bon soir, monsieur,” she snapped. “And au revoir as well.” She turned to leave.

“Ma chère,” he said, his mustachioed mouth twisted into an unctuous smile, “I hope you will ignore Monsieur de Vanen’s advice. He is not someone with whom you should associate.”

“I don’t recall asking you for *your* advice, monsieur.”

“Ah, but I must, for my cousin’s sake. I suggest you avoid Vanens, and—” he looked at her closely, “La Voisin as well.”

Athénaïs gasped. “Whatever do you mean? I have never met the woman.”

“Strange, I am sure I have seen you there.”

“Well, that must mean you are a client of hers. Understandable. Are you still playing with potions and powders in that moldering little château of yours?”

“You think I am but a simple fool, don’t you? You and the rest of my family. I will show all of you. My search for the Philosopher’s Stone continues apace, and someday I will have wealth beyond your wildest dreams.” He frowned. “But as for you, ma chère, you are far too trusting. Stay away from La Voisin and Vanens. I don’t think you know who you are dealing with.” And with that, the marquis retreated into the darkness.

* * *

Mlle Claude was still chattering as she brought Athénaïs her café au lait. “You really should see Monsieur de Vanens. I have heard he has the answers for delicate situations like this. I can have a discreet conversation with his valet.”

“I am not sure.” Athénaïs took a gulp of hot café au lait.

“Madame, I assure you. You can rely on me.” Her maid leveled her brown eyes directly at Athénaïs, who avoided her gaze.

"Perhaps. I—" They were interrupted by a scratching at the door. "Entrez."

"Ma chère, how are you? Still abed at this late hour? My, you look pale." Françoise removed her black bonnet and came over to give Athénaïs a kiss on the cheek. "I have just returned from Maintenon," she announced, seating herself next to the bed. "The gardens are exquisite. Monsieur Le Nôtre has worked his magic."

She paused to look at Athénaïs, who was staring at her coffee. "I know," she said quietly. "I heard about His Majesty's behavior with Mme de Soubise. Dreadful." She pursed her lips. "It must be awful for you."

"Oh Françoise, what shall I do?" Athénaïs again gave way to tears. "He humiliates me with his dalliances. I know he doesn't love her, he can't love her, and, and—I'm pregnant."

"What, again?" Françoise's eyebrows shot up. "Madame, please, now is the time to cease your adulterous relationship. You are a married woman, and he is a married man. For the sake of both your souls—"

"I must cease this adulterous relationship? What about the Princesse de Soubise? She is also a married woman."

"And she is just a dalliance, a passing fancy. But your relationship with him has gone on for years, imperiling his soul. As the King, he is the spiritual leader of France, and—"

"Oh, *please* stop."

Françoise pursed her mouth tight in disapproval. "I will not care for this latest infant."

"But why not?"

"On the advice of my confessor. I cannot go on supporting this adulterous relationship."

"But—but you care for the other children."

"Because I love them. I have an obligation to them and to His Majesty." She fidgeted with her handkerchief.

"Well, since you still have an obligation to His Majesty, you must care for *this* child."

"I have already spoken to him about the children." The governess' ivory complexion was now pink.

"I see."

"And he feels that I am caring for enough children now, as my position at court has demanded more of my time."

“Your position at court.” Then it hit—His Majesty had found the governess’ conversations most scintillating and the entire court had noticed. Françoise was now invited everywhere by everyone, especially the Queen, who adored her. “I don’t believe it!” Athénaïs cried. “I cannot believe that you would let your social life interfere with caring for the royal children. And to abandon me, when I most need a friend.”

“Madame, I will always be your friend.” Françoise took her hand. “I have also been exhorting His Majesty about his behavior with no success. I am praying for you both.”

“Prayers?” Athénaïs cried. “Of course, prayers. And what do I pray for now?”

Chapter 17

The Wheel of Fortune September, 1676

“**M**onsieur!” André rushed into La Reynie’s study. “Captain Desgrez has been poisoned.”

“What? Is he still alive?”

“Yes, monsieur. His lieutenant is downstairs and will take you to him.”

La Reynie arrived just as a servant carried off a basin of vomit, just like at poor Lionne’s house. But Desgrez’ color was not terribly pale and he was sitting up, his wife Marie at his side.

“Bon Dieu.” La Reynie pulled up a chair. “Did you send for a doctor?”

Desgrez tried a feeble grin. “And the doctor would do what? Bleed me? Purge me? No thank you.”

Marie scowled. “I really thought he should have been sent for. You could have died.”

La Reynie took Desgrez’ hand in his. “I heard you were poisoned. Do you know who is responsible?”

Desgrez took a moment to think. “It was the soup last night, I am sure. It tasted odd. But please, monsieur, I will be all right. I started vomiting soon and I think I have gotten rid of it.”

“But who do you think poisoned you?”

“It was probably our maid Isabella. She has been gone since last night, disappeared.”

“But why?”

“I’m not sure, but I suspect—” He started retching again. His servant rushed up with a basin while Marie held his head. Done, Desgrez lay back on the pillows, pale and sweating.

Marie took a cloth and wiped his forehead, then gave him a sip of water. “Isabella started acting strangely when the marquis was executed,” she said. “She was sullen and did not attend well to her duties. Of course, I complained, and her behavior improved a little. But then, last night, she brought him the soup. Now she has disappeared.”

Desgrez smiled, a very wan smile, but a smile indeed. "It takes more than a bowl of soup to kill me."

La Reynie clasped his hand tight. "Your color is improving already." He rose to leave. "We will find her, *mon capitaine*. Please rest and get well, for it seems the Marquise de Brinvilliers is reaching from beyond the grave. Who knows how many of her accomplices are left to bring to justice?"

* * *

And like the Wheel of Fortune, Athénaïs' luck turned round yet again, triumph and despair, passion and abandonment. She could not rejoice over her pregnancy because Mme de Soubise finally returned from the country, and the King again left Athénaïs' side. When he wasn't with her, he was flirting with Mme de Ludres. He gaily went hunting, to the ballet, the theater, while Athénaïs tearfully lingered in her apartment, too embarrassed to face the stares and smirks of the other courtiers. The ever-helpful Mlle Claude knew why. "Madame," she whispered into Athénaïs' ear, "so many other women want him and they will stop at nothing."

"Yes, I know. But he defied the Church for *me*, not them."

"But madame, with them he does not have to defy the Church. If he picks a married woman, he only has to tell the priest he is sorry and will not do it again. But with you—"

Athénaïs burst into tears. "I know! Because we have been together so long. Oh God, what am I going to do? La Voisin doesn't seem to be able to—"

But at that moment the chambermaid appeared to tidy up the boudoir and empty the chamber pot. As she bustled about, Athénaïs and her maid fell silent. Finally, she left.

Mlle Claude frowned at the chambermaid's back as she shut the door, then turned to Athénaïs. "Madame, La Voisin has stronger methods, you know that. Would you rather the other women have her aid?"

"Other women are going to La Voisin too? And for that?"

"But of course, I told you before. Time is of the essence." She took Athénaïs by the shoulders, her brown eyes boring into Athénaïs' blue ones. "We must return to La Voisin now, before another woman conquers him."

Athénaïs' mind raced, her hands shook, conscience and compulsion fighting for supremacy. "You are right, but someone might find out." She stared at the door.

Mlle Claude thought a long moment. "Madame," she said in a low voice, "I agree we need to be careful. Look, there is someone I would like to hire to be your chambermaid, someone we can trust. I met her at La Voisin's and she is very discreet. Her name is Cato."

"But does she have the qualifications? I mean, really—"

"Madame, all that is needed for that position is to empty a chamber pot." She smiled, but her eyes were dead serious. "Besides, she could be useful to us."

"Yes. Yes, of course. I am frightened. I could lose my position here, and then... Do you really think La Voisin can help?"

Mlle Claude smiled, the very picture of reassurance.

Athénaïs took a deep breath. "Very well, but I can't go now, I have so many engagements, and if I leave court people will talk. Look, you go instead of me, just get what I need. Can you do that? Just tell me how much money she needs. And be careful that no one recognizes you."

* * *

The attempted poisoning of Desgrez intensified La Reynie's investigation. More rumors, more leads—arsenic, witchcraft, counterfeiting. No proof. Then came news of a riot, and on a cool September evening La Reynie and Desgrez were off in a coach galloping through the grimy streets of Paris with a contingent of soldiers. Every few blocks, the street lanterns revealed knots of agitated, gesticulating citizens.

They finally pulled up at Sergeant Dupont's office where the beleaguered portly sergeant was surrounded by an even angrier crowd. "Stand aside for the Lieutenant-General of Police!" Dupont shouted as La Reynie and Desgrez got out and the soldiers pushed the crowd back.

"My good people, please be calm." La Reynie elbowed his way through, his nose assaulted by the pervasive stench of poverty: rancid cod, onions, stale wine, horse manure.

"What is the problem here?"

"My baby!" cried a young woman, hair spilling from her lin-

en coif in wild disarray. "A witch stole my baby."

"And mine too!" A young man wearing a shoemaker's leather apron pushed his way to the front of the crowd. "The witches took our children."

Then they all joined in, a tumult of accusations. "The midwives took them. You've heard the stories; they offer up infants to the devil. They are witches and abortionists."

"No!" shouted a girl, her back to the sergeant's door. "That is *not* it at all. Haven't you heard the other stories? Leave the midwife alone."

An angry drunk turned on her. "The midwife is a witch. Give her up!" Her dark hair flying, the girl gave the man a swift kick in the shins. "Chienne!" he cried and lunged, but Dupont shoved her inside the door and slammed it shut. Desgrez moved in with his soldiers and pushed back the crowd.

"We are only questioning a midwife," Dupont told them. "Nothing has been proven."

"But my baby is gone. She took it!"

"*Enough*," said La Reynie. "We have a rule of law in this country, and your complaints will be investigated. Now, back away from the door before His Majesty's soldiers arrest the lot of you." The King's soldiers raised their muskets.

Hushed, the mob slowly drew back. La Reynie made his way to the sergeant at the door, then turned to the people. "I want everyone who has lost a child to be here tomorrow morning to file a report. There will be a complete investigation, I assure you. Now, return to your homes."

The women still weeping and the men muttering threats, they gradually dispersed. Dupont opened the heavy oak door and ushered La Reynie inside, leaving Desgrez and his men to guard the perimeter. He found Mme Dupont tending to the girl, who had a cut above her eye. Both curtseyed, then Mme Dupont took his cloak.

"Madame Dupont," La Reynie said with a bow, "how unfortunate to see you again under these circumstances. My, it has been years. And who is this?"

"Bon soir, monsieur." The girl curtseyed like a polite young lady, but her fair skin was flushed, and her dark blue eyes flashed like storm clouds.

“Sylvie? Pardon, Mademoiselle Sylvie!” He swept off his hat in a grand gesture and bowed. “Why, look how you have grown. And how old are you now?”

“She is fifteen, monsieur,” said Mme Dupont, glaring at Sylvie. “And she should not have endangered herself. She should have let her Papa protect my sister.”

“She was unjustly accused, monsieur!” Sylvie interjected. “My aunt is a wonderful midwife who only cares about the babies. She would never do such terrible things.” She glanced into the sitting room at the older woman huddled near the hearth.

“Is the midwife related to you?” asked La Reynie.

“Yes, monsieur,” answered Dupont, his plump face creased with anxiety.

Sylvie touched La Reynie’s arm. “Monsieur, I was her apprentice. She is not guilty of anything, she is a good woman—”

“Sylvie!” Her father gave her a quick embrace. “Go upstairs now. Monsieur La Reynie will take care of this.”

Sylvie opened her mouth to argue, but her father frowned. “Yes, Papa.” Mme Dupont took her by the shoulder and they climbed the stairs to the family’s living quarters.

Sergeant Dupont ushered La Reynie into his office, giving him his own paper-strewn desk. “One moment, monsieur, I will fetch my sister-in-law.”

Mme Marie Deville appeared and stood stoically before him, clutching her shawl tightly about her bosom. La Reynie noted quiet strength and dignity in her lined face.

“Tell me, madame, what brought you here.”

She pulled herself up straight. “The crowd attacked me. Me! I delivered their infants, and they accused me of stealing babies. They know me, they know my reputation—”

“Madame,” said La Reynie patiently, “can you tell me how this happened?”

She wiped away a tear. “It seems that two of the infants I recently delivered have been kidnapped and they suspect me. They dragged me out of my home and started screaming accusations.”

“I heard the commotion,” said Dupont. “I was trying to get her away from the mob and through the door when Sylvie rushed out to defend her. Then they turned on us.”

“What started all this, Sergeant?”

“There have been rumors for weeks about abortionists and witches sacrificing infants to the devil. Just last week, a mother came to me weeping. She had left her baby alone for only a few minutes and when she returned, the child was gone. This was one of the babies Marie had delivered. Another neighbor said he heard that midwives sometimes offer up children to the devil. There have been other incidents as well, and I hear the rumors have spread all over. But then I heard about a wealthy lady trying to cure her leprosy with the blood of infants. What to believe?” He shrugged.

“I don’t know what to make of this quite yet,” said La Reynie. “Who could want these infants?” He turned to the midwife. “I have no more questions for now, madame, but I may need to speak with you again. If you would please excuse us.”

Mme Deville started for the door, then paused, clutching her shawl tight in her hands. “What am I to do? I cannot go home.”

La Reynie glanced at the anxious Dupont. “I need to discuss all this with the Sergeant. Perhaps you might join his family upstairs for now.”

She tightened her lips in resignation and shut the door.

La Reynie turned to Dupont. “Is there any evidence against your sister-in-law, aside from the fact she delivered the missing babies?”

“None, monsieur. Indeed, I have heard reports of other midwives being assaulted.”

“Tragic. But midwives have been implicated in abortions, and someone performed that service for the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting. We need to find out what happened to those aborted fetuses and locate the missing children.”

La Reynie rose from the desk and headed for the door. “I will be here tomorrow morning to speak to the victims.”

“A question, monsieur,” asked Dupont. “His Majesty changed the law regarding witchcraft in 1672. It is no longer a crime, so what can be done?”

“People may no longer be prosecuted on a simple count of sorcery. However, kidnapping and murder is quite another matter.” La Reynie wrapped his cloak tightly about him as he headed for the door. “We will get to the bottom of this.”

* * *

Athénaïs peered through her window, waiting. It seemed that she was always waiting; but this time, it was for her maid. There's her carriage! Soon Mlle Claude was in Athénaïs' boudoir, her other ladies dismissed.

"Did you get it?" Athénaïs' heart was pounding.

"But of course. La Voisin would not fail you." Smiling, her maid produced a small packet carefully tied with ribbon and placed it on Athénaïs' dressing table.

"What is it? Love powders?" Athénaïs fiddled with the ribbon.

"Careful madame, it might spill. Here, I will take care of it." Mlle Claude put the packet in the dressing table drawer.

"What is in it? Look what happened to the Marquise de Brinvilliers. We have to be absolutely sure that it is safe. His Majesty has been complaining of headaches lately."

"Madame, I assure you it is safe. La Voisin is careful about these things. Don't worry, I will administer it properly. Will he be here this evening?"

"Yes, to see the children." Shaking, Athénaïs grabbed a chair. "Oh God, I am so frightened."

"Hush, madame, all will be well. The powders are safe and effective. Please do not worry." She brought over a glass of brandy. "Here, this will soothe you." She smiled as Athénaïs downed it in one swallow.

* * *

La Reynie returned to Sergeant Dupont's office a month later and was welcomed by a chorus of excited voices. "Oh, monsieur!" Sylvie exclaimed. "I have found a position."

"Sylvie," chided her father, "Monsieur La Reynie is here on business. We will talk more about it later. You need to go upstairs."

"Un moment, Sergeant," La Reynie laughed. "Tell me all about it, Sylvie."

Soon La Reynie and her parents were sitting in the parlor while Sylvie paced excitedly.

"Monsieur," she said, "I am going to work in the house of a great lady."

"Indeed? How wonderful. And how did you get this position?"

Sergeant Dupont smiled. "My cousin Jeannette, monsieur. We are all from Poitou and so is this noble family. My cousin said the lady needed someone good at needlework."

"Yes. Let me show you my work." Sylvie brought over a needlework pillow.

La Reynie examined the tiny stitches, the expert blending of color. "Why Sylvie, this is a fine piece." He looked up at her eager face. "And who is this great lady?"

"The Duchesse de Vivonne," she announced proudly.

"Yes," said her mother, "her husband is close to the King—"

"And," interjected Dupont, "the duc is the brother of Mme de Montespan."

La Reynie's heart stopped. Sylvie is going to work for *them*? "Well, that is wonderful," he finally said. The family chattered on while he assessed the situation. What should he tell Dupont?

Sylvie and her mother finally went upstairs, so La Reynie could turn to the witchcraft investigation. "Any more hysteria about kidnapped babies, Sergeant?"

"Nothing, monsieur. There are indeed two stories, one about witches and the other about a crazy lady seeking to cure her leprosy with the blood of sacrificed infants."

"Yes, and we have no leads whatsoever." La Reynie paused a moment. Dupont was a good man, steady. "Sergeant," he said, "you know that I have to keep a close eye on the court."

"Yes, monsieur." Dupont frowned. "I know that some of the nobility lead scandalous lives. Do you think sending my daughter to court may be a bad decision?"

"No, not necessarily. This is a wonderful opportunity for her. Can she write to you? Yes, certainly she will. And perhaps she can send you her observations of what she sees and hears, no? That would be helpful. And then of course we would be sure of her wellbeing."

Finally, it was time to say good-bye to the family. "I am looking forward to hearing about your life at court, Sylvie," said La Reynie with a smile as she curtseyed.

"Oh, monsieur," she replied, her deep blue eyes shining. "It will be a *great* adventure."

Chapter 18

The Mirror January, 1677

Arguing and admiring, many with tears in their eyes, the crowd at the Hôtel de Bourgogne spilled out into the snowy January night.

“Dreadful.”

“What do you mean, dreadful? It was morally uplifting.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“What an incredible play.” Athénaïs wrapped herself up in furs to her nose as she awaited the carriage. “*Phèdre* is by far the best that Racine has written.”

“I agree with all my heart, madame.” Shivering, Françoise tugged her cloak closer. “Ah, there is our coach.”

They climbed aboard, but to Athénaïs’ dismay here came two other ladies—Olympe, Comtesse de Soissons and her sister Marie-Anne, Duchesse de Bouillon. “May we join you?” Olympe inquired. “Our coach has not yet arrived, and it is terribly cold.”

“By all means, madame,” Athénaïs replied tersely.

The ladies adjusted their voluminous skirts and cloaks and settled their frozen feet on the brazier on the coach floor. The only light came from the brazier’s glowing coals and a candle flickering in a corner of the coach. They eyed each other warily.

“Did you enjoy the play?” asked Françoise brightly.

“Disgusting,” hissed Olympe.

“Immoral,” Marie-Anne chimed in.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Athénaïs. Racine was her dear friend. “*Phèdre* is a masterpiece, the best thing Racine has written. I don’t know when I have been so touched.”

“What?” barked Olympe. “The story of a base, incestuous passion of a woman for her stepson? How can you call that a masterpiece?”

“But madame,” Françoise said quietly, “It was based on a tragedy by Euripides—”

“And her passion was inflicted upon her by Venus,” Athénaïs

broke in. "Her stepson rejected her then they both died tragically."

"I saw the play, remember?" Olympe replied. "Such disgusting emotions have no place on the stage."

"Indeed not," said Marie-Anne. "I much prefer the plays of Monsieur Corneille."

"Yes, Corneille." Olympe removed her hands from her muff to warm them over the brazier. "Such nobility of speech, such loftiness of purpose."

"Such boredom," yawned Athénaïs.

Icy silence, finally broken by Olympe. "Madame," she turned to Françoise, "do you remember the time when such a play would have been unheard of? Long ago, the enchanting afternoons at the Hôtel Rambouillet, the elegant conversations, such lovely people."

"Ah, yes, I do recall," Françoise replied. "Those were wonderful times."

"And it was us, the ladies, who made the conversation sparkle like diamonds," Marie-Anne proclaimed. "We could discuss everything—art, philosophy, theology, the classics. And we taught the men politeness of speech. Without our influence, they are simply boors."

"Beasts," Olympe hissed. "Now Racine has truly degraded us women by portraying us as little better than animals."

"Oh madame, that is ridiculous," Athénaïs declared. "Phèdre is a tragic character, a queen who falls because of her fatal flaw; a perfect Greek tragedy. Her insane lust inflicted upon her by Venus was never gratified; she was rejected by her stepson—"

"But," interrupted Marie-Anne, "then she plotted revenge on him, and in the end destroyed everyone."

"*But*," Athénaïs retorted, "Her maid was responsible for that. The maid trying to protect her mistress told King Theseus that his son had raped his stepmother. And both of them, the maid and Phèdre, finally committed suicide from shame when the young man died."

Silence for a moment. "Madame," said Olympe sly as a cobra, "you amaze me. One would think that the story of a woman with an uncontrollable passion and a scheming maid, scorned by the man she loves, who in the end destroys herself and everyone around her—would perhaps be a little too close to home, no?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Françoise.

A pause to think. "Yes, madame, it does sound familiar." Athénaïs felt Françoise' warning hand on hers. She ignored it. "It sounds exactly like the story of your sisters. Let me see, what is the latest act in that drama? Have they been locked up in a convent yet?"

Olympe's slanted eyes glittered in the shadows. "Really now, there is no need for unpleasantness. As I recall, we were discussing morality on the stage. That must be a difficult concept for Racine to understand, considering—"

Athénaïs took the bait. "Considering what?"

"Considering the untimely death of Thérèse du Parc."

Mlle du Parc was Racine's mistress and leading lady until her tragic death in 1668. Athénaïs racked her brain. How had she died? Childbirth? Miscarriage? Or...

"She was a dear friend of a lady you may know," said Olympe. "La Voisin."

Now Athénaïs remembered seeing her at La Voisin's. Worse, she felt Françoise's curious eyes boring into her.

"Racine did not see fit to allow La Voisin to visit the mademoiselle before she died," Olympe declared. "Such bad judgment."

A chill enveloped the coach like a shroud. Shivering, Athénaïs pulled her cloak tightly around her. They were silent for the rest of the trip.

* * *

Months later, Athénaïs literally ran into Racine at an overcrowded party in Paris, nearly spilling her glass of wine. "Monsieur Racine, what a delight to see you again."

Racine kissed her on both cheeks. "Madame, it has been entirely too long." He looked around. "Ah, here is a place we can talk." He led her to a quiet window seat. "Did you hear that I have married?"

"Why, yes, congratulations. It seems that you have settled down at last."

"Yes, madame." He was quiet for a moment. "I have decided to retire from the theatre."

She gasped. "What? Monsieur, no, why? You are France's fin-

est playwright. How could you deprive—” And then she caught the sadness in his eyes.

“I have enemies, madame. Many enemies, and they have sworn to destroy me.”

She bit her lip, going down the list: Marie-Anne and her sister Olympe and many others. And that person whose name she could not even whisper, still angry at the untimely death of his mistress Thérèse du Parc. She nodded, her eyes avoiding his.

“This has been a revelation for me, madame. My life has been licentious, ignoring my own faults, while trying to portray noble heroes brought down by their flaws. I am not the man my family raised me to be and I must try to do better. The theatre is not the place for that.”

Athénaïs, evaluating both his life and hers, felt her eyes sting with tears. She tossed back her wine; and, finally, an idea. “No—please, no. I will not let this happen to you, monsieur. I will not let you be destroyed.” She grasped his hand and smiled. “I will speak to His Majesty. He has expressed the desire for someone to record his exploits in battle, a historiographer to show the world his glory. You would be perfect.”

“I, madame?” He shook his head. “Monsieur Boileau is far more qualified for that position than I. Surely he—”

Athénaïs threw back her head in gay laughter. “Monsieur, I can see why you will never make a proper courtier. My heavens, humility.” She patted his hand. “I will recommend to His Majesty that he appoint the both of you. His exploits should be recorded by both of France’s finest writers.”

Now Racine had tears in his eyes. After kissing her on both cheeks yet again, he melted into the crowd.

* * *

Some months later, on a chill autumn night, Athénaïs found herself at Maintenon clutching a glass of brandy and staring glumly into the fire. She had furiously rushed there blinded by humiliation and rage, six months pregnant and fat. This was the only place she could think of to run to. That glorious summer had faded like a withering rose, her gold dress tarnished into brass, and her life turned around again, shattered one afternoon by a visitor with a gift...

“Monsieur Racine, what a surprise. How is our new Royal Historiographer—and what is this?”

“Madame, I have come to give you my deepest thanks for your generous support.” He bowed and presented her with a large leather-bound book. “It is my collected plays, madame. I hope that they may be both enjoyable and edifying.”

Taking the book into her arms, she caressed the gilt embossing. “*Merci*, monsieur, it is truly a work of art. You know, my favorite of your plays is *Phèdre*. Although she is guilty of incestuous passion, one can understand her.” She smiled sadly. “Venus indeed cursed her, no?”

“Yes, madame, and her tale has other lessons as well. You might read that play first.”

After he left, Athénaïs found a window seat with abundant light and opened the book. A satin ribbon lay inside, marking *Phèdre*. She remembered the play—her husband Theseus missing, Queen Phèdre conceived an adulterous passion for her stepson Hippolyte. Believing her husband dead, she revealed her love to the horrified young man. Worse, her maid Oenone ran in with the news that Phèdre’s husband was indeed alive and on his way, and Hippolyte was in love with someone else. Jealous and terrified, the queen followed the crafty maid’s advice to falsely accuse the young man of trying to rape her. The scheme worked all too well. Theseus cursed his son and poor Hippolyte was destroyed by Neptune. Overwhelmed with guilt, Phèdre denounced Oenone and both women committed suicide.

Athénaïs studied the play, fascinated. What was that Olympe had hurled at her that night of the premiere? That there was a parallel between Athénaïs and this queen...

Oenone, I am not one of those hardened women who can taste tranquility in crime, and show a brow unblushing, unashamed. I recognize my madness.

Athénaïs trembled, blinking back tears. A few pages further, Phèdre accuses her maid:

You have destroyed me. Why did you take charge? Go, execrable fiend! With base craft and guile you feed the infirmities of princes; push them down that slope to which their heart inclines, and smooth for their poor feet the path of crime. Oh, filthy flatterers!

Athénaïs froze. Racine is holding up a mirror...

Then Mlle Claude walked in. Athénaïs looked up and saw her maid for the first time. "You."

"Me? Me what?" She backed toward the door, wary.

"Your child. It was the King's, wasn't it?" She rose to confront her.

Her maid turned to leave, pretending not to hear.

Furious, Athénaïs grabbed her by the wrist and turned her around. "Admit it. Tell me!"

"You have known all along." Mlle Claude threw back her head and laughed. "Surely you are not that stupid."

Athénaïs slapped her, hard. "Chienne! You are a dog's whore!"

"A dog's whore? I am the King's whore, just like you. Look at you, you fat drunken slut, producing one bastard after another. Surely I deserve as much?"

Athénaïs lunged to claw her eyes out, but her maid slipped from her grasp.

"Ah, ah!" she taunted, wagging her finger as if at a naughty child. "Now, now, madame, you mustn't harm me, for what would His Majesty say? I carried his child. And what if he knew about the powders, the spells? Do you want to go that far?"

Athénaïs paled. "You wouldn't dare."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." She smiled. "I have what I want now. I have been suitably rewarded by His Majesty for my—" she stroked her belly, "for my services."

"Get *out*. Get out of here!"

And with a swish of her double-trained dress, she was out the door.

Then it hit, and Athénaïs had to grab the back of a chair to steady herself. The powders. What was really in the powders? And who were they for?

* * *

"Louis, how could you! How could you treat me this way? I have never been so humiliated." Athénaïs was akin to Medusa, her hair flying and eyes aflame.

His Majesty glared, his chin clenched. "Watch your temper, madame. Why must you be a harpy? Have you no control over

your manners and behavior?" He moved toward the door.

"I have no control over *my* behavior? Having commerce with my maid!"

His hand on the door handle, Louis fought for composure. "I have needs, madame, you know that. And there are times when you—when you were unavailable, or—"

"Unavailable, indeed. I did a little calculating. You impregnated her that Easter, the Easter I was being commanded to be virtuous! Of all the hypocritical—"

"Hypocritical? No, madame, you were married, and she was not. I—I agree her behavior was insolent. I am glad you discharged her." He shut the door just before the bottle hit it.

Chapter 19

Alchemy September, 1677

It was now ten years since the Affair of the Poisons had begun, and finally La Reynie had something solid to present to the King. But Versailles had changed, too. As his coach clattered through the gilded gates, he was astonished at the transformation: the scaffolding was down, the Enveloppe surrounding the old hunting lodge was finished, and here stood a magnificent château gleaming in the morning sun. He smiled for Colbert's sake; perhaps one big financial headache was over.

La Reynie made his way through doors, salons, hallways, until he reached the King's study bearing urgent news to the King and his council. "Your Majesty," he said as he pulled a letter from his pouch, "some priests were given this by someone who found it near the Palais. It appears to be written by a woman to her lover and accomplice. It describes putting a white powder on the napkin of 'you know who' and she says that if he fails in the deed, she will marry another. She said that she is frightened that her letters might be intercepted, and she concludes with this: '...because in all other crimes one has to be an accomplice to be punished, but with this one it is necessary only to have known about it.'"

"That means treason or regicide," said Louvois, handing the letter to the King.

His Majesty held it up to the light. "It is not signed." He arched an eyebrow. "It says the victim will be 'you know who.' That could be me, or perhaps the Dauphin. Do you have any indication of its origin?"

"No, Sire," said La Reynie, "but Captain Desgrez is tracking down the apothecaries and alchemists in the area. We have heard persistent rumors that some of them may be trafficking in poison, even poison perfumes and other dangerous substances."

Louvois turned to Colbert. "Do you think any members of court might be involved?"

“There must be,” said Colbert. “For a plot such as this to succeed, there must be someone at court who has access to Your Royal Person.”

The King paused, gazing at the papers on his desk. “I have been having the most appalling headaches recently and attacks of the vapours.” His ministers stared. “But then,” he added, “I finally had to have a molar removed. Perhaps...” Lost in thought, he carefully arranged the papers into neat piles. “I wonder if the Dutch might not be involved?”

“Or possibly the English, Sire,” said Louvois. “Both countries have spies everywhere.”

“Yes, Sire,” echoed Colbert. “We must not forget what happened to Lionne.”

With Lionne’s name, silence fell like a pall.

“Your Majesty,” La Reynie finally asked, “I assume you are already careful about what and where you eat and drink?”

“Of course. I am always cautious about those matters.” He contemplated the worried faces of his ministers. “Notify the Royal Bodyguards,” he said calmly. “However, keep the existence of this letter a secret and behave as if nothing is amiss. We do not want to alert whoever is responsible. Monsieur,” he looked at La Reynie with a slight frown, “pray continue your investigation, and report back to us promptly. And what is this I hear about witches snatching babies?”

“We are still trying to pin it down. We do know that babies have disappeared in some of the poorest neighborhoods of Paris. People claim they were taken by witches for some kind of sacrifice and that the midwives are responsible. We have no proof of that.”

“But babies are actually missing?”

“Yes, stolen from their cradles, and some midwives have been forced to flee.”

“Superstitious rubbish.” The King picked up a stack of papers and moved it to the precise middle of his desk. “Monsieur Colbert. I have scheduled a meeting with Monsieur Mansart so we can draw up plans for the new wings.”

La Reynie blinked. “New wings, Sire?”

“Yes,” said the King, “the château is much too small to support running a government, and many of the courtiers have nowhere

to stay. I am therefore planning two large wings extending..."

As His Majesty went on, Colbert, who had to finance this grandiosity, looked pained. Versailles had won again.

* * *

The investigation dragged on, and on, and La Reynie could swear he knew what news Desgrez was bringing before he opened the door. It was his big boots—measured, slow, meant no news or little. A brisk step, a confident rap on the door. Aha—good news.

"Monsieur!" Captain Desgrez opened the door and swept off his plumed hat.

La Reynie looked up with a smile. "You have something concrete this time?"

"Indeed. We found an alchemist not far from here. The neighbors were complaining about the smell and one of our men went to investigate. It is quite a laboratory."

La Reynie grabbed his cloak. "Did you find any poison?"

"Not yet, but we immediately sent for one of His Majesty's apothecaries to examine the evidence. The alchemist insists on speaking with you."

La Reynie and Desgrez soon arrived at a nondescript little house in a seedy neighborhood. The stench of sulfur led them to a back room, where they found furnaces, test tubes, and crucibles belching fumes. Mortars and pestles, books and papers with mysterious drawings littered the dusty table. The King's apothecary was hovering over his own set of instruments into which he was placing samples from the crucibles. In a corner, two armed musketeers guarded a wizened little man in black robes, whose anxious expression changed to relief when he saw La Reynie.

"Monsieur La Reynie," he cried in a quavering voice, "you are finally here. I have done nothing wrong. Why have your men invaded my home?"

"We are looking for poison, monsieur. You would save us all some time by explaining what you are doing here."

"What I am doing is not illegal, but it is difficult to explain to a layman." He searched La Reynie's face for a moment. "I have heard about you, monsieur. You are known to be fair and intelligent. Have you heard of the Philosopher's Stone?"

La Reynie searched his mental library. "I believe so. If I recall correctly, it is the key to turning base metals into gold. Why, have you found it?"

The little man sighed. "No, not yet."

"Monsieur La Reynie," called the apothecary, holding up a vial. "My test is positive for arsenic."

"Monsieur, you are coming with us." La Reynie took the little man by the arm.

"No, not me!" he cried. "It is not illegal to manufacture arsenic. I use it for rat poison."

"It may be legal, monsieur," replied La Reynie, "but—"

"Monsieur, I know who you are looking for."

La Reynie loosened his grip, but only slightly. "And just who may that be?"

"The people who want to kill the King." He looked around to see who was listening. "I know who wrote that letter you found," he whispered. "May we speak in private?"

* * *

A cold December morning before dawn found La Reynie and his men surrounding an elegant house in the suburbs. "Now!" cried La Reynie, and they pushed on the front door.

"It's bolted," said Desgrez, panting with exertion.

"Shoot the lock."

Desgrez blasted it with his musket and he kicked the door in. Soldiers swarmed over the house that smelled even worse than the little alchemist's, reeking of perfume. "In here!" cried one. Down the stairs to the cellar a soldier grabbed a suspect while La Reynie looked around. The array of laboratory equipment was stunning: a furnace, crucibles, beakers bubbling over smoking retorts, glass vessels full of mysterious substances, ores and minerals lying about. And piled on a table was an even greater find—dozens of bars of silver. La Reynie took out his pen knife and scratched the surface of one of the bars. Base metal underneath.

"What are you doing?" cried their suspect, now in shackles. "What is the charge?"

"Monsieur Louis de Vanens, I arrest you in the name of His Majesty the King for counterfeiting and attempted murder."

As Vanens was hauled off to jail, La Reynie looked around—it must have cost a fortune to set up this operation. Was it just for counterfeiting? And that sickening, flowery smell...

A door was ajar to the next room and he spied something odd, two chairs facing each other with a mattress lying on the seats of the chairs, apparently so someone could lie down. The mattress was stained. Tall candlesticks—with black candles—were positioned on the floor around the mattress. The hairs went up on the back of his neck. There was blood on the floor.

* * *

On a warm May morning, La Reynie and his fellow ministers were trapped in the King's study, the doors and windows shut tight to block the dust and din of construction. The new wings were reaching out like some sea monster, grasping every livre of France's treasure. Rumors of starvation in the provinces were ignored. Rioting peasants were drawn and quartered.

The noise was giving La Reynie a headache, the dust was making him sneeze, and he was last on the agenda. He had come to report another monster of sorts—poisonings, counterfeit, a hydra of plots and machinations spreading its tentacles from the dank streets of the Parisian underworld to the crowned heads of Europe.

But first, Versailles. Always, Versailles. "Regardez, messieurs." Looking pleased, Louis spread out a roll of architectural drawings. "This will be a grand galerie extending the length of the terrace." He gestured to the windows opening onto the huge terrace. La Reynie's eyes widened at the vast expanse, the length of the entire building; then he glanced at the impassive Colbert who would have to find the money.

"Monsieur Mansart's plan," continued the King, "includes a vaulted ceiling two stories high, to be decorated with allegorical paintings by Le Brun." He put down the plans. "The ceiling is supposed to celebrate the labors of Hercules, but—"

"If I might suggest, Sire," interjected Louvois, his eyes gleaming, "perhaps you might consider memorializing your own labors, your triumphs over the Dutch."

"What a magnificent idea." Colbert chimed in. "What better way to demonstrate your power and prestige to the world."

“Indeed, Sire,” said La Reynie, “your victories should be preserved for posterity.”

The King sat back with a broad smile. “Messieurs, you are right. That is an excellent suggestion. I want this to be the most magnificent room in Europe. It must proclaim our superiority in art, in décor, in everything.” He turned to Colbert. “Monsieur, do you think the Gobelins manufactory is up to the challenge?”

“Of course, Sire, they have the finest craftsmen in France.”

Louvois leaned forward. “Many of those *fine* craftsmen are Huguenots.”

“And your point?” Colbert snapped.

“Can they be trusted? We know where their loyalties lie.” He settled back with a smirk.

“Their loyalties lie with France,” Colbert said evenly.

The King ignored Louvois’ scowl. “Yes, they are Huguenots, but they are *my* craftsmen.” The King glanced at the council agenda. “I see we are at the last item. How goes the Vanens Affair, Monsieur La Reynie?”

Finally. “Sire, Vanens’ laboratory contained deadly chemicals and counterfeit silver ingots destined for the Royal Mint where he had an accomplice. We learned that in 1675, Vanens and his friends were in Savoy and, possibly, they poisoned the Duke.”

They all fell silent, drinking in the news like a bad wine. Charles-Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy, was the cousin of the late Comte de Soissons, himself dead under suspicious circumstances in 1673. His widow Olympe was still being eyed nervously; and her sister Hortense, the Duke’s mistress, had fled to England after his death.

“Pray continue,” said the King.

“By 1676 Vanens was in Paris, where he made himself known at court and at the home of the Comtesse de Soissons.”

La Reynie paused—the next tidbit was controversial. “Vanens’ valet has alleged that Vanens met Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, and gave her advice for which he should be drawn and quartered.”

His Majesty paled. “What sort of advice?” he asked carefully.

“He would not elaborate. In fact, when presented with a transcript of his interrogation, he refused to sign it until the ref-

erence to the marquise was removed.”

“I see. Poison,” Louis whispered. He fiddled with his quill as he thought. “Witchcraft... the court possibly infiltrated... What is behind this, gentlemen? Any ideas?”

“Yes, Sire,” Louvois proclaimed. “The Dutch. The counterfeit silver and gold could have destabilized our economy, and undoubtedly there was a plot to poison you as well, perhaps by duping a member of the court.”

“Could have, might have.” Louis looked up at La Reynie. “I need proof, monsieur. I am in treaty negotiations with the Dutch. Do you have any proof?”

“No, Sire,” La Reynie replied. “Many questions, few answers.”

Louis stared at them for a moment, then rose from his chair. “But I need answers, gentlemen, and soon. Adieu.”

As La Reynie’s carriage headed home, he was hit by a memory. Vanens’ laboratory—those chairs and the mattress and the blood on the floor—what kind of obscene rite was held there? And who paid the ultimate price?

* * *

A few weeks later, La Reynie was about to leave his office in the Bastille when a guard poked his head in the door. “Monsieur,” he hissed. “please come with me.” He motioned down the hall then put a trembling finger to his lips.

La Reynie followed him silently to Vanens’ cell. The sound of odd words being chanted over and over, wafted through the door. La Reynie opened the little window into the cell.

“Alpha, Omega, Agla...” Being a gentleman, Vanens was allowed to bring his dog to jail with him; and here was the dog, happily panting as his master was performing a Black Mass on the dog’s belly. A crucifix on the wall above had excrement smeared on Jesus’ face. Vanens was on his knees rocking back and forth, holding a picture of the Virgin and making it kiss the dog’s rump. “Alpha, Omega, Agla, Dominus adjutor meus,” he chanted over and over.

And there, in a corner, the shadows danced.

Chapter 20

Les Demoiselles November, 1677

Mme de Vivonne's household was all atwitter that morning—the merchant is here, come look! Sylvie rushed to the great hall where the merchant and his daughter were displaying wonders from afar: shimmering silks, fabulous brocades, embroidered and scented gloves, fur muffs to warm a lady's hands and her heart as well. The servants clustered around chattering with delight. Attention! Here comes Antoinette, Duchesse de Vivonne, and her guests.

Sylvie joined the others getting into formation—first her father's cousin Mme Jeannette, her household keys dangling from the waist of her black dress; then Mme Christine, madame's personal maid who wore a perpetual scowl; and grey-haired Antoine, beloved by madame's husband. A dozen others, then Sylvie on the end, for she was both the newest and the shortest. She was now madame's official embroiderer. They were needed in every household, for how else can one decorate? But her skill was often ignored, and she found herself emptying chamber pots, mending, finally embroidering a shawl, emptying more chamber pots, and so on. The duchesse was uninterested in embroidery—or much else, except gambling and running off to Paris for more private amusement.

On cue, they bowed and curtsied to madame and her two sisters-in-law, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, and Gabrielle, Marquise de Thianges. Still in a deep curtsy, Sylvie peeked up Mme de Montespan, mistress to His Majesty, mother of the royal bastards—how many children are there now? Five? And her temper was legendary. Sylvie cast her gaze at the floor, hoping not to be noticed.

“And who is this?” The great lady stopped in front of her.

“This is Mlle Sylvie,” Jeannette replied. “She is our new embroiderer.”

Sylvie looked up and ventured a smile. The great lady was

beautiful, if quite heavy, dressed in sumptuous velvets and furs to ward off the morning chill. She smelled delicious, like orange blossoms. "Bonjour, madame," said Sylvie timorously.

"Bonjour, ma petite," said Mme de Montespan with a smile. "When we are done with looking at the goods, I would like to see your work."

Sylvie blushed. "Merci, madame. I will be happy to show you."

With that, Mme de Montespan sailed off like a great ship, joining Mme de Vivonne and Marquise de Thianges at the merchant's table. There the ladies oohed and aahed just like the maids, feeling the fabrics, sniffing the rose-scented gloves, admiring the workmanship.

Mme de Thianges, however, was harder to please. She held a patterned silk up to the light. "Hmf. This is rather bourgeois."

"Oh really, Gabrielle," Mme de Montespan said. "Come look at the gloves."

But the merchant and his daughter caught Sylvie's attention. Something was not right about them. Indeed, they were everything her sergeant father had warned her about—too eager, too obsequious, fawning over the ladies and evading discussing the price. Sylvie caught the pretty daughter staring at the ladies as if they were her prey. She looked familiar. Sylvie took Jeannette by the sleeve and guided her away from the others.

"Do you know those people?" she whispered. "Have they sold you goods before?"

"Yes, but I do not know them well. Vertemart is their name. The woman's name is Marie Vertemart. The man is her father and he said she will collect the money later. Is there something wrong? Are the goods acceptable?"

"Yes, but—"

"Mlle Sylvie!" Sylvie was summoned by Mme de Montespan. "Mademoiselle, You embroider. What do you think of this brocade?"

"Well, madame, it is certainly beautiful." But as they spoke, there was Marie Vertemart right at the lady's side, maneuvering for attention.

"Madame," Marie giggled, "are these not the loveliest fabrics? They come from Italy. And the gloves are from Grenoble,

perfectly made. Would you like to try them on?"

"Yes, merci," said Mme de Montespan with a smile. She pulled on a cream-colored glove embroidered with pearls. "It is lovely, and amazingly light and supple."

As the two chatted, Sylvie watched closely. *I know that voice*, she thought.

Marie Vertemart lowered her voice into another, more secret giggle. "You know, madame, I can arrange for you to see many other delightful things. I am sure you have been at a loss since Mlle Claude left your household. I can assist you in many ways."

Mme de Montespan arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Why, of course. I come highly recommended by someone you know well—La Voisin."

The room fell quiet. Mme de Vivonne stared. Gabrielle blinked in confusion. Mme de Montespan paled—and Sylvie stepped between her and Marie Vertemart. No one should be allowed to upset the great lady.

"Indeed, mademoiselle," announced Sylvie, "I believe that I myself recognize you." Her dark blue eyes, now the color of slate, bored in on Marie. "Yes, I remember, Marie Vertemart. Do you recall Sergeant Dupont? I believe he made your acquaintance a few years back."

Marie Vertemart gaped. The room fell still, everyone staring at Sylvie standing protectively in front of the flustered Mme de Montespan. Within a minute, the merchant and his daughter had packed up their goods and were out the door.

The Duchesse de Vivonne, hostess of this botched affair, turned to Jeannette. "What has happened here? Was there a problem with those people?" Despite the cool morning, she was fanning herself furiously.

"They were unfit to be in your home, madame," said Jeannette. "You can thank Mlle Sylvie." She turned to Sylvie. "Explain for madame."

"Marie Vertemart is a loose woman, madame," Sylvie replied, "and her father is a swindler. They concocted a story to take advantage of Mme de Montespan."

"Indeed." The duchesse's glittering blue eyes turned to Mme de Montespan, now rushing toward the door. "Fascinating." Then

back to Sylvie— “How did you know?”

“My father is Sergeant Dupont, madame. He arrested Marie Vertemart a few years ago for prostitution.”

“But what did she want from madame?”

“She wanted to enter her household. But she was very improper.”

Mme de Vivonne gazed at Sylvie for a long moment, her expression flat. “You did very well, mademoiselle. May I assume that in future you will exhibit the same loyalty to me?”

“Of course, madame.” Sylvie curtseyed. “You have my word.”

That night Sylvie wrote to her family, knowing the letter would be delivered to La Reynie: “I have learned something about life at court today. His Majesty is called the Sun King, and the courtiers are like the planets circling round him. And those planets themselves attract all sorts of creatures looking for favors and advantage. We must be wary.”

But after she sent the letter and was sewing at the window, she paused to think. *I wonder... who is La Voisin?*

Fall, 1678

Autumn was cold and miserable. Athénaïs and Françoise huddled up to the fire, chatting about everything and nothing, trying desperately to maintain a truce, trapped at Saint-Cloud and enduring a hiatus in the construction at Versailles.

Athénaïs was still fat after the birth of the little Comte de Toulouse in June. His Majesty paid her perfunctory social calls, but he and Françoise, the prestigious Mme de Maintenon, would converse for hours. Although the governess was forty-four, with her fresh complexion, sparkling black eyes and serene disposition, she could easily pass for thirty; seemingly younger than Athénaïs, whose weight made her look every day of thirty-eight.

Athénaïs glanced at Françoise. She had a plan. “I need your advice. I was talking to my sister about... about the King.”

“Yes?”

“Gabrielle thinks that I should ignore the King’s dalliances. She thinks I should even humor him.”

“Well, madame, that would be a distinct improvement over

quarreling.”

“She thought that if I did, he might even find me, well, intriguing.”

Françoise opened her mouth to respond, but the King walked in. “Good evening, mesdames.” He pulled up a chair.

Athénaïs smiled sweetly. She might as well start now. “Have either of you met that new young beauty among Madame’s ladies-in-waiting? She is extraordinary. In my opinion, she will eclipse all those who have shone before her at court.”

His Majesty lifted a curious eyebrow. “What is her name? And what is her family?”

“She is seventeen years old and comes from the provinces,” Athénaïs said airily, “just like silk, silver, and gold. Her name is Fontanges, and God has never made anything so lovely.”

“This young person must be quite extraordinary,” the King replied, “since Mme de Montespan praises her with so much vivacity. We shall see.”

* * *

Two days later, he did see. His Majesty, Athénaïs, and Françoise were chatting in the main hall of Saint-Cloud when they were besieged by a swarm of curious courtiers. Everyone stared as an older gentleman bowed low, sweeping his hat in the direction of one particular young lady. “Your Majesty,” he proclaimed, “it gives me great pleasure to present to you my niece, Marie-Angélique de Scoraille de Rouissille, Mlle de Fontanges.”

The young mademoiselle sank into a deep curtsy, her golden curls briefly hiding her face. When she arose, Louis’ eyes widened. Her beauty was breathtaking: huge grey eyes the color of the Normandy sea at dawn, skin like fresh cream, lips that would put a budding rose to shame. He bowed in deep appreciation, drinking in her lush bosom barely concealed by her scandalously low-cut blue silk dress. Their eyes met, and the stunned Athénaïs could see that the young mademoiselle knew exactly how to entice a man: she gazed directly into the King’s eyes, promising everything—almost everything. He stared, transfixed.

Athénaïs vigorously fanned herself and glanced at Françoise, whose smile had turned to ice. The young lady’s relatives beamed, proud to be offering this delectable morsel to the King.

At last, she spoke.

“Ooh, Your Majesty!” she squealed. “I am so, so...” Her uncle whispered in her ear. “So enchanted to meet you.” Blushing prettily, she offered her dainty fingers to be kissed.

“Enchantée, mademoiselle.” Louis raised her hand to his trembling lips.

Athénaïs forced a bright smile. *Ha!* She thought. *As beautiful as an angel and as stupid as a basket. How long could this last?*

* * *

Today was laundry day and Sylvie was called into action. While not as dreary as emptying chamber pots, laundry was tedious, hauling madame’s dirty chemises and petticoats down the narrow back stairs to the wash room. Going downstairs was like descending from heaven to hell—from sparkling candles reflecting off of crystal, sunlight pouring through windows; then down, down to the dank washroom with its tubs of steaming water, the cackle of maids and laundresses reverberating off the stone walls. Thank God she didn’t have to do the washing, just bring the laundress the clothes.

Sylvie descended the narrow stairs carefully balancing the basket of laundry, the only light from windows high above clouded over with steam. “Oh, pardon me.” She collided into a young woman who dropped her own basket.

“Imbécile! Watch where you are going,” said the maid as she picked up her basket. She was rather plain but had very pretty auburn hair. She stared at Sylvie. “We haven’t met.”

“Bonjour, and again I beg your pardon. My name is Sylvie Dupont. I am the new embroiderer for Mme de Vivonne. And you?”

“I am Mlle Cato,” the young woman said with a frown. “And I am Mme de Montespan’s *personal* maid. I have heard about you. Did you think you could find favor with Mme de Montespan?” The frown turned into an angry glare. “Mademoiselle, you need to learn to mind your own business.” And with that, she whirled her basket around so that it slammed into Sylvie, sending her sprawling onto the wet floor in a pile of laundry. With a flash of auburn hair, Cato stalked off to the wash tubs.

Sylvie’s face flushed. “Quelle salope!” she hissed and was

about to go after Cato when Jeannette appeared behind her.

"Hush!" she hissed to Sylvie. "Leave it alone."

"But... how dare she?" Sylvie sputtered as she tried to pursue her new enemy. "What gives her the right—"

"Shut *up*." Jeannette pulled her aside. "Be still," she whispered. "I will explain later. Just stay away from her."

Later that afternoon, Jeannette joined Sylvie at the window where she was embroidering.

"I am sorry for losing my temper," said Sylvie. "But I have not been treated like that since I was a child. It seems that bullies are alike, no matter where."

Jeannette looked around to see if others were nearby, then sat down. "This is a rather strange household," she said in a low voice.

"Vraiment. What is going on?"

"Cato used to work here. She was a good friend of Mlle Claude, who used to be Mme de Montespan's personal maid before she left several months ago." Jeannette glanced around again. "She left after she had a baby—and I heard the King was the father."

"No!"

"Yes. And she had Cato transferred there before she left. We were glad to see her go." Jeannette's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Now Cato is Mme de Montespan's personal maid. I do not know who I pity most."

Sylvie giggled. "But why was she angry with me? What did I do?"

"You gained Mme de Montespan's favor, something many people wish they could accomplish. It seems that everyone wants to join her household. You saw the lengths Marie Vertemart went to." Jeannette looked Sylvie in the eye. "I have only been here a few years, and I have learned many things about this place that I cannot explain, strange things. If you value your position, you need to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut." And she walked away, the household keys jingling at her waist.

Chapter 21

The King of Swords December, 1678

“This one covers you. This one crosses you.” Athénaïs twitched in her sleep, the cards drifting before her, their faces now sly, mocking courtiers pointing to the Wheel of Fortune turning, turning, while Athénaïs desperately held on. She rose up, up—then in an instant she was flung off, falling, falling...

She went back to the witch. But it was an odd session. La Voisin was distracted, her eyes darting about, her mouth pinched as she placed the cards on the purple silk. The parlor was chilly, the fire burning low as Athénaïs watched, shivering.

La Voisin paused, staring at the final outcome card, the King of Swords. It was reversed.

“Who is that?” Athénaïs whispered. “Is it the King?”

La Voisin frowned. “No, madame. He is a lawyer or perhaps a judge, a mature man with authority, a man of good counsel, with dark eyes and hair. But he is reversed.” She swept up the cards. “I fear he will persecute us, madame.”

“Us? Both of us?”

“Both of us. He appeared in my own cards last night.”

* * *

The early morning sun was dissipating the bone-chilling fog and filtering through the bedroom curtains when La Reynie heard a loud knocking downstairs. Fortunately, he was already up. While he quickly finished dressing, he could hear Captain Desgrez’ voice wafting up from downstairs. Any news would be good. He took a quick glance in the mirror and was startled to see how tired he looked. Long lines etched his face from nose to mouth, and his dark brown eyes seemed clouded over. He had been up late for several nights pondering the Vanens affair, but to no avail. No clues, no answers, the court infiltrated. He went downstairs to greet his guests.

"Ah, Captain Desgrez. And I see you have brought Maître Perrin." He greeted the elderly lawyer, who was shaking the snow off his cloak and boots. "It is a pleasure, monsieur. Please come into my study and sit before the fire. May I offer you coffee, tea?" The three gathered before the crackling fire, Desgrez and Perrin still shivering and rubbing their red hands.

"Tea, monsieur, yes, please," said the elderly Perrin, with a quavering voice. "Is it my imagination, monsieur, that the winters are colder than when we were young?"

"Why, I believe you are right, monsieur," replied La Reynie. "They have been really severe. I hear the peasants have been suffering terribly." La Reynie's practiced eye noted that Perrin's shivering had not stopped even though he was close to the fire. He gave Desgrez a questioning glance.

"Monsieur Perrin," said Desgrez, "came to my office at dawn and told me of an interesting conversation. I brought him here so he could tell you the entire story."

Perrin was silent while the tea was poured, then took a few sips, the soothing liquid relaxing his features. With a sigh, he began.

"Last night I had dinner at the house of Mme Vigoureux, the wife of a ladies' tailor. She had a guest—a widow, Marie Bosse, a fortuneteller. Mme Bosse was very drunk and very talkative." Perrin took another swallow. "We were sitting around the table after dinner, and Mme Bosse started boasting about her business." Perrin looked up, but his eyes were far away. "'What a great life!' she laughed. 'What a clientele! Duchesses, marquises, princes and nobles. Only three more poisonings and I can retire, my fortune made.'" Perrin shivered.

La Reynie gasped in spite of himself. "Then what?"

"Mme Vigoureux tried to get her to shut up and quickly looked around for everyone's reaction. The other guests thought the remark was amusing, and I pretended I did as well. I must tell you, at first, I couldn't believe what I had heard, but the worried look on my hostess' face convinced me she knew what was going on. I had some more wine, acted like I was drunk, then left as soon as I could without arousing suspicion." Perrin gulped down the last of his tea and again stretched his white hands up to the fire.

"Monsieur, we are grateful for this information," said La Reynie.

"Yes, but can you keep them from finding out I told you? At least until they are in custody." Perrin's whole face was one question mark.

"But of course, monsieur."

Perrin shook his head. "Horrible, simply horrible," he whispered. A clock chimed the hour of eight, startling him. "Pardon, monsieur, I must leave. Court appearance."

La Reynie escorted his guest to the door. "You may rest assured that we will act on your information immediately and your confidentiality maintained. In the meantime, please keep this to yourself so as not to alert anyone."

After Perrin left, La Reynie turned to Desgrez with a smile. "Well, captain, what a stroke of luck."

"Vraiment, monsieur," Desgrez grinned. "And I have a suggestion as to how to prove these allegations."

"Indeed?" La Reynie went to his desk and motioned Desgrez to pull up a chair.

"We have heard rumors that these fortunetellers supply poison to unhappy women. Suppose I send the wife of one of my lieutenants to Mme Bosse. She goes to have her fortune told then admits her husband is a terrible burden. If Bosse sells her poison, then we have the proof we need."

"Excellent. I want you to check out the other woman, Mme Vigoureux. We need to learn more about who is involved in this before we make any arrests." La Reynie stretched back in his chair. After weeks of worry, he could finally relax. "This may be the break in the Vanens case we have been waiting for. Who knows? Within a few months, we may be able to put the entire sordid matter to rest."

* * *

A few days later, La Reynie climbed out of his coach into the crunching snow, wrapping his cloak tightly about him. The dawn's feeble rays were just now glinting on the snow piled on the eaves of a narrow three-story house with a sharply pitched tile roof. It was much like its neighbors with a shop downstairs, living quarters upstairs, servants' quarters in the attic.

Waiting for him was Desgrez, stamping his feet to stay warm, and a contingent of soldiers. La Reynie gave a nod, and Desgrez motioned to some of his men to cover the rear of the building and the rest to go to the front door with their commanders. When everyone was in position, La Reynie banged on the door. "Open in the name of the King!"

Scurrying inside, the door creaked open and a slovenly servant girl, mobcap askew, gasped. "My mistress is not yet awake—" She was nearly trampled by La Reynie, Desgrez and a dozen men who charged past her into the reception room, scene of the infamous dinner party.

"Upstairs!" La Reynie shouted, and they dashed up the creaking circular staircase to the next floor. There they found the bedroom with a large tapestry-curtained bed next to the fireplace. Desgrez swept the bed curtains aside, revealing the startled naked occupants—Mme Vigoureux screamed, Marie Bosse cowered under the blanket, and her daughter and two sons gaped in fear.

* * *

"Ooh!" Mlle de Fontanges burred as she applied a beauty spot just above her mouth. "I can hardly wait for the New Year's fête." She gazed at herself approvingly in the mirror: her exquisite face framed by cascading golden curls; dangling pearl and diamond earrings, courtesy of His Majesty, added to her glory. A bevy of ladies fluttered about assisting her in her toilette, all of them making much ado over the King's new favorite.

"Madame, would you tie a bow in my hair?" She turned to Athénaïs.

Athénaïs bit her lip but picked up a blue silk ribbon and expertly attached it to a blonde curl. *Curse Louis*, she muttered to herself. *Be nice to her, he said. Assist her in any way you can, he said. How could he be so cruel?*

Athénaïs had intended to turn a blind eye to Louis' infidelities but seeing him chase after the demoiselle like a satyr pursuing a nymph finally shattered her resolve and her nerves. She needed a diversion. On Christmas Day, the spinning wheel had again intoxicated her; and again, His Majesty got the bill. Their conversation deteriorated into a screaming match which, of

course, he won. She promised to behave; and now here she was, playing ladies' maid to this stupid little...

"Merci, madame," the mademoiselle chirped to Athénaïs. "You are so talented with hair."

The words hit Athénaïs with a painful thud. Years ago, she sat at her own dressing table while her former rival Louise did her hair. No wonder she ran off to a convent. "Mademoiselle, please excuse me, I have a frightful headache." She fled.

* * *

The new year brought a succession of witches to sit on the sellette. They reminded La Reynie of the fountains of Versailles, spouting torrents of information—some of it useful, most of it self-serving. They had known each other for sixteen years, happily sharing their beds and their men, with la Vigoureux the mistress of the two husbands of la Bosse. La Bosse had already spent time in prison for counterfeiting, and the parallels with the Vanens case were interesting.

"Did you also manufacture poisons, madame?" La Reynie asked.

The portly la Bosse waved her hand dismissively. "I amused myself by playing at chemistry, monsieur."

"Indeed. And what kinds of substances did you experiment with?" No answer. "Madame, we searched your home and courtyard. Do you know what we found?"

"Heavy water, monsieur, mercury and hemlock." She pursed her lips.

"What were you doing with those items?"

"It was La Voisin, monsieur," la Bosse replied, her eyes wide with feigned innocence. "It was she who put those ideas in my head."

* * *

"Where is that document?" La Reynie tore through boxes of papers in his closet.

"Monsieur?" Desgrez strode in, his hat caked with snow. "I have brought the findings of the chemists. What are you searching for?"

La Reynie pulled out yet another stack of papers and dumped them on his desk. "Lesage. La Voisin and Lesage. I'm

looking for—Ah, 1670, 1669, 1668. Here it is. Lesage was convicted of sorcery and sentenced to the galleys.”

“And?” Shivering, Desgrez made his way to the fireplace and positioned his backside to its welcome warmth.

“He’s back.” La Reynie tossed the document onto his desk in disgust.

“Lesage? But how? Did he escape?” Desgrez reluctantly left the warming flames to peruse the document.

“I wish I knew.”

“What makes you think he has returned?”

“Both la Bosse and la Vigoureux confirmed that he is back with La Voisin.”

Desgrez continued reading. “This is his old testimony, no?” He looked up at La Reynie with a frown. “It names Mme de Montespan as one of his clients. And I assume she is—or was—a client of La Voisin.”

“Presumably. I wonder how deep she got with the witch. And how did Lesage get free?”

“Didn’t you tell me that her brother is the Duc de Vivonne? And he was the host of that debauch many years ago, where they baptized a pig.”

“Among other dreadful things. Your point?”

“Wasn’t he appointed commander of the galleys?” Desgrez handed the papers back to La Reynie. “He would have been in a position to—”

“No.” La Reynie took a breath. “No, we should not be speculating. But wait.” He rummaged around his paper-strewn desk. “I just received a letter from Sylvie.”

“Sylvie?”

“Sylvie Dupont, the sergeant’s daughter, I told you about her. Her father sent over her letter. Ah, here it is.” He unfolded the letter, displaying her careful handwriting. “It is dated last week. Let me see.” La Reynie scanned the letter through the salutations and enquiries about her family’s health.

“Here, let me read it to you. ‘You asked me to tell you about my work. I am usually in madame’s wardrobe room sitting at the window mending or embroidering. I am now working on a shawl for madame with embroidered roses and it is turning out very well, I wish you could see it. My post is near the door to ma-

dame's boudoir, allowing me to hear what is going on.

"Her household has been excited since we heard about the arrest of M. Vanens and the arrest of the witches. There are many whispers. What about the paper? They ask each other. How can we get it back now? Mme de Vivonne is in a terrible mood. But I must tell you that madame is often angry, especially at her sister-in-law Mme de Montespan. Madame laughs at her behind her back. She is happy that the King no longer pays attention to her. Besides, *tout le monde* knows how proud and haughty Mme de Montespan is, and few like her."

La Reynie sat down, letter in hand. "This is interesting about the duchesse. She may be connected somehow to Vanens and the others. And I wonder what that paper is about."

Desgrez nodded. "Sylvie could be helpful to us. And perhaps we should be looking not at the duc, but at his wife."

"I agree. He just doesn't seem the type to get involved with La Voisin. Have you met him? No? He's one of the fattest men I know—what a paunch. And he's also one of the wittiest, always ready with an amusing story. He's as clever as his sisters with words. I just don't see him doing anything underhanded.

"But his wife..." La Reynie paused, remembering the duchesse. He had met her once, and her ice blue eyes made him feel like he was being interrogated on the sellette. "I don't know," he continued, "Lesage could very well have been lying about his clients. I will enquire of the Admiralty Office as to how he happened to be released. Perhaps Sylvie can help us get this straightened out."

He looked up at Desgrez. "Have a seat, monsieur, and tell me the chemists' findings."

Desgrez pulled up a chair and produced the list of substances seized at the witches' residence, along with the chemists' explanations. "First, the ordinary, everyday poisons." He smiled at La Reynie's raised eyebrow. "Arsenic, mercury, nitric acid—they probably used that in counterfeiting coins—and hemlock. At least their noble victims could die like Socrates. Then the most interesting poisons, hensbane and wolfsbane, and deadly nightshade. Finally, there's digitalis. Guaranteed to stop your heart."

He grinned. "Now it becomes truly bizarre. Listen to this: mandrake root—an aphrodisiac; powder of cantharis—Spanish

fly, yet another aphrodisiac; powder of toad and bat and viper, blobs of hanged man's fat—

"Blobs of *what?*"

"The remains of a dead criminal are supposed to be efficacious in spells, no?"

La Reynie shivered, recalling the crowds fighting for the ashes of the beheaded and burned Marquise de Brinvilliers.

"Plus nail clippings, bone splinters, menstrual blood, urine, and semen."

"Sweet Mother of God," La Reynie whispered. "What were they doing with those?" He sighed. "Probably anything they could get away with."

"Indeed, monsieur, and they seem to have been at it a long time, with many high-paying clients." Desgrez deposited the report on La Reynie's desk. "How shall I proceed?"

La Reynie rose to get his cloak. "For now, I want you to find Lesage and put La Voisin under surveillance. According to la Bosse, La Voisin and Lesage quarreled about her other men and they are no longer together. Find him. And la Bosse said something else about her that is intriguing—'Look in her garden,' she said. She was insistent but refused to elaborate. I will check that out when we arrest her. In the meantime," La Reynie said as he stuffed papers into his valise, "I need to brief Colbert and Louvois." He snapped the bag shut. "La Bosse has implicated yet another lady at court."

* * *

Now La Reynie was back in the King's study to report yet another poison case. But something felt different this time. Louvois was quietly seething, his eyes darting back and forth from Colbert to the King. Colbert, on the other hand, was the picture of cool self-assurance.

"Your Majesty," said La Reynie, "I have been investigating the witches, and there seems to be no end to their list of wealthy, titled clients. I will be blunt. Human life is up for sale. For many, poison is the only remedy for family problems. Sacrileges, impieties, abominations are common practice not only in Paris, but throughout the nation. First the Marquise de Brinvilliers, then Vanens, now Mme de Poulailion. Mme de Poulailion tried several

times to dispatch her husband with the help of Vigoureux and Bosse by carefully poisoning his chemises, his bouillon, his wine, and enemas, so that the poison would accumulate over a period of weeks, simulating a natural decline. The witches certainly instructed her. And we keep hearing about the witch La Voisin, who seems to have even more aristocratic clients."

"And, Sire," said Louvois with a sideways glance at Colbert, "I have grave concerns about the ability of Parlement to render justice in this affair. Mme de Poulailion comes from an excellent family, and I fear the judges will find this attractive lady all too believable. Then there is the Vanens investigation involving the death of the Duke of Savoy. If details of that case became public, there might be international repercussions."

"What do you suggest?"

"An independent commission that can act in secret, to hear testimony that is too sensitive to be aired publicly, and whose decisions cannot be appealed."

"What do you think, monsieur?" His Majesty turned to Colbert.

"I agree, Sire," Colbert said. "But I must add that if an independent commission is established, bypassing Parlement, not only will the judges be unhappy, but the nobility will be upset to see their own on trial, especially wellborn ladies."

A half-smile played on His Majesty's lips—this was the same nobility who had risen against him in the Fronde years before. "Set up the commission."

The meeting finally over, La Reynie and Colbert sought privacy in a deserted salon where they had the slumbering coals stoked and fine brandy poured. "And how are you today, monsieur?" La Reynie asked. "You seem to be in good humor."

Colbert's smile erased years of worry from his face. "Did you hear, mon ami? My daughter is now betrothed to the son of the duc de Vivonne, the nephew of Mme de Montespan."

La Reynie stifled a gasp. "That is... wonderful news. How did it come about?"

"Louvois has a daughter of marriageable age. He approached the marquise about a possible match with her brother's son. She found the idea most unsuitable, so she went to His Majesty for his opinion."

Colbert smiled at the rapt interest on La Reynie's face. "Athénaïs—the marquise—told me the King was surprised that Louvois had committed the grave fault of approaching anyone other than himself about the marriage. He said Louvois had thus far helped him to spend enormous sums, and that I myself had assisted him to heap up treasure. Not only will my daughter marry the son of the Duc de Vivonne, all my daughters will become duchesses."

"Congratulations, monsieur. That explains the unhappy look on Louvois' face." La Reynie smiled. "And did the Minister of War complain?"

Colbert chuckled. "The marquise says he has had the jaundice over it for more than a fortnight. When their carriages pass on the road, he reads some documents in order to avoid saluting her."

La Reynie raised his glass with a grin. "A toast—to the beautiful daughters of the Minister of Finance."

* * *

The clink of crystal caught the attention of Athénaïs walking nearby. *There is Colbert and La Reynie. But where is Louis?* She set off in search of the King.

Instead, she found Françoise standing at a pair of tall windows gazing out at the snow. Athénaïs could feel jealousy rise up like a newly ignited flame, until she noted the unhappy expression on her one-time friend's face. "Bonjour, madame," Athénaïs said, and joined her at the windows. "The view from here is lovely."

"Bonjour," said Françoise with a sardonic smile. "It seems your attempt to assuage the King with cordiality has come to naught." She gestured down the hall with her lace fan.

Athénaïs turned—there was Louis. He was leaving the apartment of Mlle de Fontanges with an expression of sublime satisfaction, the same look he once had when leaving Athénaïs' bed. Followed by a gaggle of grinning courtiers, he proceeded down the hall, oblivious to the two women watching him. Athénaïs clutched at the window frame to steady herself.

Françoise gave Athénaïs an aggrieved look. "I have tried to reason with His Majesty about his adulterous passion. I begged

him to return to the Queen, who adores him, poor woman. You can see how much success I have had." She reached out to stop Athénaïs' hand, now fumbling in her bag for snuff. "Ma chère, it is prayer you need, not snuff."

Athénaïs grabbed a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, for once at a loss for words.

"I will write my confessor," Françoise whispered, herself fighting back tears, "and have prayers offered for the King." She stared down the hall at the back of their sovereign, continuing his royal progress. "For he is on the brink of a great precipice."

* * *

"Madame, I am sorry. I should have gone with you to La Voisin." Cato ushered the weeping Athénaïs into her boudoir, shut the door and poured some brandy.

Shaking, Athénaïs sat down at her dressing table. "It's not your fault. I should never have stayed there alone." She grabbed the glass and tossed back the brandy. "How could I have been so stupid?" She stared at her reflection—hair in disarray, face red, eyes swollen, the lace fichu at her neckline torn.

Cato brought a cool damp cloth and began to wipe her face. "Next time, madame, I will go to La Voisin for you, I promise."

"Next time?" She burst into tears. "Oh, mon Dieu, I can't go on like this."

"Madame, please. You need La Voisin. Don't worry, I will go in your place."

"No, no more! Dear God, how can I live with myself?" Athénaïs turned away from her mirror, defiled beyond redemption.

PART II

Chapter 22

Look in Her Garden March, 1679

La Reynie searched the crowd of worshipers emerging from early mass.

"There she is," Desgrez hissed.

"Where?"

"There, with the green cape. She's coming this way."

A plump little woman with a pleasant face proceeded down the rue Beauregard towards La Reynie, Desgrez, and their men. As she drew near, the soldiers discreetly positioned themselves around her while La Reynie approached.

"Mme Catherine Montvoisin?"

"Yes, monsieur?"

"I arrest you in the name of the King." The soldiers swept in and Desgrez bound her hands behind her back.

"What? How *dare* you." Then she recognized La Reynie. "Surely, monsieur, there has been some mistake." Her black eyes sparked fire.

"No mistake, madame." He turned to Desgrez. "Secure her house."

Desgrez and a contingent of soldiers set off for La Voisin's villa, while La Reynie escorted his prisoner—the most notorious witch in Paris—to the high keep of Vincennes Prison.

* * *

Later that day at Saint-Germain, Athénaïs wandered into a gilded salon filled with bored courtiers amusing themselves with cards and conversation, their chatter drowning out the violins. No heads turned in her direction, no offer of a comfortable chair or even a friendly smile. Finally, they noticed her—fans rose to cover gossiping mouths, the men smirked. Since the rise of the King's new plaything she was of no use to any of them. She scanned the room.

There sat that accursed Italian Primi Visconti telling the fu-

ture of a wide-eyed, bejeweled Mlle de Fontanges, surrounded by a bevy of her pretty friends tittering over the mysterious pictures. "This one covers you," he said laying out the cards. "This one crosses you." He glanced up, saw Athénaïs, then looked back at the card in his hand. "Hmm... the Devil card." He arched an eyebrow. The ladies burst out laughing behind their fans.

Athénaïs smiled evenly and headed for the door.

"Bonjour, madame!" Mlle de Fontanges called. The made-moiselle, wearing the same magnificent pearls the King had once lent to Athénaïs, sauntered over to look down her pretty nose at her rival. "Looking for someone?" she giggled. "I know where he is." The chatter stopped. Visconti's moustache curled.

Years of polished Versailles hauteur came to Athénaïs' rescue. She declared, "My dear child, you assume you know who I am looking for. If it were indeed His Majesty, I always know where to find him. In fact," she said with a languid wave of her jeweled fan, "tout le monde knows his schedule, from his levée in the morning to his coucher at night. It is said that a Frenchman marooned on a desert island, if he had a clock, would know where the King was at every moment. Obviously, your provincial upbringing has led to this unfortunate error."

Athénaïs was interrupted by the chiming clock, its gilded cupids pointing to the time. She gasped. "Why, as a matter of fact, it is two o'clock. His Majesty is due at my apartments and I must leave at once." She turned on her heel, leaving the pouting Mlle de Fontanges and the chortling courtiers behind.

* * *

Out of breath and still simmering, she made it back at her apartment just in time to position herself gracefully on the gilt settee before the fire.

But it was not the King who arrived next. "Madame!" Cato slammed the door behind her, gasping for breath. "La Voisin has been arrested."

"On what charge? What did she do?"

"*Poison.*"

"No—it can't be, I never thought—how did you find out?"

"From the servants. Tout le monde knows."

"Get me some brandy," Athénaïs whispered. *No!* She paced

until Cato handed her a glass. “Do you know who arrested her?” She took a swallow.

“Monsieur La Reynie, madame.”

“La Reynie?” she sputtered. “I saw him and Colbert a few days ago, they were drinking a toast—to what? Wait, it was probably the engagement of Colbert’s daughter to Antoinette’s son. Antoinette... I wonder how deep she got?” She downed the glass.

“Cato,” she said with the steadiest voice she could muster, “La Voisin must have many clients at court. Do you know any of them?”

“Madame, tout Paris visits La Voisin. There are many carriages at her house.”

“Well.” Athénaïs took a deep breath. “That being the case, I am sure that La Reynie, knowing how popular she is with the nobility, would not presume—” She hesitated, staring at her empty glass.

Just then, a valet ushered in His Majesty. Cato fled.

“Good day, madame. And how are you and the children?” he inquired with a formal bow. His dark eyes, once so tender, now avoided her gaze. She opened her mouth to greet him, but he continued, “I am looking forward to seeing our little Mignon soon. I hear from Mme de Maintenon—”

Athénaïs’ resolve to be calm and reasonable, dissolved. “Yes, of course, Mme de Maintenon. Always, Mme de Maintenon.” She lifted her nose in disdain. “The *governess*.”

Louis’ polite smile soured. “Surely you do not mean to disparage your dear friend and companion for our children, whose wit is exceeded only by her wisdom. Those are qualities I most admire about her.”

“Really?” Athénaïs struggled to keep herself under control. “I am glad to hear that you admire wit and wisdom, for those qualities are sorely lacking in the person of your latest fancy.” Now it was her turn to sneer. “Have you not heard what the court is laughing about? They say she is nothing more than a beautiful painting with no wit or intelligence.”

“That is *enough*.” Louis turned to leave. “Madame, you must stop your insults. I don’t want to hear it.”

She followed him to the door, flailing like a wounded lioness. “I don’t care what you want to hear! What has happened to you?”

Taking up with that impudent little piece of baggage from the provinces. She not only has no conversation; she has no manners. Did you know she dared to insult me just now?"

"Be *still*, madame." Louis hissed. "Do you want the entire court to hear?"

"I will *not* be still!" Athénaïs grabbed a porcelain figurine and hurled it at the wall, where it shattered into glittering pieces. "You cannot silence me!" she shrieked. "I have had enough! Enough of the lack of respect I am receiving from your pretty demoiselle, and from Mme de Maintenon, and from you and all the court!"

"Lack of respect? Look at you, madame." Louis was shaking, fighting for control. "And look at this." he brandished the now empty bottle of brandy. "You are drunk yet again. Have you no sense of decency?" He turned his back and marched out the door.

"Cato!" she cried. Her maid carefully stuck her nose around the door. "Pack our things. We are leaving at once. I refuse to stay here and be treated in this insolent manner."

Within the hour, Athénaïs' carriages, loaded with her household and all its belongings, thundered out of the iron gates of Saint-Germain, heading toward Paris.

* * *

La Reynie had a policy that had stood him well over the years: never ask a question of a witness unless you can guess their answer. La Voisin now in custody, he still knew little about her; so he turned to her fellow witch la Bosse.

"Madame, what do you know about La Voisin?" La Reynie gazed down at her from his high desk.

The fat la Bosse, recently snatched from incestuous sheets, was perched precariously on the creaking sellette. She sized him up through narrowed eyes. "Did you know, monsieur, of the many times La Voisin tried to kill her husband?"

"Really? What method did she use?"

La Bosse grinned. "She didn't need a method. She had her lover Lesage—"

"Lesage? Lesage tried to kill him?"

"Well," she proclaimed. "Lesage wanted to marry La Voisin. Ha! That was then—they had a falling out, you see. They hate

each other now, and she has another lover, and—”

“But what methods did Lesage use, madame?”

“He used every method known—spells, incantations, doses of poison, even bludgeoning, yet nothing worked. Once Monsieur Montvoisin’s maid Margot bumped his elbow just as he was about to taste the poisoned soup.” She giggled. “There was one occasion when he realized in time he had been poisoned and used an antidote. But he hiccupped for months and suffered constant nosebleeds, poor man. He was hard to kill.” She barked a laugh. “It became a joke among us. ‘Bonjour!’ I would say to her. And how’s your husband? Not dead yet?” She slapped her knee and roared with laughter.

La Reynie glared her into silence. “And he’s still not dead?”

“No, monsieur. He brags that his soul is glued on tight.”

“And Lesage—where is he?”

“I have not seen him for some time, but I know he cannot be far.”

“I see,” said La Reynie. “Is there anything else about La Voisin that we should know?”

La Bosse leaned forward conspiratorially, as if La Reynie was now united with her in the pursuit of evil. “Monsieur, the King could perform no greater boon for his city of Paris than to exterminate that whole miserable race of fortunetellers.”

“Indeed?” La Reynie suppressed a smile.

“It is the ruination of the world. Why, there must be 400 of them in Paris alone. It all begins innocently enough with a palm reading,” she said eagerly. “But countless women, women of all classes, ladies of quality—all of them owe their downfall to that seemingly innocent first step.” She lowered her voice to a husky whisper, as though La Voisin was in the next cell. “Indeed, monsieur, once the fortuneteller discovers her client’s weaknesses, she has them in her power and can lead them wherever she pleases.”

* * *

“I am innocent, monsieur.” Perched atop the sellette, La Voisin sat up straight and fixed La Reynie with a haughty stare. “I am being persecuted.”

“By whom?”

“Why, the missionaries, of course, the ones founded by Vincent de Paul. They have been plaguing me for the past fourteen years, accusing me of heresy. What did they tell you?”

“They have told me nothing, madame.”

“Did you know they sent me to render an account of my arts to the doctors of the Sorbonne, who found nothing to criticize? And that I discussed the science of astrology with the professors, *and* that I exchange social calls with the rector of the University of Paris? And besides, did you not arrest me just as I came from mass at my parish church?”

“Madame, the charges against you have nothing to do with heresy—”

“Or witchcraft? By my recollection, His Majesty removed the criminal penalties for witchcraft and sorcery in 1672.”

“Madame, you are not being charged with heresy. You are being charged with furnishing poison to murderers.”

“I? Absurd.” She wrinkled her nose at the offensive allegation. “I read faces, I read palms, I read cards. I tell the future, monsieur, occupations I learned at my mother’s knee at the age of nine. I use my gifts to reassure anxious clients and to support my family. Nothing more.”

“That is not what your friend Marie Bosse said.”

“What?” she sputtered. “You take the word of that, that—putain?”

* * *

From la Bosse to la Vigoureux to La Voisin, there were charges and countercharges, more suspects hauled in. Back at his desk, La Reynie sat gazing with despair at the stack of papers demanding immediate attention.

Brisk stomping of boots and his office door swung open. “Monsieur—look who we found lurking about.” And there was a pleased Captain Desgrez with a firm grip on an all-too familiar ungainly figure in a reddish wig and musty grey cloak.

“Well, well, well.” La Reynie walked over to the dour prisoner. “And who do we have here?” he said, circling the suspect. “I seem to recognize the wig. Let me guess... Adam Coeuret? No... Dubuisson? No.” He peered at the nervous prisoner’s face. “Aha—I remember, Lesage. The last time we met, you were head-

ed for the galleys. For life, as I recall." La Reynie passed behind Lesage, then turned and grabbed him by the throat while Desgrez twisted the prisoner's arms behind his back. "Who let you out?" La Reynie snapped. "Talk."

"I, I can explain," Lesage gasped, his eyes bulging. Desgrez let up just a little. "I don't know exactly who, but—we were released because of our bravery."

"Bravery? You?"

"I swear, monsieur. The galley I served on was distinguished in action against the Genoese, so we were all released."

"Indeed." La Reynie finally let go. He was really getting too old for this. "Get him out of here." Desgrez turned Lesage toward the door. "We know how to get the truth."

The pressure now off his throat, Lesage's perennially brazen attitude returned. "Oh, monsieur, please don't be trite. That threat may work on your more stupid prisoners, but I know you are ruled by the law, which forbids torture except by sentence of a court. If you want information, especially about witches—"

La Reynie motioned for Desgrez to pause. "What kind of information?"

Lesage looked at Desgrez with a sneer. "Please release your grip on me, monsieur."

By now La Reynie didn't know whether to be insulted or amused, and chuckling to himself, he nodded to Desgrez to release him. Lesage straightened his ratty wig and assumed an air of boredom that would make a courtier proud. "I understand you have arrested my former... ah, amie, La Voisin," he said, casually inspecting a hangnail. He cocked an eyebrow at La Reynie. "What have you learned about her? Have you interrogated her yet? She is a habitual poisoner. And, if I might suggest—have you looked in her garden?"

* * *

Twilight was just descending when La Reynie and Desgrez arrived at La Voisin's elegant villa at Villeneuve-sur-Gravois, the dark, empty house looming before them in the chill spring mist. All the occupants had been arrested, including La Voisin's stepdaughter and her maid Margot. Her hapless second husband was being questioned. Now only the search of the premises remained

to be done, and La Reynie headed straight for the garden. He paced through the dripping foliage toward the pavilion, noting that someone had been busy of late turning the soil in various places, leaving muddy spots. The hour was drawing late, and a cold wind pursued him down the path, fluttering his cloak and chilling him to the bone. He caught a whiff of something, and his nose wrinkled in disgust. *Is that smoke?* Yes, but... "Captain, over here."

Lesage had alerted him to the pavilion designed for outdoor entertainment. "Look behind the tapestry," he had said. La Reynie and Desgrez followed the smell inside to the tapestry on the wall and found behind it a small oven. Desgrez swung open the cast iron door. Inside were ashes, and a ghastly odor still lingered.

"What could they have been burning, monsieur?" Desgrez sifted through the ashes with his dagger. "Look, it's bones." He gently extracted them with his blade. "Animal, or—"

La Reynie suddenly felt ill. "I don't think it is animals."

Desgrez kept searching until with a click, his dagger bumped something hard—something that had not turned to ashes, something that rolled out of the oven down to their feet—a small, charred skull. They stared.

La Reynie looked up and contemplated the loose earth here and there about the garden. "Mon Dieu, no," he whispered. He turned to his captain; whose face had paled. "I need men with shovels," he said firmly, steadying himself with his own authority. "I want this garden dug up immediately. Get them started then meet me inside."

Walking back to the house in the drizzling rain, La Reynie shivered, struggling to recover his equanimity. Infants, perhaps hundreds of them.

He found La Voisin's house to be lavishly appointed, although in garish taste. He paused at the drawing room—a stuffed chair facing a brocade settee near the fireplace, a table between them with tarot cards on a silk cloth, everything ready for the unwitting client. He spied in a corner an ornately carved cabinet, its doors locked tight. With a twist of his penknife he opened it and found vials of evil-smelling liquid, mysterious powders in jars and individually wrapped papers. He carefully sniffed one of the

concoctions, then jerked his head back. Poison? He put it back, shut the cabinet and headed up the stairs.

Inside an upstairs wardrobe he found hanging an array of vestments, including an elaborately embroidered dalmatic, a tunic like the one worn by a deacon at High Mass; a skirt of lace-trimmed, sea-green velvet, and a fabulous cloak of crimson velvet embroidered with hundreds of double-headed, wingspread golden eagles. Neatly placed below the cloak was a pair of slippers with the same eagles sewn in gold thread. The ensemble surely cost a fortune.

A nearby cupboard revealed incense, black tapers, even a crucifix. Most interesting was a leather-bound book decorated with a five-pointed star, the text written in Latin and Hebrew. Could this be a grimoire, a book of spells? And there lay another book appearing far more mundane, like a book of accounts. He opened it at random, and the names leaped from the page: "Her clients—Sweet Mother of God, it's half the people at court."

* * *

"My dear friend." Athénaïs embraced Colbert, come to visit at her Paris apartments. "Has this dreadful weather blown you to Paris? Come and get warm."

"Thank you, madame, you are too kind." Colbert handed his wet cloak to the valet and kissed Athénaïs on both cheeks. She led him to a settee at the crackling fire. "May I offer you café au lait?" He nodded.

"Mademoiselle," she called, "café au lait." With an anxious smile, Athénaïs turned to her guest. "What brings you to Paris?" He opened his mouth to answer, but she couldn't wait. "Tell me, is he still enamored of her? What has happened since I left?"

Colbert sighed. "Yes, they are still together, and..." He looked at her for a long moment, so seriously she became alarmed.

"What is it? Bad news?"

"No, madame. I bear a message from His Majesty." Athénaïs bit her lip, steeling herself. "He wishes you to return to court—" He took a deep breath. "And he further desires to appoint you Superintendent of the Queen's Household."

She gasped. A thousand thoughts raced through her brain, converging in her heart. "Superintendent of the Queen's House-

hold? But—” Her eyes filled with tears. “No.”

Colbert took her delicate hand in his wrinkled one. “But *ma chère*, you should feel honored. It brings the rank of a *duchesse*, which you have longed for and so richly deserve.”

“I wanted it, yes, but not this way.” She began to sob and fumbled in her bag for her lace handkerchief. “It means... you know what it means.”

“Yes. As Superintendent of the Queen’s Household, you cannot also be the King’s mistress.” He patted her hand in a vain attempt to comfort her. “But you are still the mother of his children, and His Majesty still holds you in the highest regard.”

“I know, I know.” Athénaïs dabbed at her eyes. “But the Comtesse de Soissons still has the position—”

“She has been asked to relinquish the post.”

“What? Why?”

“I am not at liberty to divulge all the details, but, well, since the arrest of La Voisin, His Majesty has found it necessary to make a few changes at court.”

Athénaïs paled. “I see.” But Cato walked in with the silver coffee service, and Athénaïs caught her curious stare. “I will pour, *mademoiselle*. You may leave.” She turned her attention to serving coffee and getting information.

“The whole court is talking about it, you know,” she said as she picked up the pot.

“About what?” Colbert eyed her as she poured the steaming coffee.

“Why, La Voisin’s arrest, of course. Sugar?”

“None, thank you.” He took a sip. “Tell me, what do they say?”

“Well.” Athénaïs smiled brightly as she poured herself some. “*Tout le monde* knows that she was arrested on poison charges and that she had a very high-born clientele.”

“Yes, I have heard.”

“Why, the entire court is buzzing. Many of them were her clients. They are worried that because of some harmless folly—”

His eyes narrowed. “If their follies were indeed harmless, they have nothing to worry about. Besides, there has been entirely too much gossip and speculation.”

Athénaïs opened her mouth, then shut it. “Yes, of course.”

Colbert quietly contemplated her. “*Madame*,” he said softly.

“You should know that the entire court is talking about you.”

“About me? But they always talk about me. That is not news.”

“Every little thing is news to those bored courtiers, madame, and the talk is about you describing the King’s new favorite in most insulting terms.”

“And what of it? That stupid little ninny has neither the intelligence nor the wit to maintain the position of *maîtresse en titre*.”

“That should be no concern of yours, madame. The King has made his decision.”

“How can you speak to me in such a tone? I thought you were my friend.”

“Madame,” Colbert said soothingly, “I am indeed your friend. And as your friend I have taken pains to impress upon His Majesty both your qualifications for your new post and your gratitude in receiving it. I am simply urging you to show discretion in your speech.”

“Discretion!” Athénaïs stuttered, not knowing whether to scream or weep. “Discretion? I am to be discreet, when I am continually humiliated by that vapid—”

Colbert raised a warning hand.

“Yes, I know, I know. And it’s not just her. It’s my so-called friend Mme de Maintenon. She spends hours with the King, talking about everything under the sun. I can understand respecting her advice, but he used to honor *my* opinion. And she took my son from me.”

“Madame?”

“My son, the Duc du Maine. She has poisoned his mind against me, I am sure of it. He will not spend any time with me, always clinging to her.” She gave way to choking sobs.

“Madame, do not despair. He still loves you, I am sure. You must not give up hope.”

“I haven’t given up hope. I know he will return to me—”

“Your son?”

“No, the King. He will see how foolish he has been, and—”

“Madame, for heaven’s sake, it’s *over*. Your love affair with him is over. Surely by now you must know that.”

“No!” Athénaïs shut her eyes to blot out the awful reality.

“No, I don’t know that. He will come back to me—he *must*.”

* * *

It seemed now to La Reynie that he had the entire court under investigation, including Mme de Montespan and her sister-in-law the Duchesse de Vivonne. And Sylvie was working for the duchesse—what was happening there? Perhaps her latest letter forwarded from Sergeant Dupont would tell him.

“My dear parents,” it began, “I do not have much time, so I will be brief. We are packing because madame is going to the country. Here is the news: First came word that Mme de Montespan was leaving court in a rage. When the duc told madame about Mme de Montespan I was in the wardrobe room. I could hear madame laugh and mock her sister-in-law and say it was about time that chienne got her reward. This made her husband angry. He shouted at her that it was through his sister that they had made their fortune. She laughed and told him that he must be a fool for not having those rewards from his own merit. He slapped her, then she announced she was disgusted with him and she wanted to go back to her estates.

“But right after he left, Mlle Cato, who works for Mme de Montespan, rushed in. She said that La Voisin had been arrested. Madame gasped and cried that she was ruined. But Mlle Cato said not to worry because Mme de Montespan was leaving court. They were talking about doing something to her, or about her, but I could not make out what they were saying. I saw madame a little later and she was pale and quiet.

“I pity Mme de Montespan. When she visits she has been kind to me and admired my needlework. Now she has no friends. I am lonely too. I used to idolize the beautiful lords and ladies. But now I see that they are but wild beasts clawing at each other.

“I hope I will be able to visit soon. I need to find a way for me to write to M. La Reynie. If you are agreeable, please have M. Desgrez deliver my letters directly to him. Tell him that the best spot to retrieve them is in the chapel just behind the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

“Your loving daughter, Sylvie Dupont. P.S.: Who is La Voisin?”

Chapter 23

The Burning Chamber May, 1679

La Reynie's coach clattered briskly down the Paris streets toward the Arsenal, surrounded by mounted soldiers scanning the rooftops and alleyways for signs of trouble. A musketeer rode on top with the coachman; and inside behind drawn curtains sat the irritated Lieutenant-General of Police. Captain Desgrez sat across from him, a pistol in his belt.

"This is absurd." La Reynie fussed with his white collar, hot in the stuffy coach. "Having to defend myself from the citizens of this city whom I have sworn to protect."

"Indeed, monsieur. Do you have any idea who sent the threat?" Desgrez asked. "Perhaps one of the families of the accused?"

"Considering the length of the list of highborn suspects in this city, it could be anybody. But I am concerned about Sylvie. I started worrying about her the day she got her position in the Duchesse de Vivonne's household."

"Yes, I am as well. At least now we can get her letters directly. That saves a few days."

La Reynie peeked around the curtain to look outside. Catching an angry stare from a pedestrian, he shut the curtain tight.

Desgrez pulled out his flintlock, set it to half-cocked position just in case, and laid it on the seat next to him. "For Sylvie's sake, I hope Mme de Vivonne is not another high-born witch's client plotting the demise of her husband."

"I agree. And what if Mme de Montespan herself is a client of La Voisin? Would she hire La Voisin to get the King back? And is she in league with Mme de Vivonne, or are they rivals? Perhaps Sylvie can provide some answers."

With a squeal of brakes their coach and entourage pulled up before the moldering hulk of the Arsenal, where the proceedings of the *Chambre Ardente*—the Burning Chamber—would take place. La Reynie and Desgrez got out and made their way through

the crowd, kept at bay by more soldiers. The *Chambre Ardente* was charged by the King to remove these sensitive cases from Parliament—causing that venerable body to protest loudly—giving them to the *chambre* for the sake of security and privacy. The name went back to the burning of the heretical Huguenots, tried in a room draped in black, lit with flaming torches. Although candles had replaced the torches, the evocative name stuck.

Desgrez positioned himself at the door while La Reynie took his place on the high bench with his fellow black-robed judges—Louis Bazin de Bezons; the president, Louis Boucherat; and ten other judges. Below them sat Solicitor-General Robert and Court Clerk Sagot. He shivered. While outside it was a lovely spring afternoon, the chamber was cold and dim, lit only by high barred windows and sputtering candles.

The defendants were dragged in: fat Marie Bosse with her son and daughter, and her fellow witch and bed mate Mme Vigoureux. Their eyes widened at the sight of the judges high above them. Bezons rose to pronounce sentence:

“Mme Bosse,” he intoned, “you are sentenced to undergo the Question, and then to be burned alive at the stake—”

“No!” she screamed. “I cooperated with you—I told you everything!” A guard slapped his hand across her mouth.

“Sentence to be carried out in two days. Mme Vigoureux.” All eyes turned to the other witch in the dock. “You are sentenced to undergo the Question and then to be burned alive at the stake. Sentence to be carried out in two days.”

La Vigoureux turned white. “But I have important evidence for the court—names, important names. Spare me, and I will reveal all!”

* * *

A few weeks later, La Reynie slipped through a side door of the Versailles chapel, positioning himself in the back next to a pillar. He had come with more disturbing news for the King and had a hunch most of his potential suspects would be here at morning mass, so he decided to attend—and observe.

The chapel was crowded with nobility contemplating more earthly than spiritual matters, jostling each other to find the perfect place to be seen. During services, His Majesty would sit in

front facing not the altar, but the rest of the congregation. In spite of his own flexible morality, Louis wanted to see who was—and was not—attending chapel.

La Reynie scanned the crowd and found a familiar face with a long nose. Olympe, Comtesse de Soissons, was whispering to her sister, the Duchesse de Bouillon. Both were glaring at Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan. Athénaïs stood on the left side of the chapel; at her side was Mme de Maintenon with one arm around the fidgeting Duc du Maine. Across the aisle stood Mlle de Fontanges surrounded by fawning courtiers.

He smiled. The King's harem was present for mass.

A boy soprano began to sing an Ave Maria. As his voice soared, La Reynie winced, remembering that high-pitched scream from la Vigoureux, her intestines distended with water, begging for mercy.

"Who else is involved?" he had demanded. "Talk!"

"The Italian—she coughed, her eyes bulging, grimacing with pain. "Primi Visconti."

"What about him?"

"He knows everyone. Everything—" She gave a long, terrible shriek, then fell silent.

"And what about the Comtesse de Soissons, and her sister the Duchesse de Bouillon? Were they also your clients?"

No reply. The doctor felt for her pulse. "She has cheated the executioner, monsieur."

* * *

The choir began a glorious Palestrina motet, pulling La Reynie back into the present. The angelic voices of the choirboys floated high into the incensed air of the chapel, hovering there among the gilded angels and haloed saints, then drifted off into silence. He whispered an Ave Maria to dispel the darkness.

The organ thundered, and all turned to see the procession of King, bishop, and priests marching into the church. La Reynie was struck by the King's appearance—gone was the sober brown velvet attire of old; His middle-aged Majesty was now decked out in diamonds and emeralds and cascades of lace as if he were a young cavalier, all of which failed to conceal his growing waistline and fleshy jowls. As the King passed Mlle de Fontanges, she

gave him a flirtatious smile. The King gave her a barely perceptible nod and continued his dignified march to the altar. La Reynie chuckled. Why, he's old enough to be her father.

The King was followed by the stately Bishop Bossuet, his white halo of hair glistening in the morning sun, surrounded by acolytes and deacons. La Reynie tried to take his mind off the botched torture session by focusing on the mass, but was interrupted by whispering.

"Look!" a male voice hissed in an Italian accent. "Do you see them? It's too amusing."

La Reynie turned and had to suppress a smile. Both Mme de Montespan and Mlle de Fontanges clasped prayer books and rosaries, their respective pairs of lovely eyes gazing heavenward, rapt in prayer.

"Regardez," the Italian chortled. "They're as ecstatic as a pair of saints."

Then with ringing voice and dramatic gestures, Bossuet delivered an oration (again) inveighing against the immorality at court, exhorting the faithful to remember their Lenten resolutions of purity, all the while glaring at both Mlle de Fontanges and Mme de Montespan.

"Bossuet is in rare form," came a whisper on the other side of the pillar.

"And aren't you glad it's rare?" the Italian chuckled.

"Ite, missa est," Bossuet finally chanted, "Go, the mass is ended."

"Deo gratias," the choirboys sang in response, their voices fading into the distance.

"Yes, thanks be to God, the mass is finally over," whispered the same irreverent voice to a chorus of muffled giggles.

As the King, Bossuet, and the acolytes solemnly proceeded out of the chapel, La Reynie discreetly peered around the pillar. Well, no wonder—it's Primi Visconti himself, Italian fortuneteller extraordinaire. If he only knew. La Reynie waited until Visconti was several paces ahead of him before he left. On his way out he spied a familiar face—Sylvie. She turned and saw him, but kept on going. They had agreed to not recognize each other in public.

* * *

Athénaïs caught a glimpse of La Reynie just as he passed by. She took a breath to steady her nerves then turned around to collect her things, only to discover the Comtesse de Soissons and Duchesse de Bouillon.

“My dears!” Athénaïs gushed. “Such a pleasure to see the two of you again. How long has it been?” She turned to Olympe, the former Superintendent of the Queen’s Household. “I regret I have seen so little of you lately. I have been terribly busy—but then, you know what a trial that position can be.” She languidly waved her fan. “As you surely remember, some of those ladies-in-waiting need constant supervision. It’s no wonder you chose to retire, you must be completely exhausted.” She lifted an eyebrow. “In fact, *ma chère*, you look positively pale. Are you well?”

Olympe had, in fact, turned white, the only color on her face two bright circles of rouge. She curled her lip to spit out a reply when the duchesse’s hand restrained her.

“So kind of you to be concerned about my sister,” the Duchesse de Bouillon interjected smoothly, fluttering her black eyelashes. “But I assure you she is in the best of health. Come, dear sister, we must be going.”

The ladies stalked out, Athénaïs behind them. For once she could hold her head high.

* * *

The King took a paper from a stack and centered it precisely before him. “La Vigoureux promised sensational revelations. Then she died. Correct?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” sighed Louvois. “She died during the water torture.”

“It seems to me,” said Colbert, “that a little less haste might have revealed more.”

“But haste was important in this affair,” harrumphed Louvois, “lest desperate people take their own lives, or the lives of others, and prevent justice from penetrating to the truth.”

La Reynie had to come to Louvois’ defense. “She did make important revelations before she died. As did la Bosse.”

“What sort of revelations?” asked the King.

“La Bosse declared that one of la Vigoureux’s clients was none other than the Duchesse de Bouillon, who offered 50 pis-

toles to speak to the spirits.”

“The Duchesse de Bouillon?” His Majesty’s eyebrows shot up. “Can you verify this?”

“We hope for more details,” said La Reynie. “But she named someone else, confirmed by la Vigoureux. They recommended we bring in Primi Visconti for questioning, that he could make important disclosures about prominent people. He is, after all, a successful fortuneteller with much of the court as his clientele. If you like, I can draw up an arrest warrant.”

“Primi? Primi Visconti?” Louis threw back his head and roared with laughter, while Louvois smirked and even Colbert smiled and shook his head.

La Reynie squirmed. *What did I miss?* Carriage loads of clients—including the Comtesse de Soissons—reportedly lined up in his courtyard waiting to have their fortunes told.

“When Primi first came to court,” said His Majesty, eyes twinkling, “he stunned everyone with his amazing talents. People flocked to him in droves, and still do. I challenged him. ‘Primi,’ I said, ‘I give you a choice—a 2,000-livre pension which I will pay you for your secrets—either that or the hangman’s noose.’ So he told me. He had recognized the handwriting of another man in the sample submitted as a specimen of mine, because he had been forewarned that my secretary could imitate my hand to perfection. And he could tell the courtiers many astonishing facts about themselves because his sponsor at court had coached him in advance.”

La Reynie smiled evenly. “Since that is the case, I will not proceed on Monsieur Visconti. However, his lady friend, the widow Marguerite Léonard, is in custody. It seems her husband died recently under suspicious circumstances. She came to Visconti last year for a palm reading. Visconti not only predicted she would lose her husband before the year was out, he said she would remarry none other than himself.”

“Indeed?” replied His Majesty, now quite serious. “Well, keep us posted on the matter.” He pulled another paper from his stack. “I understand you arrested another witch abortionist.”

“Yes, la Lépère was a midwife-abortionist in the employ of La Voisin. When high-born women came to her saying they were pregnant, she performed the abortion usually with a syringe or

a long quill pen.”

Louis recoiled with a shudder.

“If the woman had felt life, la Lépère would baptize the infant and bribe a grave digger to bury it in the corner of some cemetery. La Voisin, she claimed, was not nearly so scrupulous. If a girl came to her thinking she was pregnant, but actually was not, La Voisin gave her a treatment anyway. When la Lépère objected to that practice, La Voisin told her that if the women believed themselves to be whores, she saw no reason to argue with them. La Voisin would bury the infants all about her garden—not to mention incinerating the larger ones—and when la Lépère protested, La Voisin told her to keep her mouth shut.”

“And what about la Lépère’s clients—anyone at court?”

La Reynie hesitated. “We do have one name, Your Majesty—but that information has not been verified.”

“And who might that be?” Louis lifted an eyebrow.

“The Duchesse de Vivonne.”

“What? No—she’s the wife of the Admiral of the Fleet.”

“Yes, Sire, and the sister-in-law of Mme de Montespan.”

“When did this happen? When did she—allegedly—have an abortion?”

“Seven or eight years ago. But again, we do not know if it is true. La Voisin is reluctant to talk, so I plan to confront her with her former paramour Lesage. That may inspire revelations from them both.”

“I believe you said Lesage was a charlatan. Then what about the others, like La Voisin? Are they diabolical witches, or just opportunists who sell poisons and fake spells and abortions? And those vestments you found at La Voisin’s house—what were they used for? Real ceremonies, or just gibberish designed to impress the gullible?” His Majesty’s moustache curled. “And do witches really ride about on broomsticks? I always thought that was nonsense.”

“I wish I could answer you, Sire. I do not know if they are all witches, or just pretend to be. In fact, I am not even sure what a real witch is.”

“Well, find out.”

Chapter 24

A Devilishly Good Plan June, 1679

La Reynie shut his office door behind him, peeled off his stifling black robe then threw open a window for a breath of fresh air after a stuffy, depressing courtroom. What had he missed? The infamous Mme de Poulailhon was only banished. Solicitor-General Robert demanded the death penalty, but—the lady showed so much wit and presence of mind before the judges that they could not bring themselves to give the poor creature anything more than banishment. The problem: lack of physical evidence.

A knock at the door. “Monsieur?” Desgrez tentatively peered around the door. “Do you have a few moments?”

“Certainly, have a seat. Desgrez nodded. “Was it because of her connections at court?”

“Partly. We have many more defendants to investigate—of both high *and* low estate—and they can’t all have connections. But what brings you here? For news of the trial, or...?”

“First, news. La Voisin’s husband has died of natural causes.”

“Poor man. I wish we had been able to question him more thoroughly. Ah, well.”

Desgrez smiled. “And I have something for you.” He opened his satchel and pulled out an elaborately carved black wooden box. “We found this at the home of the witch la Trianon.”

“My,” said La Reynie. “What did you find? Poison, I presume? She is supposed to be La Voisin’s chief apothecary.”

Desgrez pulled out packets of incense, potions, and powders, then black candles, laying them on the table. “And look at this,” he said, carefully extracting a score of wax figurines bristling with pins.

La Reynie picked one up. “I wonder who this was for? This doll must represent some poor cursed soul, with a pin in its heart and another in its belly. I hope the spell didn’t work.”

“Well, monsieur, as for spells—” Desgrez pulled out a book,

The Luciferian Credo.

“Mon Dieu.” La Reynie perused the book. “A grimoire. I found another one in La Voisin’s house.” Inside the front cover were drawn two concentric circles, bisected with a cross; and curving along the inside of the circles was written, “Alpha,” “Omega,” and “Aglá” along with the phrase, “Dominus adjutor meus.”

“What does it mean?” asked Desgrez. “I know Alpha and Omega are the Beginning and the End, but as for the rest, my Latin is rusty.”

“It says ‘God my helper,’ but I have no idea what ‘Aglá’ means... Wait a minute. That is what Vanens was praying. I wonder...”

“Would that help?” Desgrez pointed to the leather volume on La Reynie’s desk. *“The Malleus Maleficarum.* You once told me it means *‘The Witch’s Hammer.’* Does that mean a hammer used on witches, or by witches?”

“On them, presumably. It was written by German witch hunters.” La Reynie started leafing through the book. “I did not find much here that is useful. On the contrary, it is very troubling. It claims women—all women—are not only physically weaker than men, they are morally and intellectually weaker, prone to all sorts of carnal vices, and therefore liable to either commit witchcraft or consort with witches.

“Listen to this about the power of witches: ‘They can see absent things as if they were present; they can turn the minds of men to inordinate love or hatred; they can strike at times whom they will with lightning, and even kill some men and animals; they can make of no effect the generative desires, and even the power of copulation.’”

Desgrez lifted an eyebrow. “I heard that they could make a man’s member disappear.”

La Reynie tried unsuccessfully to suppress a grin. “Yes, the book spends many pages on that subject. Anyway, witches ‘cause abortion, kill infants in the mother’s womb by a mere exterior touch; they can at times bewitch men and animals with a mere look...’ et cetera, et cetera.” La Reynie tossed the book aside. “Much of this is ridiculous. However, there are some interesting allegations about midwives.”

“Midwives?”

“Remember that episode a few years ago, where several

poor Parisians claimed that a midwife had stolen their babies? The book claims that midwives are the most evil of women, that they kill infants before they are baptized and offer them to the devil. We need to determine the cause of death of those infants we found in La Voisin's garden."

"Do you think midwives are evil?"

"Certainly not—although I am still not sure what we are dealing with here. For example, His Majesty asked me if witches could really fly."

La Reynie chuckled. "Let me read you this. 'Now the following is the method of being transported. They take the unguent which, as we have said, they make at the devil's instruction from the limbs of children, particularly of those whom they have killed before baptism, and anoint with it a chair or broomstick; whereupon they are immediately carried up into the air...' Of all the strange allegations we have heard, flying does not seem to be one of them."

He closed the book. "One thing I do know. The witches' clients—the ladies at court—seem to fit in every respect the analysis of that wretched book: jealous, vengeful, spiteful, plotting—and perhaps downright evil."

* * *

La Reynie climbed out of his carriage at the Arsenal into the summer heat, the air still heavy from the pungent smoke from burning witches and poisoners (the defendants of low estate). One after another, witches were tortured and burned. Meanwhile, Mme Dreux (of high estate) still languished in the Bastille, while the *Chambre Ardente* puzzled over her alleged crimes.

He coughed and wiped his eyes. *I am breathing them in, thought La Reynie, along with their filthy crimes. Who is behind all this? One person, or many?*

To find out, it was time for Lesage and La Voisin to be confronted by their accusers—each other.

"You betrayed me," hissed La Voisin at her former paramour. "I took you into my home and my bed, I introduced you to my clients, only to have you *steal* them."

"And it is a good thing I did." Lesage harrumphed. "Indeed, I took her gullible lady clients who were all set to poison their

husbands and directed them instead toward harmless white magic and hocus-pocus.”

“Really, monsieur?” asked La Reynie. “Did you not perform acts of sacrilege, such as the Black Mass?”

“*Moi?*” he huffed. “I would never indulge in such trumpery. My activities were confined to consummating marriages, forwarding romances, and locating buried treasure. If my clients thought I could perform magic, I was not about to have them think otherwise.” He feigned a look of aggrieved innocence. “You don’t think I believe in such foolishness, do you?”

La Voisin exploded. “Yes! By your own mouth you admit how you deceived me. I thought you were a true believer.” She turned to La Reynie. “Monsieur, you yourself would be astounded at the amazing performance he put on for my clients. Items in an armoire—laurel branches and crystal cups—he caused to disappear and reappear in the garden. Even I could not do that. And the lies!” She whirled around to confront Lesage. “He told me he was one of the ten original Sibyls of the Ancient World, a master of the Cabala.”

Lesage smirked. “Tell the court about the curse I put on your husband.”

“Really?” La Reynie raised an eyebrow.

La Voisin took the bait. “Yes—he laid a death spell on my poor husband by saying prayers over a ram’s heart, then burying it. My husband cried out with pains in his stomach, and, and—” She hesitated. She had said too much.

“And then you took pity on him,” sneered Lesage, “and begged me to lift the spell, didn’t you? And you thought I was responsible. You are as gullible as your clients.”

“Yes! Perhaps I was gullible. But you cannot fool the court. I will tell them how even after serving your sentence in the galleys, you continued to run your counterfeiting operation. And the items you dosed with poisons—enemas, underclothes, gloves, and perfumes—”

“Not my poisons, madame, yours. You have been dealing in poisons for more than fifteen years. What about the poisons you delivered to the court at Saint-Germain?”

La Voisin winced as if she had been struck. She set her mouth hard and refused to speak.

* * *

Late morning, and Athénaïs didn't want to rise from bed just yet. Cato had brought café au lait and opened the drapes revealing an early September rain beating against the windows, heralding yet another day of disappointment. Louis' visits were sparse and excruciatingly polite, driving her to too much gambling, too much brandy, and now she had a headache.

"Mademoiselle Cato," came a familiar voice. "Is madame up yet?"

Athénaïs looked up with a start.

In came Cato. "Madame, the Duchesse de Vivonne would like to see you."

"Of course."

Antoinette swept in with a brittle smile, kissed Athénaïs on both cheeks, then sat. The rules of the game were clear—prior animosity must be put aside for the sake of decorum.

"Mademoiselle," Athénaïs called, "Café au lait for madame."

Soon they were drinking coffee and chatting about the dismal weather, each one eyeing the other over the rim of their cups. Finally, Cato was gone.

"Ma chère," said Antoinette, "these are difficult times."

Athénaïs tightened her grip on her cup. "Why do you say?"

"The arrest of La Voisin. And did you hear Lesage was arrested too?"

Athénaïs stared at her cup, trying not to react.

"And now that fool La Reynie is casting his net even wider. Many innocent members of the court are being named. It is a disgrace."

"I agree, it is terrible. One cannot tell who will be named next." Athénaïs pretended to sip her cold coffee, avoiding Antoinette's stare.

Antoinette put down her cup. "You are a good friend of Colbert. What does he have to say?"

"Nothing—I mean, I have not discussed it with him at all."

"Good."

"But—but why should I be worried? I have had nothing to do with La Voisin."

"Oh, please, Athénaïs, I know you were at her house, and I know you saw me too."

“Yes, with the rest of the world.”

“But the rest of the world is not under investigation. Be careful what you say to Colbert. He does not need to know about us. We do not know whose side he is on.”

“But, *ma chère*, his daughter is marrying your son. And you cannot trust him?”

Antoinette put her cup down and rose. “I am sure Colbert discusses this with La Reynie. Watch what you say to him, or there could be consequences.” And she was gone.

* * *

September brought a fountain of accusations from Lesage, spewing out tales of poison, love spells, furtive rites with pots of urine. La Reynie and Desgrez hauled in suspect after suspect and most of the evidence pointed to La Voisin. It took over a month of hammering for her to open up once more—but the wait was worthwhile.

“Yes,” she sighed, “I furnished poison to Mme Leféron so she could kill her husband.”

Finally, thought La Reynie. “And what about Mme Dreux?”

“Yes, I sold some to her as well.”

“And who assisted you in this—Lesage?”

“No, the Abbé Mariette. You arrested him several years ago—”

“With Lesage, yes.”

“You should know the truth about Lesage!” she exclaimed. “He took two of my best clients—Mme de Vivonne and Mme de la Mothe.”

“Antoinette de Vivonne, the sister-in-law of Mme de Montespan?” She nodded. “And Mme de la Mothe. Why did these two ladies come to you?”

“One day they arrived together, and said they wanted something to do away with their husbands.” She pursed her lips in disgust. “I told them that I didn’t care to deal with such matters, but I hear they found their way to Lesage.”

And it was back to Lesage again in his nearby cell.

“La Voisin mentioned Mme de Vivonne?” Lesage assumed his best air of righteous indignation. “Just like the rest of them.” He shook his head. “These women, all they want to do is kill

their husbands. Well, let me tell you the whole story. La Voisin, not so long ago, made deliveries of Spanish fly to the Château Saint-Germain—”

“The aphrodisiac?” asked La Reynie, giving the poor clerk time to scribble furiously. “To whom did she deliver it?”

“A maid in Mme de Montespan’s household, by the name of Mlle Cato. And do you know how Cato got that position? She was formerly in Mme de Vivonne’s household.” Lesage slyly examined La Reynie’s face for a reaction.

“Go on.”

“The same deliveries were also made to Mlle Claude of Mme de Montespan’s household. And! At the moment you arrested La Voisin, she was conspiring to place yet another confederate in Mme de Montespan’s household, a woman called la Vertemart. But that is not all.” Lesage’s eyes widened with affected horror. “Around that time, La Voisin got involved in something she bragged would make her very rich and she could leave the country. Her husband tried to dissuade her. He said that it would lead to disaster.”

* * *

Transcripts were rushed to the King, and he sent new instructions. La Reynie must continue, but he must record the transcripts on separate folios, and to keep the folios apart from the official records. The King would decide later what to do with them.

“But what about the Duchesse de Vivonne?” asked Desgrez, sitting before the fire in La Reynie’s study. “Mon Dieu, she is the sister-in-law of Mme de Montespan.”

“Read this.” La Reynie handed him another letter. “Louvois wants daily updates about any allegations against her.”

“But the transcripts are in separate folios. The Chambre Ardente might not ever know about these accusations?”

“That seems to be the case.” La Reynie sighed, deeply troubled.

“But why?”

“I think you know the answer to that question.”

“Yes. I do. I wonder what will happen to those transcripts.”

La Reynie turned to the fire, pondering. “I have considered

that. I will be keeping my own copies, just in case." He turned to Desgrez. "Sylvie—we need Sylvie to try to tell us more about the Duchess de Vivonne."

"Do you think she can get any more information about the alleged abortion?"

He shook his head. "Possibly, but I don't want her in danger. Desgrez, you must contact her directly, but discreetly. Perhaps you can get her back to her parents' home where we can discuss this privately."

His captain was already on his feet and halfway out the door.

* * *

La Reynie kept hammering on the reluctant La Voisin. "Did you not make many trips to Saint-Germain?"

"I went there only twice," she said firmly.

"How long have you known Mlle Claude de Vin des Oeilletes?"

"I have never known her. But—if it is Mlle Cato you are talking about, who has been living with Mme de Montespan, and who had an aunt who lived in the Rue des Vieux-Augustins, I knew *her* through her aunt."

"Did you help to place her in Mme de Montespan's household?"

La Voisin hesitated. "I said prayers for her, three novenas," she finally replied.

"Novenas? To Mary and the saints? Not—" Ghastly visions of unspeakable rites flitted through La Reynie's brain.

"Just novenas, monsieur. That was all that was required."

"And she paid you for that?"

"Her aunt did." She pursed her lips. "She gave me a worthless ring and one écu."

"And when was the last time you saw Mlle Cato?"

"Not since she got the position."

"Did la Vertemart ever speak to you about placing her with Mme de Montespan?"

"That is possible, but I myself never worked toward that end." She pouted. "Monsieur, if I were going to place someone in Mme de Montespan's household, it would have been my mother-in-law, whom I was trying to place with the help of Cato's aunt. But Marie Vertemart told me she wished to be placed with some-

one of quality, and that she would give me a pearl necklace for my trouble.”

“But did you not push to be a go-between for la Vertemart in that matter of service to Mme de Montespan?”

“Yes, well, ah, it was placement with either Mme de Montespan or some other person of quality; but nothing ever came of it. She is totally unsuited for such a position. “Hmf!” She snorted. “She is a loose woman.”

“But *someone* was working toward placing her in Mme de Montespan’s household?”

“Yes. Marguerite, la Vertemart’s aunt. And Lesage told me that Mme Bosse was in on it too.” She curled her lip in a smile. “Lesage said it was a devilishly good plan.”

After some more prodding, La Voisin detailed the complex web of associations—la Vertemart’s father was supposed to take a petition to Saint-Germain. “Lesage said he would accommodate it and pass it on,” La Voisin added.

“What did he mean by that? What was in the petition?”

La Voisin frowned. “I don’t know what he meant, and I don’t want to know.”

“Does anyone else know?” La Reynie leaned forward.

“Yes. Several people knew. And they were trying to get Marie Vertemart into Mme de Montespan’s household.”

* * *

“Monsieur,” La Reynie wrote to Louvois, “for some reason, la Vertemart, her sister, and her aunt, were trying to infiltrate Mme de Montespan’s household. I need arrest warrants immediately for them and for Abbé Mariette, Lesage’s old co-conspirator. We need to get at the bottom of this.”

La Reynie sent the letter then went to the prison and paid Lesage another visit.

“You should know, monsieur,” declared Lesage, “that the plot to place la Vertemart arose while La Voisin was helping Mme de Montespan. And as I recall, the negotiations took place at the house of Mlle Claude de Vin des Ouillets in Paris.”

“When was this?”

Lesage stopped to think. “About three years ago; 1676, I think. It was then that I heard Mlle Cato’s name.” He lowered his

voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Find the fortuneteller la Filastre. You will hear astounding things."

* * *

But it was Marie Vertemart, the merchant's daughter, they found next.

"When did you become involved in this affair?" La Reynie asked.

"Well," she smiled coyly, "It was about the time of the marriage of Mlle de Thianges—"

"Mme de Montespan's niece?"

"Oh!" she giggled. "Or perhaps it was at the time of the marriage of another of Mme de Vivonne's relatives. Anyway, I talked to Mlle Cato—"

"And where was Mlle Cato at that time?"

"Mlle Cato was one of the maids of the Duchesse de Vivonne. Or was she at the household of Mme de Montespan?"

"But did you speak to Mlle Cato?"

"Yes, I did, but she told me that I had applied too late, that the position had been filled."

"But you already had a relationship with Mme de Vivonne, did you not?"

She squirmed just a little. "Well. I had to visit her often, as she bought my father's merchandise. I collected the money from her."

"And what about Mlle Claude—did you ever speak with her?"

"No—ah, no, I never met her."

"But La Voisin tried to place you in Mme de Montespan's household."

"No!" Her eyes widened.

"You are lying. Didn't you offer her a pearl necklace in order to gain entrance to Mme de Montespan's household?"

"Oh no," she whined. "Me? I am hardly qualified to be a lady in waiting. I do not have the slightest idea how to work in such a household. Why, I can't even embroider. So why should I conspire to work for Mme de Montespan?"

Chapter 25

The Magician October, 1679

*L*esage, you're as slippery as an eel, La Reynie muttered to himself as he again walked down the prison hall to the suspect's cell. *Are you really telling the truth, or—*

"Monsieur!" called the jailer. "La Voisin wishes to make a statement. She insists it is important."

Finally. Can she shed some light? La Reynie headed to her cell instead.

"You need to know the entire truth, monsieur," she announced with an ingratiating smile. "I regret that I have withheld secrets confided to me by persons of quality."

"Indeed." La Reynie nodded to the clerk to begin.

La Voisin folded her hands primly across her plump stomach. "It is in regards to the ladies who approached me to do away with Mlle Louise de La Vallière."

"Which ladies, and when did this occur?"

"The Comtesse du Roure and the Vicomtesse de Polignac, before Lesage stole them away from me. Both desired to be rid of their husbands, like so many others. But! These ladies especially wanted the affection of the King and spoke often of poisoning Mlle de La Vallière."

"And when was this?"

"Years ago, before 1666. But nothing came of it that I know, because Lesage took them from me." She sniffed. "But the worst of them all was the Comtesse de Soissons."

"So, Madame la Comtesse visited you. When was this?"

"Around that time. She came with her friends, the Maréchale de La Ferté and the Marquise d'Alluye. When I read her palm, her solar line was very pronounced, so I told her she had been loved by a great prince. And she exploded! She demanded to know if this love could be reawakened. I tried to reassure her that it was possible, but she would not be satisfied with anything less than success. She hated Mlle de La Vallière and demanded that I elim-

inate her. I tried to tell her that it would be difficult, but she flew into a rage. She said I must help her, and if she could not get satisfaction against the mademoiselle, she would carry her vengeance further and would stop at nothing.”

“What did she mean, stop at nothing?”

“She despised the King for not loving her. If she could not have him, I assume she did not want anyone else to have him.”

“Did the comtesse perhaps go to Lesage as well?”

“But of course. He saw to that.”

* * *

“Oh, well, yes,” said Lesage with a wave of his hand. “She is correct. But there is more you need to know. A bout three years ago—1676, I think—four highborn ladies came to see me. They wanted to get back from la Filastre a piece of paper that the witch was using to compromise them.”

“And what was on this paper?”

“I heard it was a pact with the devil. The Duchesse de Vivonne drew up the pact with the other ladies asking terrible things. I found out about it because la Filastre was holding on to the document and wouldn’t return it. The duchesse was in a panic and begged me to get it back. I promised I would.” He sighed. “Unfortunately, I was not able to retrieve it.”

“Did you actually see this paper, even a glimpse?”

“No, I never saw it. However, I heard that la Filastre had been promised 3,000 livres if the wishes in the paper were granted.”

“Again, who were these women?”

“The Duchesse de Vivonne.” Lesage carefully eyed his inquisitor. “And the Duchesse d’Angoulême, the Duchesse de Vitry, and the Princesse de Tingry.”

“The Duchesse d’Angoulême?” La Reynie’s eyes narrowed. She was supposed to be a middle-aged paragon of virtue. “Indeed. Why did these ladies ask you to retrieve the paper?”

“Well, to be precise, they needed my advice on how best to proceed in the matter.”

“But why you? Weren’t *you* the one to make the pact with the devil in the first place?”

“*Moi?* Monsieur, you can call me a charlatan and a thief, but I have never engaged in sorcery. All I did was give my clients what

they wanted—marriages, buried treasure, and the like. On my part, it was nothing more than an easy way to make money.”

“Very well.” La Reynie pondered for a moment. “Now, what do you know about a plot to poison Mlle de La Vallière?”

Lesage sighed. “That was years ago.”

“Do you remember who was involved?”

“Yes. Mesdames de Polignac and de Gramont wanted to be in the good graces of the King, and they wanted to poison Mlle de La Vallière. I said prayers for them—only gibberish in Latin, you understand—and buried some pigeon hearts. Just simple hocus-pocus.” He smiled. “Monsieur, I got these ladies to quit La Voisin and her wicked poisoning ways. That way no harm could come to Mlle de La Vallière.”

“Indeed. But what about the Comtesse de Soissons—are you not familiar with her?”

“In that regard? No.” He arched a cynical eyebrow. “However, you should know about her sister, the Duchesse de Bouillon. She tried to hire me to facilitate the death of her husband in order to marry her lover, the Duc de Vendôme.”

* * *

“Monsieur, are you saying that Mme de Vivonne is under investigation? Is Sylvie in any danger?” The usually placid Sergeant Dupont paced back and forth in his office.

“My dear Sergeant,” said La Reynie, “please be assured that Sylvie’s safety is paramount. Yes, there are allegations against the duchesse, but—”

A jingle of reins outside. “Ah,” said the sergeant. “She has arrived.” Sylvie ran in, flushed and bubbling with excitement, accompanied by Desgrez. Cries, curtseys, hugs, refreshments offered, and finally they all sat down.

“Did you have any trouble getting away, Sylvie?” asked La Reynie.

“No, monsieur. I am just visiting my family on a Sunday afternoon.” She smiled. “They thought Captain Desgrez was a relative come to fetch me.”

“Thank you for coming. I am sorry to take away time from your family.”

“Oh, but I have been *so* looking forward to seeing you. I have

many questions. That household is a strange place. Tell me," she leaned forward intently. "What is happening with La Voisin? I hear many rumors about her."

"I cannot tell you much, because there is an investigation. What have you heard?"

"She is a witch, no? I hear whispering about the arrest. People are nervous and angry, especially at you. Was the duchesse a client of hers?"

"Perhaps. La Voisin had many clients. Tell me, have you heard of Mlle Cato?"

Her jaw dropped. "Cato?" She burst out laughing. "She hates me. She thinks I was trying to get into Mme de Montespan's household."

"Why was that?"

"Well, it started when this merchant's daughter—Marie Vertemart, I recall—tried to persuade Mme de Montespan to hire her. She said that La Voisin recommended her. Papa, do you remember her? You arrested her a long time back. Why are you staring at me? What is going on?"

"You know about Marie Vertemart?" La Reynie asked. She nodded. "And you met Mme de Montespan?"

"Yes. She seems to like me, probably because we both embroider. Anyway, I stopped la Vertemart from bothering her. I could see that she was very embarrassed, especially when La Voisin's name came up."

"Really?" La Reynie paused. "And Cato works for—"

"Mme de Montespan now, and she used to be in our household."

"I see. And what is the relationship between the duchesse and Mme de Montespan?"

"Difficult. They are sisters-in-law, but one would never know it. The duchesse hates Mme de Montespan and was glad when she left court temporarily. Odd, though, I have seen them whispering together."

"And did you hear of Mlle Claude?"

"Indeed, yes. Mme Jeannette said that she was a friend of Mlle Cato and used to work for Mme de Montespan. Then she had a baby." She put her hand to her lips to suppress a smile. "I hear the baby was the King's."

La Reynie looked at Desgrez then back at her. They should have known this. “Sylvie, is there anything else you can tell us about the duchesse—anything that you might find odd or disturbing, especially about her past.”

“Everything there is odd and disturbing. The servants whisper about La Voisin, but then Mme Christine appears and they shut their mouths. Madame hates her husband and Mme Christine helps her find excuses to get away. Madame probably has a lover somewhere. But they both seem to like me—or at least need me, because I was training to be a midwife.”

“Really, Sylvie?” La Reynie raised an eyebrow. “What did they want from you?”

Sylvie paused. “This is a rather delicate matter, monsieur. She took a deep breath. “I was kneeling on the floor measuring her bed for the new bed-hangings. Oh, they will be beautiful, I found the design in an English book—”

“Sylvie!” her father prompted.

“Yes, Papa. I overheard her complain to Mme Christine about, ah, female matters.” She fidgeted, unsure what was appropriate to reveal.

“Please, Sylvie, it may be important,” said Papa.

“Mme Christine was not sure how to help her, so I mentioned that I had apprenticed to a midwife. They both were rather astonished.” She smiled proudly. “When I said I was experienced with herbal remedies they were very pleased.”

“Yes, I am sure they were,” said La Reynie. “Sylvie, this is important. Please keep us advised as to what the ladies want from you, in addition to anything else you might overhear.”

Sylvie stopped smiling. The Lieutenant-General of Police was asking her to spy on her employer—and the way he looked at her now, so seriously, there must be a risk. But how fascinating! “Yes, monsieur,” she said quietly. “I will try to learn more.”

“Messieurs!” Mme Dupont came in, wiping her hands on her apron. “Please, it is time for dinner. You will stay to eat with us?”

Sylvie turned from La Reynie to Desgrez. “Oh, please stay,” she said with a hint of a blush. “Maman is a wonderful cook.”

“Sylvie, come help,” said Maman.

“One moment, madame.” La Reynie turned to Sylvie. “Is there someone in that household you can trust, who can look

out for you?"

"Of course, monsieur, Mme Jeannette is my father's cousin and she has been very kind."

"Yes, monsieur," said the sergeant, "we can trust her."

"Did you tell her that you know me?" She shook her head. "Quite right."

"Meanwhile—" He turned to Desgrez. "The captain here will be keeping an eye on you."

With a grin, Desgrez bowed extravagantly to Sylvie. She bit her lip, her deep blue eyes dancing. "I need to help Maman." She curtseyed and fled to the kitchen.

* * *

Colbert shook his head in disbelief when La Reynie told him the latest allegations. "Did you confront La Voisin again to try to reconcile her story with Lesage's?"

"Yes," said La Reynie, "and I found her drunk—I think she had stolen a bottle of wine from one of the other prisoners—that I couldn't get anything out of her. She kept rambling on and on about the babies, the ones we found burned and buried in her garden. There were 2,500 of them, she said. And one of her clients was Mlle Thérèse du Parc, the actress."

"Jean Racine's mistress, the one who died?"

"The same. She hated Racine and claimed that he poisoned her."

"I can't believe it. Do you recall he is now the Royal Historiographer?" Colbert asked.

"He is? Well, we are following up on him, for possibly Mlle du Parc came to the witch for an abortion."

"Mon Dieu, think of the scandal. To drag a man like Racine into this is unconscionable. Does she have any proof?"

"La Voisin claims that as Mlle du Parc lay ill, Racine refused permission for La Voisin, her dear friend, to visit her. She alleged that Racine must have poisoned her."

"If I was in his position, I don't believe that I would have allowed her to visit, either. And a gentleman with his reputation, for us to drag his name through the mud."

"But look at the alternative, monsieur. To do nothing just because of a name or a title would be wrong, would it not? His

Majesty read my report with horror, and he wants a complete investigation of everyone involved.”

“Admirable. He could just as easily cover everything up. But,” Colbert rubbed his creased forehead distractedly, “God help us. How could the nobility be so gullible as to fall in with this lot of fortunetellers and witches? They must be warned.”

“Yes, and I have an idea. Perhaps we can use the power of the stage...”

* * *

“Isn’t this exciting?” Gabrielle gushed as she, Athénaïs, Louis-Victor, and Antoinette took their seats in their theatre box. “I have been looking forward to this evening. I hear that the special effects are most impressive.”

Athénaïs scanned the audience, the light from hundreds of flickering candles revealing several people she knew in the packed theatre. She had been talked into seeing *La Devineresse: Or, the False Enchantments*—a title surely referring to La Voisin. Tout le monde, everybody knew that it had been commissioned by La Reynie himself. He had obviously designed it to persuade the witches’ noble clients that they had been fooled and cheated. How could one avoid coming without looking suspicious?

“Well, ma chère,” said Athénaïs, turning to Antoinette, “are you prepared to be amused?”

“Actually,” sniffed the duchesse, “I am prepared to be annoyed.” Her ice blue eyes surveyed the chattering crowd. “I see your friend is here.” She pointed her fan in the direction of a box to their left, where Mme de Maintenon was surrounded by fawning admirers. “My, what a surprise, your governess named as lady-in-waiting to the future bride of the Dauphin. Surely you tried to persuade her of the inappropriateness of that honor.”

“Indeed, I did,” Athénaïs snapped. “She claimed that she would much prefer to live in freedom at her little kingdom of Maintenon. And then she sighed—you know how she does—and claimed that if the King commands her to form our young Bavarian princesse into the manners of this country, had she the right to refuse? Really. She could not comprehend that for the King to raise her up would be to tear me down. What will people think?”

“Indeed,” replied Antoinette. She leaned toward Athénaïs,

covering their faces with her black lace fan. “What *will* they think? I imagine you must wish to be rid of her.”

“Vraiment. Truly, the woman is intolerable.”

“Then I am sure you could find a way, discreetly of course. Not all of our friends have been arrested.” She smiled, her blue eyes glinting in the candlelight.

Athénaïs blinked.

Thundering applause, and the curtain rose on that ridiculous play preaching the gullibility of the public. A magician in exotic robes proclaimed “Abracadabra!” as he waved his magic wand. Before the startled eyes of the audience, he cut a man in two then reassembled him in a puff of smoke. And what are those flitting across the stage—genii? Why, they seemed to pass right through a brick wall. And on and on, laying bare the stupidity of the witches’ clients.

Furious, Athénaïs fumbled in her purse for her snuff box. *That son of a bitch, Lesage*, she thought. *It was all a hoax, a trick.* She looked sideways at her sister-in-law, frozen into her public smile. To be rid of Françoise? Bon Dieu, in that way?

The play finally ended with waves of applause and curtain calls. “Wasn’t that fascinating?” Gabrielle exclaimed. “Can you believe it, there are charlatans out there pretending to be real witches.”

“No,” Athénaïs muttered. “I can’t believe it.” She felt a warning hand on her arm. “We seem to have an admirer,” Antoinette whispered, nodding toward the audience below.

Then Athénaïs saw him: a distinguished looking gentleman who was carefully studying the holders of the box seats. Their eyes met. *Sacrebleu! It’s La Reynie.* The ladies flashed their brightest smiles, and fled.

Chapter 26

The Price She Paid December, 1679

Desgrez finally found la Filastre and La Reynie rushed to Vincennes Prison for the interrogation, his mind crowded with bizarre allegations. She created a pact with the devil with Mme de Vivonne and then held on to the document for blackmail; and she plotted to get inside the household of the King's latest mistress, Mlle de Fontanges. Was any of this true?

La Reynie took his seat at his high desk, checked to see if his faithful clerk Sagot was ready, then began.

"Your name and age?"

"Françoise Filastre. I am 35."

"Married or single?"

"Neither."

"Are you addressed madame or mademoiselle?"

She smiled, a bare slit. "I am neither married nor unmarried. I was debauched, monsieur, when I was eight years old." Her pale blue eyes were as flat as the prison walls.

Odd, La Reynie paused, a wealthier suspect had confessed the same thing had happened to her. "Who—who did this?"

"A valet." She shrugged. "And so, I was unable to marry."

And then, totally expressionless, she verified her attempt to infiltrate the household of His Majesty's new mistress. She had not only approached a gendarme to help her in gaining entry to the mademoiselle's household, she admitted she was the mistress of a known poisoner. Was Mlle de Fontanges the target of a poison plot? La Reynie immediately told Louvois, who stationed guards in her household.

* * *

"What?" His Majesty looked up from the stack of transcripts with a frown. His council sitting before him glanced at each other, uneasy. La Reynie, Louvois, Boucherat, and Bezons were all supposed to solve this mess. "Are you saying that not only was

Mlle Fontanges the target of a plot, but the Duchesse de Vivonne was involved in some kind of curse?"

"Yes, Sire," La Reynie replied. "We have the testimony of the witch La Bergerot. She said that in 1667 she was visited by the duchesse who hated Mme de Montespan and needed help. La Bergerot referred her to Abbé Cotton, and the duchesse wrote down a list of demands so the abbé could work some magic. But the list somehow disappeared, and the duchesse was frantic. Later, in 1675, la Bergerot said la Filastre read to her a pact she made with the devil that included the name of the duchesse."

"But what was in the pact?"

"We don't know. The document has disappeared. Lesage claimed it involved some kind of danger to you, but La Voisin claims that the duchesse wanted only to do away with her husband."

"I find all this difficult to believe," said the King. "Especially La Voisin's allegations against Racine that he was responsible for the death of Mlle du Parc. Have you been able to prove that?"

"So far," said Louvois, "La Voisin's claims have not been substantiated. We asked la Filastre what she knew about it and she insisted she knew nothing."

"Of course she knew nothing," Bezons interjected. "Your Majesty, the whole story is patently ridiculous. To think that a man of Racine's reputation would stoop so low—"

"It is possible," said La Reynie, "that Mlle du Parc visited La Voisin for the purpose of an abortion which may have led to her death. Then again, her pregnancy might have been embarrassing to Racine, giving him the motive for poisoning her. I have therefore prepared an order for his arrest, if that is Your Majesty's wish." He handed the order to the King. At this, La Reynie's fellow ministers looked pained.

Louis handed it back. "Monsieur, please hold it for now. We need corroboration. The case as it stands is based entirely on La Voisin's word."

"But it's not just Racine being implicated," said Boucherat. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. "The nobility are frightened and outraged. I—all of us here—have been approached by people of quality who are in despair that their names are being dragged in the mire. It is a most delicate situa-

tion." He fell silent while his fellow judges nervously eyed each other. An ember snapped in the fireplace, causing Boucherat to start.

"Approached or threatened?" Louis stared.

Boucherat paused. "Both, Your Majesty" he whispered.

Bezons nodded. "I myself have received anonymous, threatening letters."

The King turned to his Lieutenant-General of Police. "And you, Monsieur La Reynie, have you received more threats?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I have as well, plus many of the nobility have complained forcefully." *That's putting it mildly*, he thought, reflecting on the elegant penmanship of the most recent death threat shoved under his door.

Louis silently assessed the faces of his ministers; then he rose, bringing everyone to their feet. The King was barely average height, but now seemed to tower over them.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I wish to thank you for your hard work and dedication in the face of these trials." His dark eyes bored into theirs, searching for any sign of weakness. "You must not let anything dissuade you from your duty!" He slammed his fist down hard on the table. "For the sake of the public welfare, you must get to the root of this dreadful traffic in poisons, so that it can be eradicated entirely. You must do absolute justice, without regard to rank or sex or position. It does not matter who is named in this affair, or how highly they are placed. Justice must be done."

* * *

Now it was La Voisin's turn on the sellette to answer Lesage's allegations, as was her right under French law. La Reynie and Bezons stared down at her from their high desks, Lesage's damning testimony before them.

"Lesage stated that you delivered powders of some kind to Saint-Germain and Versailles," Bezons began. "What was in them?"

"What powders?" she shrugged. "I know nothing about powders. Unless," she smiled, "you may be referring to my trip to Saint-Cloud to sell rouge to the ladies of Madame Henriette."

La Reynie leaned back. Lesage had said that not just pow-

ders were on their way to the court. There was the mysterious petition La Voisin had planned to deliver to the King. He said that La Voisin's first mission to deliver the petition failed, and she had been arrested just before her second attempt. And after delivering the petition, the witch had planned to leave the kingdom with 100,000 écus, probably with "le Grand Auteur," apparently a sinister mastermind. Lesage said that he warned her this enterprise would bring disaster.

"Tell us, what was in the petition you were to give His Majesty?" demanded La Reynie.

La Voisin squirmed, uncomfortable with both the question and the hard seat. "Romani and Bertrand brought it to me already prepared, so that His Majesty would free my friend, Sieur de Blesis. The Marquis de Termes had kidnapped him."

"Ah, yes. I understand Blesis is an alchemist, no? Why did the marquis kidnap him?"

"Blesis was amazing! He was going to make me a fortune. Why, he even knew how to make silver through the use of goat's fat and turn base metal into gold."

"Goat's fat. Really. And that's why the marquis was holding him?"

"Yes. Since he knew how to turn base metal into gold, or at least copper into silver, the marquis held him in his château to force him to manufacture some." She pouted. "The marquis even installed furnaces and told him that he would not be released until he had completed the job. Months went by, and he refused to release him. So Blesis' friends and I decided to get a petition to the King to have him set free."

"I see. And how was Lesage involved with the petition?"

"Lesage told me that if we wished to present it, that he would treat it in a manner that would make it work, but I never gave it to him."

"But what was Lesage going to do with it?"

"I don't know, I—I was going to take the petition to Saint-Germain without him doing anything to it and present it in the usual fashion with Romani."

La Reynie kept at her, but she stuck to her original story. "And who is le Grand Auteur?"

"Really," she sniffed. "l'Auteur' was only my supplier of spirit

of mercury and silver, Latour.”

And on, and on. Cato? It was Cato’s aunt who paid her a paltry sum to facilitate entrance to Mme de Montespan’s household. Mlle Cato? Never met her, and never visited the Duchesse de Vivonne. La Vertemart did indeed ask for help in entering Mme de Montespan’s household, but La Voisin refused.

“And do you know the Comtesse de Soissons?”

“Yes. She demanded that I find a way to get rid of Mlle de La Vallière—and if the King would not submit, I must dispatch him too. And would you believe that she only paid me five gold half louis?” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. Obviously, no amount could compensate for her current troubles.

But La Voisin did provide more details about Lesage’s client the Duchesse de Bouillon. “Do you know what Lesage said about her?” La Voisin declared. “He said, ‘The duchesse is like the rest of them. She is crazy—all she wants is to kill her husband.’ That’s what the duchesse wanted from him.”

Startled, La Reynie and Bezons just looked at each other. That confirmed what Lesage had said.

* * *

Later that night in his chamber, La Reynie read and reread the ancient texts on the abominable crime of witchcraft. Lesage’s words resonated in his head: “These women are crazy. All they want to do is kill their husbands.” Tales from the *Malleus Maleficarum* of incubi and succubi, demons that seduced all-too eager women in their sleep, that suffocated, raped, and emasculated men, grasped at his imagination. Shivering, he wrapped a blanket around himself and positioned the sputtering candle closer to the yellowing text. Is that what La Voisin and the others were doing? Riding about on brooms, cavorting with Satan, devouring babies? Superstitious nonsense. Surely now, in modern times in Paris, it could only be a massive conspiracy to defraud and deceive and occasionally even to poison. But...

The witches’ clients. Did they indulge in abominable deeds? Women are most susceptible to these horrors, the texts insist. Did that include Madame de Montespan? His mind turned to the first time he saw that extraordinary beauty, dancing with His Majesty so long ago. Her hold on the King was the talk of the

court. Lesage insisted she had been a client of La Voisin. What powers did the witch bestow upon her? And what was the price she paid?

* * *

Sylvie ran up the stairs to her little room, clutching the latest letter from Desgrez. She loved intrigue, and it had been exciting to overhear conversations, leave notes for Captain Desgrez behind the statue of the Virgin, nervously hide in a remote pew to wait for him to retrieve them, then silently slip away. So wonderfully mysterious, exciting to see him. Last week she almost got to talk to him, but—he didn't have time to chat, he said, putting her note into his satchel. He must get home, his wife's parents were coming for dinner. She stared at his back as he rushed off. His wife. He is married.

Now what? Why should she care that Desgrez needed her? But here was the latest request. She scanned it eagerly, but, like always, there was nothing personal in it. Never anything personal, just hoping she would have more information on Mme de Montespan and the duchesse. How could she describe it all?

Whispers, secrets, like the scurrying of rats in the walls emerging at night to feed on one's imagination. Sylvie knows things, the servants said nudging each other. She used to apprentice to a midwife. Go to her for your problem. Sylvie, once the lowly embroiderer, was now looked upon with respect. But what did they want? Herbs for the change of life, herbs for headaches, sleeplessness, nerves. Sylvie made trips to the kitchen, to the gardens, searching for the right herbs, wishing she could consult her aunt who was long gone from Paris. Then came whispered requests for something to make you bleed when you were a little late. Herbs to make you bleed? And how late are you? And where does one draw the line?

But Sylvie, sitting quietly at the window embroidering, would listen as they spewed their secrets. The prior supplier of such services was now in the Bastille—the duchesse had an abortion years ago—she and Mme de Montespan had visited La Voisin—and always a missing paper, whatever it was—but few details. What should she tell Desgrez?

And then one cold morning, boots tramped down the halls

of the château, louder and louder, men's voices, gruff, knocking on doors. Sylvie opened the door to find Captain Desgrez and his men, arrest warrants in hand, like a blast of frigid air storming through Saint-Germain in search of their titled suspects. She slammed the door, her heart pounding.

Her fellow servants went into a panic, all clucking like chickens in a henhouse invaded by wild dogs. "Are they coming here?" they cried. "What will we do?"

"Hush!" Jeannette exclaimed. "They have nothing to do with us. Return to your—"

Mme de Vivonne rushed in, Christine right behind. "Why are they here? Are they coming for me?" The duchesse cast her eyes about the room in a desperate search for aid.

"Surely not, madame," said Christine, gently taking her mistress by the arm. "Let us go to your bedchamber. They should not bother you there." She led her away.

Sylvie forced a brave smile. "Why are you all worried? Surely there is no reason to be afraid." But as they hurried off, she stood at the door listening, waiting. Would her captain actually come here to arrest madame? And would Sylvie be responsible for her fate?

"Come with me." Her elderly friend Antoine, who had been in the household for years, motioned for her to follow him. They retreated to a quiet hallway. "I will tell you why they are nervous. Promise you will not tell anyone," he whispered.

"Of course. What is going on? Why is madame afraid?"

"They are La Reynie's men. She fears they will arrest her, and it would not surprise me if they did."

"But why?"

"Madame has many secrets, nasty ones, secrets that others know about and want money for. I have heard things, Sylvie, terrible things." The old man's frightened blue eyes focused far away, searching the past. "There are rumors about her."

But here came a gaggle of servants and Antoine disappeared down the hall. Now Sylvie was scared. What are they trying to hide? She ran up the back stairs to her tiny room.

* * *

Athénaïs was in the main hall when the soldiers stormed

through. Her heart pounding, she turned to retreat to her apartments when she nearly collided with the grim-faced Duc de Bouillon rushing toward one of the salons. She paused; the thought of her enemies in trouble prompted her to discreetly follow him. She stopped at the door after seeing him join the Comtesse de Soissons, her lover the Duc de Villeroy, and her friend the Marquise d'Alluye.

The Duc de Bouillon laid his hand on the shoulder of his sister-in-law the comtesse. "Madame!" he hissed. "We must speak." He led her to an alcove.

Athénaïs shrank back from the doorway, grateful the hall was dark.

"But this is absurd," the comtesse cried. "I have done nothing!" A rustle of silk, and Athénaïs glimpsed the comtesse run to the marquise. "We must flee. His Majesty has deigned to warn me of our impending arrest. Can you believe it? He said he was warning me out of respect for my uncle the Cardinal. If he had that much respect, he would leave me alone."

"But—but flee? Both of us?" gasped the marquise.

"We either leave the country or face the Bastille."

The Duc de Villeroy protested. "But chérie, surely if you turn yourself in to the authorities you can prove your innocence."

"Yes," the marquise insisted. "We have done nothing wrong, so we should have nothing to fear. We must present ourselves at the Bastille and refute the allegations. Otherwise, people will say we are guilty."

"Nothing to fear?" the comtesse replied, her voice shaking. "You know Louvois hates me. He has witnesses at his command. The nerve, issuing a warrant against a person of my rank and station. He will not be satisfied until I am in prison or even on the scaffold. I would rather keep my freedom and protest my innocence later."

"But to leave the court, to leave France," the marquise gasped.

"Yes, and you must come with me."

"But—"

"Yes, madame," said the Duc de Bouillon. "A warrant has also been issued in your name. My own wife has been subpoenaed to appear before this mockery of a court."

Athénaïs felt sick. She quietly backed away from the door and fled to her apartments.

* * *

Up in her room, Sylvie prayed the rosary over and over to calm herself. “Ave Maria, gratia plena...” So this is why La Reynie wanted information. Madame has a terrible secret—what? Then Sylvie recalled how she learned the duchesse was different from other women.

Jeannette had brought her to the duchesse’s apartments to meet madame and Mme Christine, the guardian of the bedchamber. Jeannette had warned her to curb her enthusiasm, to not be a gawking peasant; and watch out for Mme Christine, a haughty former actress who put on airs.

Sylvie curtseyed prettily while the duchesse examined her as if she were a choice cut of meat. She declared she was not interested in embroidery, but her bed hangings were years out of date and should probably be replaced. Then madame took off somewhere, and Mme Christine, with a theatrical wave of her hand, ushered Sylvie into madame’s bedchamber.

Sylvie gaped at the size and opulence of the chamber; indeed, most people did not have a room just to sleep in. Even the prosperous bourgeois had their large curtained beds in their living space. But this! The air was heady with jasmine, the afternoon light streaming through the tall windows sent sunbeams dancing on the huge bed and glittering a crystal perfume bottle with an amethyst stopper. The ornately carved furniture glimmered from a fresh polishing, and the plush Oriental carpets invited bare feet.

And the tapestries. “It is all from the Gobelins manufactory,” said Christine, a rare smile replacing her usual frown. Sylvie practically ran to a wall hanging to see the workmanship. The tapestry wove the story of a naked damsel about to succumb to a satyr, her heaving pink breasts glistening. Sylvie looked closer and discovered pink silk woven in with the wool threads. *I wish I could learn how to do that*, she thought.

She turned to the embroidered bed hangings: faded, out of date, and a perfect opportunity for her to display her talent. She looked around the room for other textiles that might need

repair or replacement, and her eyes fell on the prie-Dieu with its cushion for madame's praying knees. It was unworn and uncrinkled, and the rows of candles before the small altar sat in pristine glass containers. This was unlike Maman's prie-Dieu, worn by countless hours on her knees, one Ave Maria after another before the smoking candles.

That prie-Dieu was Sylvie's introduction to the worldly duchesse, a lady of quick temper and cutting tongue. The only person in court who could best her in amusing, biting remarks was her bitter enemy Mme de Montespan; and her ally, her only real friend, was Christine.

Sylvie decided to stop cowering. Had the duchesse been arrested? She carefully descended the dark circular stairs from the servant's quarters down to the landing behind the living area. All was hushed. She felt for the door to madame's bedchamber. A voice—whose? Her hand found the latch and carefully lifted it.

The duchesse knelt at her prie-Dieu, her face in her hands, sobbing. Every candle on the altar was lit, the smoke wafting her prayers to heaven.

Perhaps the sinful duchesse was turning to God at last. Sylvie whispered a prayer of thanks, but as she turned to go—there, in a corner behind madame. Is that a shadow? Who—what—is that? It moved.

She shut the latch and ran back upstairs to bed.

Chapter 27

The News January, 1680

It was as if a cannon had fired into the midst of the court, exploding everyone's pretensions. Black clouds of rumor swirled around Saint-Germain and Paris—who would be arrested next? Noble suspects took flight to Paris, amongst one's friends and away from prying eyes. No one knew exactly what was happening—the newspapers were useless—so they gathered in frightened knots to console each other and gossip about whoever wasn't there, and above all excoriate both the judges and the abominable Lieutenant-General of Police.

In their search for news and sympathetic company, Athénaïs and Gabrielle braved the icy afternoon to call on the Marquis de Feuquières. He may be a suspect; therefore he was bound to have information.

The courtyard of the marquis was crowded with frosted-over carriages and inside the noisy salon, Athénaïs encountered a swarm of courtiers, the atmosphere thick with tension. Though freed from the stultifying atmosphere of court and the King, the crowd was not freed from fear for their reputations and perhaps for their very lives. What to do? Of course, indulge. A dark corner of the salon was occupied by a furtive couple, gender uncertain, their panting sighs drifting out into the rest of the party. They were ignored, the card players' shouts of triumph and curses of defeat drowning out the string quartet.

"Regardez, Gabrielle," said Athénaïs, removing her gloves. "Look who's *not* here."

"Who?"

"My sometime friend Mme de Maintenon and her worshipful acolytes."

"Vraiment," her sister replied, looking around. "I rather doubt she would approve."

As Athénaïs and her sister gave their cloaks to the valet, Mme de Sévigné came over. "My dears, how are you?" she said,

giving each of them a kiss.

"Quite well, thank you. Isn't the weather dreadful?" They made their way over to the welcoming fire.

"What's happening, everyone?" Here came Mme de Sévigné's cousin, the irrepressible Bussy-Rabutin, handing his cloak to the valet. "I came for news, and I bear some."

"Do you really have news, dear cousin?" Mme de Sévigné gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Certainly madame, would I lead you astray?" Looking around at the available ladies, he added, "Well, perhaps not you." He winked. She rapped him with her fan.

Athénaïs gave a pretend scowl. "Well? The news?"

Bussy-Rabutin looked around to see who else was listening. "As tragic and as sordid as this affair has been, it has produced at least one amusing story." He raised a sly eyebrow.

Athénaïs feigned interest. "Do you mean that there is actually entertainment to be had in these unfortunate times? Do explain."

He chuckled as he took the ladies aside. "It is the Duchesse de Foix," he whispered conspiratorially. "His Majesty confronted her with a letter that she wrote to La Voisin."

"What did it say?" asked Gabrielle, her mouth agape.

"Well—the letter said, 'The more I rub, the less they project.' 'What does this mean?' demanded His Majesty. And she said, she said—" He sputtered with laughter.

"What?" they cried.

"She confessed to His Majesty that La Voisin had given her a prescription for increasing the size of her bosom."

"No!" they screamed and fell into a fit of giggles. "No wonder she fled to her estate." They were interrupted by their host declaiming loudly from across the room, so they made their way past the card tables to join him.

"Those imbeciles," shouted the Marquis de Feuquières, distractedly mopping his brow with a handkerchief. "How *dare* they."

"Of whom are you speaking?" asked Athénaïs. "My dear marquis, forgive us for imposing on you at such a time, but we are dying for news." She offered her hand to be kissed.

"Ah, madame, such a terrible time. But your beauty and gra-

ciousness ennoble my poor house.” He kissed her hand with a flourish. “I was speaking of the *Chambre Ardente*, of course. The Burning Chamber, how appropriate—they are traitors to their class, dragging the nobility through the mire like commoners.”

“Indeed,” Primi Visconti replied, lounging on the settee behind them. He raised his glass of cognac in a mock toast. “And we owe it all to Louvois.”

“What?” exclaimed the marquis. “Not La Reynie? That mad fool. Surely the *Chambre* is his creation. Or perhaps Colbert—”

“Definitely not,” Primi spat. “Colbert can see the evil eye of this tribunal. Louvois, au contraire, is upholding it. It is *his* work. He advised the King to form it, and he is the one in control.”

“But what about La Reynie?” the marquis sputtered. “Why is he doing this to us? He had seemed so fair, so judicious, and now look at what he is doing. He’s despicable.”

“I suspect,” said Primi, “that La Reynie wishes to become a councilor of state, and in order to make a good impression he is turning upside down the most honorable families of Paris. Look what is happening to society. If one eats badly, he thinks he’s poisoned and has his cook and servants arrested. A letter to La Reynie and the prison gates swing open. Many languish there for months, even years, waiting to be interrogated.” He tossed back another swallow.

“But the rest of the tribunal seem to be honorable men,” interjected Bussy-Rabutin. “Except for Bezons, that Judas.”

“Bezons!” cried the marquis. “Do I have him to thank for my predicament?”

“You too are in difficulties with the *Chambre*, monsieur?” asked Athénaïs with politely restrained interest.

“Indeed, madame, I may be arrested.”

“No. What do they claim was your offense?”

“I have not been privileged with that information, madame. All I know is that I am supposed to be the client of a witch by the name of la Vigoureux. She claimed I sought her help for communication with the spirits, of all things.”

“Communication with the spirits? And for that you may be arrested?” Shivering, Athénaïs edged next to the fire. She forced a gay laugh and reached for her snuff. “What idiocy. To think that a man of your position could be arrested for such foolishness,

when it isn't even a crime." She inhaled deeply, hoping the blessed tobacco would calm her.

"Didn't la Vigoureux die under torture?" asked the lovely—and notorious—Maréchale de La Ferté, adjusting the lace barely covering her scandalously low-cut bodice. "At least, that's what I heard."

"You are correct," replied her host. "Tortured to death by mistake, I hear. And the testimony of that hag is ridiculous. These baseless charges are the product of a ring of professional poisoners who are prolonging their miserable lives by denouncing prominent people. The irony of it all—the time lost in that procedure is time gained for the criminals."

"Amen, amen!" the crown chimed in.

"I wonder what La Voisin has been saying," asked Mme de Sévigné. "Hasn't she been tortured yet?"

Athénaïs blew her nose, her handkerchief shielding her face.

Lounging on the settee, Primi Visconti eyed the crowd through his glass of brandy. "No, she has not been tortured yet—but soon, I am sure. And it will be most interesting to learn what she has to say. And by the way, I hear her daughter has also been arrested."

At that, the crowd became quiet. Athénaïs turned to the fire to shield her reddening face. She remembered La Voisin's daughter, very well.

Primi grinned wickedly at the Maréchale de La Ferté. "I heard you visited the witch often, no? And with the Comtesse de Soissons, I believe?"

The maréchale blushed all the way down her décolletage. "Well, yes, but I only went with my friends to be sociable." She fanned herself furiously. "I have no idea why I should be issued a subpoena just for that."

Athénaïs and Gabrielle cast each other knowing glances. The maréchale was known for her debauches and visiting La Voisin was surely the least of her sins.

"Speaking of the Comtesse de Soissons," said Mme de Sévigné in an attempt to focus the gossip on a more distant target, "has anyone heard where she went? How ridiculous, a woman of her station being forced to flee. What she was accused of is nonsense. Such silly stories as she has told on herself a thousand times, like

anyone who has visited La Voisin.”

Athénaïs felt herself relax, if only a little bit.

“Tell that to Louvois.” The room hushed, and all turned to Primi Visconti for this latest juicy tidbit. “Word travels fast. He heard that on two of her stops on the way to the border, there were not one, but two suspicious deaths. He sent his cavalymen after her to make sure she made it across the border without killing anyone else. By the time she reached Antwerp, then Namur, she found the city gates slammed shut. Apparently, her reputation preceded her.”

He chortled. “And just to make sure she kept going, when Louvois learned that she had made it to Brussels and was going to mass on a feast-day, he had a soldier sneak into the church and let loose a sack of black cats. The superstitious congregation had heard about the *Chambre Ardente* and the dangerous French who are poisoners and sorcerers. They took the black cats for demons and her for a witch.”

“No, really!” his audience gasped.

“Indeed. The angry mob set on her and chased her out of the city. Lord knows where she will turn up next.” Visconti took another swallow and settled back into the settee. The gathering fell into uncomfortable silence as they reflected on the shocking fall from grace of one of the most notable ladies at court.

“And her sister, the *Duchesse de Bouillon*?” asked Gabrielle. “Isn’t she also threatened with imprisonment?”

“What—you didn’t know?” laughed Visconti, now thoroughly drunk. “She was served with a subpoena to appear only two days hence.”

The crowd erupted into exclamations of astonishment at the prospect of the beautiful duchesse being dragged into court and made to sit on the sellette.

“And what about the *Marquise d’Alluye*?” asked Athénaïs. “Didn’t she flee with the comtesse?”

“I heard she tried to kill her husband,” the *maréchale* announced brightly.

“No,” retorted *Mme de Sévigné*. “She was accused of attempting to poison her father-in-law. Her husband made such furious remarks at the tribunal’s ridiculous accusations against his wife that now he has been banished too. In any event, she

finally parted ways with the comtesse and she is somewhere in the provinces.”

“And that is an option I must consider,” declared the fat, middle-aged Comtesse de Roure. Everyone stared. “Did you hear those ridiculous allegations? First my sister-in-law and now me.” The comtesse’s sister-in-law Mme de Polignac was also on the run, accused by Lesage of poisoning her valet because he knew too much.

“My dear, not you too,” murmured Mme de Sévigné sympathetically. “Such old tales. And do the judges think that you also, ah—” She tried to put the matter delicately, but the comtesse saved her the trouble.

“Yes, those fools think that years ago I plotted to depose Mlle de La Vallière in His Majesty’s affections.” She turned to Athénaïs. “I am being accused, even though I obviously did not succeed. And they think that my own sister-in-law actually used an aphrodisiac to seduce him. She was stupid to run from this silliness. I, at least, am going to stand my ground. I will appear at court and tell the truth—that it is all lies.” She glared at Athénaïs, who all knew *had* succeeded in winning His Majesty’s attentions.

Now they all stared at her. Athénaïs wanted to sink into the floor.

A loud rapping at the door, and their host froze like a hunted fox. A flustered valet rushed in followed by a bewigged, black-robed official and two burly musketeers, their spurs jangling on the parquet floor.

“Monsieur le Marquis de Feuquières?” demanded the officer of the court, brandishing a sheaf of papers.

The marquis gulped, then straightened his back with all the dignity he could muster. “Yes, monsieur, I am at your service.”

“Monsieur, I bring you a summons.” With a flourish, the officer handed him the document. “You are to appear at the Châtelet Court for questioning. Failure to appear will result in imprisonment.” He bowed, then he and his musketeers marched back out.

The pale marquis examined the summons in his shaking hand. “It’s—it’s just a summons—I am not being arrested.” He looked up at his gaping guests. “It’s only a summons!” He threw back his head in laughter. “And when they hear my defense, they will realize what idiots they have been.” His audience could

finally exhale and began to chatter nervously.

“Gaston,” called their host. “Bring out my best cognac!”

Her legs shaking, Athénaïs sank into the nearest chair.

* * *

Too much cider gave Sylvie the giggles, and she and old Antoine were laughing so hard they were splashing it out of the jug. She poured him some more—La Reynie needed information. For several sleepless nights, tossing and turning, Sylvie had tried to put the pieces together—what was the duchesse suspected of? So here sat Sylvie and Antoine alone in the servants’ sitting room, their pewter cups staining an old table scarred with the spilled cider and cheap wine of generations of servants, lit by a guttering candle. It wasn’t hard to lure Antoine up here with the promise of a drink after a difficult day dealing with madame’s tantrums and Jeannette’s scolding.

“How long have you been here?” she asked. “I wager it must feel like forever.”

He took a long draught of cider. “Ah, yes. I started when the duc and duchesse were married. Her family had the money, and he had the title. Sometimes marriages like that turn out well, but this one...” He fell silent.

Sylvie decided to probe further. “I have heard stories about madame.”

“Oh, my, lots of stories,” he chortled. “Like the one about the groom—”

“She went riding and came back pregnant.” Now both of them were laughing hard.

“And you know what is funny?” asked Antoine. “The duc doesn’t care. In fact, he is very fond of the boy.” He contemplated his cup. “I wish that were the only trouble.”

“More cider?” Sylvie filled it anyway. “You know,” she said while he took a long sip, “She truly hates her sister-in-law Mme de Montespan. I wonder why?”

He shook his head. “Sad. Years ago, madame got jealous of her over the King. She wanted him too, like everyone else. Then she got mixed up with the fortunetellers, and something changed.” Antoine’s faded blue eyes searched the shadows. “She hates court anyway. You know, always running off in search of

something or other. But after she met the fortunetellers, she became very frightened, angry." He drained his glass.

She poured him some more. "Mme Christine is pleasant to me, but I wonder—"

"Her? You must be careful with that one. All the trouble madame has gotten into, Mme Christine was right there."

"Really? And she seems like such a lady." Sylvie giggled. "And what about Cato? What was her position here? I know she is now working for Mme de Montespan."

The old man furtively looked around the room. "We have to be careful what we say."

"Of course," she whispered, and leaned closer. "What happened with her?"

"She knew everything," he hissed. "Madame met her at La Voisin's, and I think Mme de Montespan's maid Mlle Claude was there too, all in it together, and Mme Christine. I couldn't figure it out. Cato had no talent at anything, she couldn't serve dinner or embroider, but madame trusted her. That was when the troubles started. Then when Cato left—"

"Well, hello!" A jingle of keys, the door swung open and in walked Jeannette. "I thought I heard voices." She retrieved the jug, now almost empty. "You can drink like this on your day off. Now go to bed, both of you. We have a long day ahead."

Antoine stumbled off, feeling his way down the dark corridor, while Sylvie retreated to her garret room, dizzy with cider and suspicions.

* * *

Marie-Anne Mancini, Duchesse de Bouillon, swept up to the courtroom doors like a queen, with her husband the Duc de Bouillon on her right arm and her lover the Duc de Vendôme on her left. Then the doors swung shut on her crowd of distinguished friends. The duchesse sat in a chair—not, of course, on the sellette—and proceeded to remove her scented gloves, revealing her delicate, bejeweled white hands. She looked around. "Are these proceedings to be recorded?" she asked.

"Madame," intoned Presiding Judge Boucherat, "as you can see, we have a clerk to transcribe these proceedings."

"I want to be sure that my remarks are duly recorded. And I

also want to assert that I come not out of respect for the Chambre, for I do not recognize it." She sniffed. "I do not mean to allow any diminution of my privilege to be tried only by Parlement. I come only out of respect for His Majesty."

Boucherat ignored the insult. "Shall we proceed? Name?"

With a languid air, she answered the routine questions about her name, residence, and age. Then the questions became more pointed. She denied knowing the witch Marie Vigoureux, but she had met La Voisin.

"Did you visit her because you desired the death of your husband?" asked La Reynie.

"Desire the death of my husband? Ask him if he believes that. He escorted me to this very door."

"But why did you visit La Voisin?" Bezons asked.

"She came to my house one day saying she knew what curiosity I had in the supernatural. She recommended that I see a very exceptional man, a man of marvels, she said. So, several days later while out in my coach with some friends, we decided to stop at La Voisin's house to see this man, called Lesage, to see what extraordinary things he could do. He told me that he could burn a paper in my presence and later make it appear wherever I wished. Monsieur de Vendôme and I were supposed to write down requests on a sheet of paper, which we did. The paper was folded and sealed, and Lesage tied it with a silken cord, then sprinkled it with sulfur and set it on fire. Afterwards, Lesage said we would find the burned letter intact in a porcelain jar in my home, although this did not happen. Instead, he came to me two or three days later and brought the letter with him. It astonished me extremely to see the letter folded and sealed just as it had been before it was handed to him." She fluttered her fan.

"Please continue."

"Well, I repeated the story to my friends, and they could not believe it. They said we must get Lesage to burn another letter to see if he could repeat the performance. I sent for Lesage again, and another letter was thrown into the fire. We enclosed two coins for the Sibyls, as before. Lesage said that he would have the burned letter restored to me intact again and left. After sending for him several times, he finally came to say that something had prevented the Sibyls from appearing and that was why he had

been unable to reply. I have not seen him again. The whole affair was so amusing I repeated it to my friends and even wrote an account of it to my husband, who was away with his troops." She smiled at the silliness of it all.

"Isn't it true," said La Reynie, "that you wrote a letter and gave it to Lesage, who sealed it and burned it like the others, which included a spell to bring about your husband's death?"

"No. And that story is so ridiculous as to be unbelievable."

Finally, the courtroom doors swung open again for the triumphant duchesse who was greeted by a babbling crowd of admirers. "Really," she exclaimed, "I cannot believe that men of sense could ask such ridiculous questions."

Chapter 28

The Black Box February, 1680

“Thank you for allowing me to see you, Your Majesty.” La Reynie took his seat before the King.

“You said you want to discuss a suspect, someone who is too dangerous to remain at court? Whom do you have in mind?”

“There are two that concern me greatly. The first is the Duchesse de Bouillon, who just last week gave a rather convincing performance at her hearing. Poison is not unknown to her family. The testimony against her and her sister the comtesse was compelling.”

“And the second?”

“The Duchesse de Vivonne.”

Louis rubbed his forehead, his eyes pained. “It is just so difficult to believe.”

“With both these women,” La Reynie continued, “we have heard repeated allegations that they plotted the deaths of their husbands. We keep hearing another name, that of the Marquise de Montespan.”

Louis stared.

“There are two things that are concerning me about her, Your Majesty. The first is that her name keeps coming up in the witches’ testimony, mostly in regard to a plot to place la Vertemart in her household. Lesage insists that years ago she came to him for love potions, and he has claimed repeatedly that she has been a long-time client of La Voisin.”

“Nonsense. That cannot be true.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, it is possible that these are lies. But, the Duchesse de Vivonne, her sister-in-law, made a pact with the devil in order to become your lover and to get rid of her rivals. Remember the allegations that Mlle de La Vallière was the target of an assassination plot years ago, and several ladies have been linked to attempts to gain your love and to eliminate their rivals by any means necessary.”

“Ha! The cackling of hens.”

“But now we have the new plot by the witch la Filastre to gain entrance into Mlle de Fontanges’ household.”

“But why? Did you ask her?”

“Not yet, Your Majesty. There were people present at her initial interrogation that would not be privileged to hear any allegation against—”

“Mme de Montespan? Surely she had nothing to do with that.” The King fell silent for a moment. “Thank you for your discretion,” he finally said.

“Your Majesty, I can only imagine how difficult it must be to hear all this.”

“But then.” Louis frowned. “How do we know what the witches are claiming is true? After all, Lesage admits to deceiving his clients. Can his testimony be trusted?”

“We do not know for sure. However, much of what he said has been corroborated by La Voisin, and some of her claims have been corroborated by others. She will be questioned again soon and tortured before her execution. She should reveal the truth then.”

His Majesty sat back in his chair. “Dear God, I hope so. This matter of the Duchesse de Bouillon and her sister the comtesse has given me pause. One of the noblest families in France brought down on the word of scum. Then there is her trial. I have read the transcript.” He pursed his lips as if he had eaten a lemon. “And it does not exactly match what she is claiming now. Did you really ask her if she had seen the devil at La Voisin’s?”

“No—what did she say?”

“She says you asked her that, and she replied yes. She could see the devil at that moment, and he looked just like you.”

La Reynie flushed hot. “The transcripts do not reflect those remarks, Sire.”

“But she and her allies are claiming that the tribunal acquitted her of all charges.”

“Not quite. My fellow judges have not yet been able to reach a decision. She denied everything, and for a person of her station, well—”

“Do you think she is guilty of plotting to poison her husband?”

“Yes. The evidence is not as overwhelming as that against her sister, but there is plenty of it. Lesage’s testimony was corroborated by La Voisin. His remarks about the duchesse are compelling. ‘All these women are crazy,’ he said about her. ‘All they want to do is kill their husbands, and all she wants is to be a widow.’”

The King turned to gaze out the frosted window. “Insolent woman. Perhaps the duchesse would enjoy exile with her sister. Tell me, monsieur, what do you think of my decision to warn the Comtesse de Soissons to flee instead of arresting her?”

La Reynie blinked. How could he question his sovereign’s judgment? He had cursed the King’s decision as being dangerously naive, but—“It must have been a difficult decision, Sire. The niece of the late Cardinal Mazarin, to whom you owed so much—and yet she vowed to kill you if she could not have you.”

The King avoided his gaze, still staring out the window. “I only hope that I shall not be called into account for this action by God or my people,” he whispered. “God only knows what that woman is capable of, or who her next target will be.”

Finally, the King turned to face La Reynie. “Please remind me. What are the charges facing the accused, the laws they are accused of breaking?”

“Poisoning, attempted poisoning, possible attacks on Mlle de La Vallière and Your Majesty, counterfeiting in some cases. That is all the current law allows.”

“And not sorcery? Not sacrilege?” But Louis had answered his own question. “I am beginning to regret changing those laws. These are modern times, and I was hoping more rational times. And now—what do you think?”

“Your Majesty, do not forget the petition that was to be presented into your own hands. We are now hearing that it was supposed to be treated somehow, perhaps with a spell, or something to that effect.”

“But what would a spell do?”

“I am not sure. Your Majesty, if you would allow me to explain with a story.”

“Of course.”

“Do you remember when we searched La Voisin’s house and found the book of spells and other curious items? I took them to

someone I trusted. She had been my mother's midwife and my own wet nurse, long ago." He chuckled at His Majesty's smile. "Yes, Sire, I may be old and grey, but she is indeed quite older. My family is still fond of her and I have visited her on occasion. She is a true sage femme, very knowledgeable about herbs and medicine. I went to her for advice..."

* * *

Snow blanketed the herbs and shrubs of the little house just outside Paris, icicles dripping like frozen daggers from the eaves. La Reynie made his way slowly down the garden path. The feeble sunshine brought no warmth at all, and he was glad to see smoke rising from the chimney. He almost regretted carrying with him this ugly black box of witches' paraphernalia that seemed to contaminate Nana's little yard.

He hadn't got within six feet of the house when she poked her head through the door, a tiny, wizened face shrouded in a black shawl. "Nicolas, is that you? What have you brought? Leave that awful thing outside."

Startled, he placed the box carefully on the frozen ground. How did she know what was inside it? "Of course, Nana."

"Mon cher!" She finally opened the door to let him in. "What have you been up to, mon petit choux? Come in." She made the Sign of the Cross over the box as he entered her little house.

La Reynie embraced her, kissing her on both wrinkled cheeks. "Nana, how did you know what I was bringing?"

She looked at him as if he was dense. "Surely you can tell the presence of evil?" She smiled as he shrugged. "My poor Nicolas, you look tired. Are you well?" She patted him on the cheek. "Come have a seat." She motioned to her best upholstered chair in front of the fire while she took the other, hard one. "I have been hearing about you. Tout Paris has been in an uproar. One might almost call you *The Witches' Hammer*, just like the book."

La Reynie chuckled. "My popularity has not exactly increased."

"Well, certainly not among the high born, but the common folk are grateful. What have you brought me today?"

"Some items I seized from a couple of witches."

"La Voisin?" He nodded. "And from her friends, of course. Ah,

no wonder.”

“Can you look inside the box and tell me about its contents?”

She sighed with disapproval. “Only for you, my pet. It must be done with care.” She carefully selected a bunch of herbs hung next to the fireplace to dry. Mumbling something, she dropped some leaves into her steaming iron kettle.

La Reynie raised an eyebrow. What was she saying?

Nana caught the disapproving look and beckoned him to join her. “Come here, my pet. Let me show you.” La Reynie went over to the bubbling pot, fascinated.

“Motherwort,” she said. “It is good for women’s ailments and for chasing away evil spirits.” She continued to stir.

“What was that you were saying, if I may ask?”

“A prayer to St. Michael and the Blessed Virgin to protect us.” She smiled at his sigh of relief. “Mon cher,” she said, “herbs and prayers can be used for good or ill.” She shook her head sadly as she stirred. “Some have asked me to use my powers for ill. Once a lady came to see me. I knew she was high born by her coach and four horses, and she wore a traveling mask. When she refused to take off her mask, I told her I could not help her.”

“What did she want?”

“I didn’t even let her ask. She tried to give me a gold louis but I refused it. I could tell from her eyes that she was desperate and what she wanted was evil. I would not let her near me, so she drove off.” Nana turned her attention to the brew. “Ah, I believe it’s done.” She ladled some of the liquid into a cup, then took another bottle off the nearby shelf. “Holy water. We are ready.” La Reynie followed her outside to the waiting box.

Nana sprinkled the infusion over the evil container as she whispered a prayer in Latin. “Vade retro, Satana! Non suade mihi vana. Sunt mala quae libas, ipse venena bibas!” La Reynie smiled to hear her tell Satan to drink his poison himself. Finally, she sprinkled it again with holy water. “Now we can bring it inside.”

At last, the box sat on her wooden table and she pried it open. “Well, let’s see. *The Grimoire of Pope Honorius*. My, my. You know that’s a book of spells to be said by a priest?”

“Yes. Could the spells be made by a witch instead?”

“No. Only a priest or friar can make them work, because they have the power to say mass. I hear they consecrate the most

awful things. Hmm.” She put the book down, then removed a pouch from the box and sniffed its contents. “Ugh—dried toads.” She put it back, then carefully inspected each little box and bag. “Henbane, oh my. And hellebore too. That will cause an abortion, but in the wrong dose it can kill. Did you know how much poison is here? And a dried pigeon’s heart—disgusting. The only item missing is arsenic.”

But Nana gasped at the wax figure stuck with pins. “Mon Dieu! Please Nicolas, let me take out the pins.” He nodded, and she went to work carefully removing the pins, praying over each one. Finally, she leafed through the grimoire, clucking over its prayers and strange drawings. She shook her head as she put the book and the rest of the items back in the box and carefully shut the lid. “Let me make us some tea, to cleanse and protect us.”

Soon they were sipping another mysterious brew that La Reynie found did indeed refresh him. “Well, my pet, it’s not as bad as it seems.” Nana put down her cup. “The power of the items in that box depends greatly on the power of the person casting the spells. That includes the wax figure with the pins, it’s hard to tell if that caused any harm. I have heard about La Voisin. An efficient abortionist and poisoner she was. But I can tell you that from what I have heard, and the things in that box, when it comes to real magic, she was mostly a fraud.”

“A fraud? How?”

“Well, there is no denying the blackness hovering over that box—which is gone now, you may thank me for that. But spells aside, most of the items are simply bad tasting, bad smelling, and sometimes poison. One does not have to be a witch to poison, you know. Was she working with others, may I ask?”

“Two miscreants by the names of Lesage and Mariette.”

“Lesage? That fool?” She chuckled. “Well, no wonder. Quite a showman is Lesage. He has probably seduced or befuddled every wealthy woman in Paris. He’s not a real sorcerer, though he might like to think so. He’s an entertainer, a magician who does sleight of hand to make objects appear and disappear. Presto—before your very eyes.”

La Reynie couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, I’ve heard the same thing.” He paused, watching the tea leaves settle to the bottom of his cup. “But some people have been poisoned, you know. Is

there anything in that box I need to know about? Some of the spells—and the poison—have been directed toward people at court.”

She frowned. “The spells can be countered well enough, even if they were made by someone who had real power. And most of those items are not to kill anyone, they are for the prayers. But the prayers aren’t always necessary. I will give you an example—the toads. The toads in that pouch will make you very sick if you ingest them, but that’s not likely to happen because they taste so bad. That’s why some poisoners use enemas to deliver the dose. And that requires a trusting victim. But toads are very popular in casting spells. I heard of one witch in Paris who makes a living selling toads. Are toads harmless? No. I have heard of poisonous frogs in South America used to kill by touch.”

“What? Have they been brought here?”

“I don’t know. Someone must have tried. If so, their poison could be put in almost anything that touched you. Hmm. Probably it would have to pierce the skin. Arsenic could have the same effect, but it may simply irritate the skin.”

“We keep hearing rumors about poison linked to perfume.”

Nana frowned. “Poison in perfume. Have you found Monsieur and Madame Vautier?”

“Why, yes—they are in custody.”

“If it can be done, he and his wife know how. He is an alchemist and a distiller, a specialist in chemicals and potions. Distilling is necessary for both poison and perfume, and he also provides the scents used in making spells.”

“In making spells?”

“Yes. Many spells require a scent to be burned as incense when conjuring up the devil.”

“Then not only a spell, but poison could be put on a piece of paper that the victim would handle...” La Reynie fell quiet. He had been hearing bizarre things from the suspects.

“I don’t think that would work.” She shook her head. “Unless it pierced the skin.”

La Reynie thought a moment. “Nana, have you heard about—” He almost blushed, embarrassed to even ask. “Nana, do witches really fly about on brooms?”

She burst out laughing. “No, but they think they do.”

“What?”

“My poor Nicolas, I fear I will shock you.” She giggled.

“Nana!”

“Here is the story, my pet. The witches anoint a broomstick with an unguent containing henbane. It is something like an aphrodisiac, so when it comes into contact with the skin of— well, you know what private part of a woman’s body I am speaking of.”

Now La Reynie was blushing.

“The unguent, you see, makes them believe that they really *are* flying.”

Reynie’s jaw dropped. “The marquise!” he blurted out. “The Marquise de Brinvilliers. In prison, she inserted a broomstick into, ah—” He took a deep breath. “Nana, there is something else. The *Malleus Malificarum* talks about women being prone to evil, but perhaps... I don’t know if there is a connection, but two of the accused confessed to being debauched as little girls. Could there be a link between that and their terrible deeds?”

Nana gazed at him for a long moment. “How would you behave if that happened to you? Would you not be full of rage and want revenge?”

La Reynie turned to the fire. He could not look at her, he could not conceive that something like that could happen to him. Change the subject. “Are there any other poisoners, or witches, or sorcerers that I need to be concerned about?”

“Ah, yes, let me think. There are some priests or friars that I have heard of.” Shivering, she tugged her black shawl closer. “Yes, of course. They have the power to cast the spells in the grimoires. Have you heard of the Abbé Guibourg?” La Reynie nodded. “Find him, but be careful—the Abbé Guibourg is not a fool like Lesage, or an amateur like La Voisin. He does not pretend. He is a true agent of Satan.”

* * *

When La Reynie finished his tale, His Majesty gulped. “So the petition could have been treated by a spell?”

“We don’t know yet, Sire. But the petition or other objects could be poisoned as well. It is even possible that perfume can be dangerous. How, I don’t know.”

“Dear God. Think of it—how many items do we use every

day that are scented? Gloves, handkerchiefs. And now a petition that is poisoned or cursed?"

"Possibly. But we'll never know what was on the petition because we never found it. These cases of poisonings are tied in with sorcery. The witches seduce their clients with dreams of love and success, then persuade them to use poison to remove all obstacles. Sorcery and poison go together, and it's not just simple spells. We are hearing of black masses said over the bodies of naked women, infants having their throats slit in sacrifice." He paused—His Majesty had turned white.

"This needs to be stopped," La Reynie continued. "For let us assume for a moment that witchcraft and spells don't have their desired effect. In that case, the witches are nothing more than charlatans, cheating gullible clients. But if witchcraft and spells do work, then the public needs to be protected even more."

"Yes, yes, you are right. What in God's name compels people from the noblest families to indulge in such crimes? Poison, sacrilege, hideous rites—what is their motive? Lust? The court has always been filled with it. Ambition? That would include everyone. But could there be another motive? Who was La Voisin accused of being in league with?"

"Le Grand Auteur? We don't know if he is real or not."

"You will be questioning La Voisin soon, under torture. Do you believe she will tell the truth?" La Reynie was about to answer, but the King continued. "There will be witnesses to her testimony, no? And a transcript. And you of course will be asking about these ladies, whose names will be dragged in the mud." His eyes locked on to La Reynie. "Be careful how you phrase those questions."

He meant, of course, questions about Mme de Montespan.

Chapter 29

The Little Bird February, 1680

Sunday before Ash Wednesday, snow falling softly outside the heavily draped windows, a blazing fire in the dining room, candles flickering in a thousand crystal reflections. Sylvie stood sharp at attention with the other servants lined up against the dining room wall, waiting for the lords' and ladies' slightest wish. Sylvie was by no means trained to serve; that took years to learn. Her job was to carefully remove the dirty dishes from the table, replacing a poor servant who had been badly burned in the kitchen.

She tried not to fidget, but her stomach growled. Supper tonight would probably be the leftovers from this meal with whatever cook thought to serve them. She watched as Antoine expertly transferred a roasted ortolan to the duc's plate. The little birds—treasured for their crunchiness—had been fattened on millet, their sweet song drowned in Armagnac, then roasted and served whole to the discriminating nobility. The duc popped the entire bird into his mouth then happily munched away, wiping the savory juices from his double chin. Sylvie stared. This meal was a world away from the salt cod and potatoes of her childhood.

The Duc and Duchesse de Vivonne had invited the family of their son's betrothed, the Colberts. The groom-to-be was their son Louis de Rochechouart, duc de Mortemart. The young man—just 17—was sitting at his father's right, across the table from his betrothed, little Marie-Anne Colbert. She sat next to her father, Monsieur Colbert, with Madame Colbert across from him. Naturally the Vivonnes invited their relatives, including the duc's sisters, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, and Gabrielle, Marquise de Thianges. The young couple would be wed later in the year and details of the wedding needed to be discussed.

While Sylvie tried to keep a professional mien as she transferred the dirty dishes to the tray, she couldn't help but watch the

young couple. The bride-to-be, a bubbly little thing, looked like she had just left the nursery. Marie-Anne giggled and blushed while trying to talk like a sophisticated courtier. Her intended was a gangly youth who looked nothing like his father—there were rumors about that. And unlike the duc, the shy lad had no conversation whatsoever. Sylvie was now 17 and, looking at them, had never felt so old. And unmarried.

The talk at table focused on arranging the upcoming wedding, court gossip, and then—Sylvie had just cleared the fish course—news from her ancestral home.

“Any news from Poitou, monsieur?” the duc asked Colbert. “There are rumors about the Huguenots being persecuted. That is our natal province, and we are concerned.”

Colbert put down his fork. “Difficult situation. A young Huguenot boy ran away from home and went to live with a Catholic family. They had him baptized and are keeping him without his parents’ permission. It is very unfortunate.”

“But can they do that? Without his parent’s permission?” asked Gabrielle.

“Yes, the new laws permit it. I fear tension is rising.” Colbert took a sip of wine.

“The wine comes from there, Charente in fact,” said Mme de Montespan. “It’s lovely, isn’t it? I do hope there will be no trouble.”

Sylvie glanced at Colbert then went back to clearing the table. Her family was also from Poitou and many of her relatives were Huguenots. Forced baptisms? What was going on?

“Will the King revoke the Edict?” asked the duc. “What is your impression?”

Everyone turned to Colbert. The Edict of Nantes had kept an uneasy peace between Catholics and Huguenots for almost a hundred years.

“I know there has been pressure to revoke it from Catholic nobles and the Church,” Colbert said slowly, measuring his words. “And from Louvois.”

“He would,” Mme de Montespan muttered.

“What will happen if the King revokes the Edict?” asked Marie-Anne. Her pretty brown eyes scanned the table, looking for an answer from the adults.

“They will have to abjure their faith and become Catholics, *ma chérie*,” said Colbert. “Which most will refuse to do. I expect many of them to flee, probably to Protestant countries like the Dutch Republic and England.”

“A terrible prospect,” said Mme de Montespan, who tossed back the rest of her glass. “It will be horrible to lose them.”

“Indeed,” said Colbert. “Many of our finest artisans at the Gobelins manufactory and at Beauvais are Huguenots. If they leave, much of France’s talent will leave with them. We will lose our competitive edge against the Dutch and it will harm our economy.”

Sylvie’s hands trembled and she carefully put down the dishes. She had heard of the Huguenots at the Gobelins, weavers who made tapestries for Versailles. She had dreamed of perhaps working there some day. What will happen to them?

The conversation drifted... the Duchesse de Vivonne was smirking at Mme de Montespan. “Whatever is going on with the beautiful mademoiselle?” asked the duchesse.

“Which mademoiselle?” Marie-Anne turned to her mother.

Mme de Montespan glowered in the direction of the duchesse. “She means the Mlle de Fontanges. The beautiful mademoiselle was not present last month at the most important wedding of the year, between the Prince de Conti and Mlle de Blois. But you probably know as well as I. She had a miscarriage. How sad.” She returned to her file of beef, stabbing it with her fork.

Sylvie caught the triumphant look on the face of the duchesse and recalled the gossip about the great lady’s competition. She brought over a bottle of Bordeaux to Athénaïs. “More wine, madame?”

“*Merci, ma petite*,” the great lady muttered, and held out her glass.

“But wasn’t that the most splendid wedding?” Gabrielle chattered on, and on.

Marie-Anne’s face brightened. “I just heard that the witch La Voisin will be tortured soon.” A clatter—someone dropped a fork. “And then she will be burned at the stake. Papa,” she turned to Colbert, “please, can I go to watch? Tout Paris will be there. It is *so* exciting.”

Silence, as everyone took in the news. Mme de Montespan

was frozen into place, staring at her wine as if it were a cup of blood. The duchesse sat expressionless. Her husband pursed his plump lips, his eyes darting back and forth, assessing both his wife and sister. Colbert put down his fork and glared at his daughter. "Ma chère fille, where do you get this from?"

"Oh, but Papa, it is all over the place, tout le monde—" Then she caught his look.

"What a morbid conversation," said Gabrielle with a bright smile. "Really."

"Indeed," said Mme Colbert. She frowned at her daughter. "Marie-Anne, it is not suitable to bring up such things in polite conversation." Then she smiled at Gabrielle. "Isn't the weather dreadful?"

Sylvie began clearing the meat course, much of it uneaten.

* * *

After a tense carriage ride surrounded by musketeers, La Reynie met the warden of Vincennes at the gate then carefully made his way up the slippery stone steps of the high keep. La Voisin faced interrogation, then torture, in the dank chill of the tower of Vincennes.

He was greeted by shouted pleas and groans from the many defendants, their filthy hands grasping at him through the bars. He passed by Lesage, who gave him a proud smile, then by the cell of La Voisin's recently arrested stepdaughter Marie-Marguerite. She stared, wide-eyed. She shared a cell with Margot, La Voisin's sullen maid, who didn't even look up. Finally, he reached the torch-lit interrogation room where Bezons and Sagot were waiting for him. There was the sellette for the prisoner to sit on; nearby, the clerk's little desk. The torture chamber waited in the next room.

"Guards—bring her in." Sounds of scuffling and swearing echoed off the dank walls, then the door swung open and La Voisin, red-faced and staggering, was dragged in. "What, drunk again?" La Reynie snapped at the guards. "Where is she getting it from?"

The head guard merely shrugged. "She's always drunk, monsieur. Somehow she gets the others' rations."

"Put her on the sellette."

The final questioning of Paris's most notorious witch dragged on for two days, focusing first on the many plots to poison unwitting Parisian husbands, their wives allegedly La Voisin's clients. One of those victims was none other than President Leféron of the Parlement of Paris, dead from poisoned soup served up to him by his wife. A luckier man was Monsieur de Dreux, one of La Reynie's fellow judges. Mme de Dreux had not only plotted to kill him, she wanted to kill the intended wife of her lover. After those efforts failed, she went to La Voisin to terminate an embarrassing pregnancy.

La Reynie was not surprised to see that La Voisin accused the other witches of being far more evil than she. With slurred speech and dramatic gestures, she denounced every witch and sorcerer in Paris, including her own lover Blessis. She claimed that her mortal enemy Lesage had performed a parody of the mass for eager clients, but when pressed for the name of any actual priest who had ever celebrated a black mass over the stomach of a naked woman, she denied knowing any. But La Reynie had heard too many tales to the contrary.

She kept insisting the man called "le Grand Auteur," the criminal mastermind, was actually a low-life named Latour. Like the recently arrested Vanens, he manufactured counterfeit money and dabbled in black magic and alchemy. La Voisin had planned to leave the kingdom with him, but the plan fell through and he didn't seem to have anything to do with the petition.

"Did you not carry powders to Saint-Germain and to Versailles?" La Reynie finally got down to business with the plot to harm the King.

"No!" La Voisin's glittering black eyes stared right into his soul—but then her gaze shifted, and she became a sweet little lady. "It is true that one time I carried to Versailles some powder of mole that I had gotten from Lesage. It was for a servant-girl who wanted to marry her master. But I never carried anything else to Versailles or Saint-Germain."

"But what about the petition that was supposed to be presented to the King at Saint-Germain? Exactly how was it fixed by Lesage?"

"Lesage said that he had charmed the petition in order to make it successful, but I don't know anything more about it." She

squirmed uneasily on the sellette.

“Does Lesage know the secrets of preparing poisons?” Now was her chance to take revenge on her former lover and current accuser.

La Voisin looked surprised. “Although he is no longer my friend,” she said calmly, “I have no knowledge of him making poisons or working with any poisoner.”

“Who else manufactures poisons?”

Pleased to divert the subject away from herself, La Voisin launched into a lengthy list of manufacturers of poisons in secret laboratories. She pointed to someone with a vaguely familiar name: “Vautier,” she hissed. “He is a dangerous man—he makes poison and perfume.”

Vautier, perfume—what was it that Nana had said? La Reynie made a note.

With no new information, the frustrated judges finally pronounced the sentence that had been determined long before: torture with the Boot, starting with the Question Ordinaire (as if anything so excruciating could be ordinary) followed by the Question Extraordinaire. The Boot consisted of wooden planks tightly fastened around the leg into which metal wedges (or corners) were hammered. With each wedge the crushing pressure on the leg increased. The Question Ordinaire had four wedges driven in; then the Question Extraordinaire with four more. After the Question she would be executed.

“Maman, Maman!” the cries of La Voisin’s step-daughter echoed off the stone walls as the witch was hauled into the cold, windowless torture chamber.

“Messieurs, I have told you everything...” La Voisin slurred. The guards reported with disgust that instead of praying the night before, she had spent the time feasting and singing bawdy songs. But her dark eyes darted across the room, then widened. Flickering torches cast dancing shadows on the faces of her interrogators La Reynie and Bezons. Black-garbed torturers and their assistants closed in on her, and standing by were the physician and surgeon, assuring the prisoner did not die in the process. As always, the clerk had pen in hand ready to record the prisoner’s every word, every whimper, every cry for mercy.

The torturers strapped La Voisin’s plump little body down

on the table, encased a leg in the wooden Boot, and positioned the first wedge. The judges loomed over her, ready to pound the wedges and the questions, the same questions as before, demanding the truth. But they could not ask about Mme de Montspan or the Duchesse de Vivonne. Those questions were too sensitive for a transcript going to the judges.

“Is what you said about the Comtesse de Soissons and the Marquise d’Alluye the truth?”

She dodged the question. “I have never been to Saint-Germain, I never carried powders, and I do not know Mlle Claude.”

“That’s not what I asked you.”

She pouted, defiant. “I told you everything that I know about the Comtesse de Soissons, and I have nothing to add about the Marquise d’Alluye.”

“Tell us the truth—” But please, not all of it.

The torturer pounded in the first wedge. CLANG

Her mouth twisted into a grimace. “I have nothing more to say, and I am telling you the truth, as God hears me.”

The second wedge was hammered in. CLANG.

“Ah, mon Dieu!” she cried. “Holy Virgin!” CLANG. Her body jerked. “Have pity on me, I have told you the truth.”

CLANG. The fourth wedge was pounded in, the end of the Question Ordinaire. She screamed, her cry reverberating off the cold stone walls and echoing throughout the prison. La Reynie returned to the long list of poison suspects and their victims, but despite her moans and pleas, he learned nothing new.

The torture began again with the Fifth Corner, the first of the Question Extraordinaire, a continuous round of allegations, denials, pounding, moaning, screaming. No more details.

Finally, at the Eighth Corner, her only response was a loud scream, then silence; the only sound her urine dribbling off the table onto the stone floor.

“Do you have nothing more to say to discharge your conscience?”

“No, no more,” she gasped. “Have pity on me!”

The torturers were done, the Boot was removed, and her broken body thrown onto a straw mattress. The same questions—what was she doing at Saint-Germain with the powders? The same answers, so they continued the list, name

after name, carefully avoiding the two names that must not be said here—the Duchesse de Vivonne and Mme de Montespan. La Voisin had nothing to add or explain.

The morning of her execution, La Voisin was flung onto the mattress again. She announced: "For the sake of clearing my conscience, I will say that a large number of persons of all sorts and conditions came to ask my help in killing off a large number of other persons." She stared into the distance, her eyes fixed on some distant memory. "It is debauchery that is the root of all this evil," she whispered. "One hears strange things in this profession..." She lost consciousness, and at last they had no more questions.

That Friday afternoon, Desgrez and the jailers loaded her into a carriage for her final trip to Paris. La Reynie and the judges of the *Chambre Ardente* followed in a long parade of officials.

Tout Paris—thousands—came to see the spectacle. Here was the woman whose deeds dragged the aristocracy into the mire, the terrible threat to the foundation of society itself. "You dog's whore!" they screamed. "Sorcerer!" On that cold evening she was unloaded from the carriage and shoved into an ox-drawn cart, bound and dressed in a white hooded robe. She accepted a candle into her hand; but, red in the face, she angrily pushed away the anxious priest presenting her with a crucifix. Jeered on by the frenzied populace, the cart lumbered down the cobblestone streets until it came to the Cathedral of *Nôtre Dame* where she was to pronounce her public apology, the *Honorable Amend*. Unlike her repentant predecessor, the *Marquise de Brinvilliers*, she refused and cursed the priests. Through a steady volley of insults and cat-calls, the cart continued on to her final destination.

At the *Place de Grève* they stopped before the waiting pyre of logs and straw. Darkness had fallen and flickering torches illuminated thousands of excited faces. The public square was a perfect location for such a spectacle, surrounded by apartment houses whose windows were filled with loudly cheering Parisians of high and low degree. La Reynie took his place with the other officials on the impromptu viewing stand, clutching his cloak tightly about him against the cold. He watched Desgrez and several others drag the violently struggling witch out of the cart and onto the large pile of straw where she was made to sit

against the stake. The black-masked executioner ordered her bound to the stake with iron chains and her writhing body to be covered with yet more straw.

To the roars of the crowd, the executioner lit the fire. Choking smoke obscured their view, but soon they cheered to see flames licking at La Voisin's feet. She swore loudly and kicked away the burning straw, but the executioners rushed to replace it. La Reynie caught the smell of burning flesh and gagged, recalling the stench of La Voisin's oven. "Mercy!" she cried. She coughed—she screamed—but finally, with a roar, a wall of fire towered over her slumped body. As she disappeared into the flames, she cried "Jesu! Maria!" Then she was silent, her plump little body properly roasted. To spare her more torment—he claimed—the executioner ripped off her head with grappling hooks.

His duty finally done, La Reynie summoned his carriage to go home. All he could think of was a brandy to calm his queasy stomach and warm his bones.

At a window overlooking the Place de Grève stood Athénaïs, concealed by her hooded cloak and velvet traveling mask. She covered her face with her hands and wept.

Chapter 30

l'Innocente March, 1680

Like a lumbering procession of elephants bearing a pasha and his retinue, the King's coaches swayed and lurched through the muck back to Versailles. His Majesty's coach bore a prize as valued as a pasha's ruby: a princess for the King's son, the Dauphin. Marie-Christine of Bavaria was still almost a child and her French rather poor, but she chatted gaily with her shy fiancé, her delighted father-in-law to be, and the newly exalted Mme de Maintenon. The Queen's coach followed behind, then the pearl grey coach of the Royal Mistress Mlle de Fontanges, its perfectly matched eight white horses festooned with mud. And behind the current favorite, led by a paltry six horses, the coach of the former favorite slogged through the mire.

Athénaïs pursed her lips as she peered out the curtain. "Well, at least I'm not eating her dust." She jerked the curtain shut. "There is no dust."

Several coaches behind Athénaïs, Sylvie was crammed in with a half-dozen gabbling servants going on and on about the odd behavior of the King's new mistress. Was she ill? But Sylvie was silent, remembering a chance encounter back at the Château de Villiers-Côterets...

* * *

I'm late! Jeannette will scold. So stupid of me to get lost in this place, round and round in circles. Sylvie had her hand on the latch when she heard a voice, low, behind her.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle. You are new here, no?"

She turned and curtsied. She did not know this large man, but he was obviously very important. "Bonjour, monsieur. Yes, I am new to the household of the duchesse."

"Ah, the Duchesse de Vivonne. Your name, mademoiselle?" He spoke softly.

Now she dared to look up into his eyes—they were dark, full

of fire. She was transfixed. "My name is Sylvie Dupont, monsieur. I am embroiderer to madame." Sylvie rose from her curtsey, her heart pounding.

"Do you know who I am, mademoiselle?"

"No, monsieur, I apologize, I do not."

"You must have heard my name. François-Michel le Tellier, Marquis de Louvois."

The Minister of War! Sylvie stifled a gasp and sank into a deeper curtsey. "I am honored to meet you, monsieur," she whispered.

"And I am very pleased to meet you." He gently placed his finger under her chin and made her rise. Now they were eye to eye. His hand lingered on her face and brushed a strand of her dark hair back into place. She felt her skin, her entire body, aflame. "I regret I must leave now, mademoiselle. There is a meeting I must attend. But we will meet again, no?"

"Yes, monsieur," she whispered. "We will meet again."

He smiled and bowed—to her, a mere embroiderer! And he was gone.

* * *

"Well, I think she was poisoned."

"What—who?" Sylvie was jerked back to the present.

"Oh, pay attention!" Christine exclaimed. "The King's mistress, of course. Didn't you see her at the ball? Pale as a ghost, perspiring, tripping over her own feet, so forgetful she didn't curtsey to the Queen during the minuet—all the signs of poison."

The coach erupted. "Dreadful!" said one. "No, really?" another gasped. Old Antoine shook his head. "Don't be stupid," he muttered. They all turned to Christine for more.

"And if it is poison," said Christine with a proud sniff, "it was probably Mme de Montespan who did it. I heard the King made her dress the mademoiselle herself. How humiliating—and the perfect opportunity." Her fellow passengers gasped and nodded.

"How can you say such a thing?" asked Sylvie, aghast.

"Really, ma chère." Christine turned to Sylvie. "You are dreadfully naïve. Are you from the provinces? You know so little about the court."

Sylvie flushed hot and was about to counter-attack when

Mlle Jeannette intervened. "That is *enough* gossip. Such comments are unseemly. We have a long journey ahead."

Grateful she was sitting next to the window Sylvie turned her head to the view. The Marquis de Louvois himself...

* * *

"Where are we now?" Desgrez draped his wet cloak on a chair then picked up the transcripts. "Did the Abbé Mariette reveal much?" A cold spring rain spattered the windows, and the waning afternoon sun made the documents hard to read, even with every candle lit and a fire blazing in the corner.

"No, not much," said La Reynie. "I had hoped that he would shed some light on this mess. But even though he was Lesage's friend and knew some of La Voisin's associates and clients, he claimed he knew little else."

"But we have La Voisin's daughter." Desgrez looked at La Reynie hopefully.

"Yes, and tomorrow—" He was interrupted by a rapping at his door. "Entrée!"

His valet poked his head in and handed La Reynie a letter. "An urgent message, monsieur, from Louvois."

La Reynie removed the seal. "Mon Dieu." He sank onto the settee and motioned Desgrez to join him. "Fouquet is dead."

"Fouquet is dead?"

"Yes." He turned to gaze at the fire. "The doctor said apoplexy."

"Dead at last." Desgrez leaned back and stretched his boots to the fire. "I learned a lot working with Colbert on the investigation. Fouquet was popular, but he was dangerous."

"Indeed. Did you ever find the money he embezzled?"

"Some of it. We traced it both into and out of his personal accounts and the treasury. He was connected to powerful individuals in foreign countries who could have bankrupted France. He was not only stealing from the treasury, he knew too much."

"Do you think he was involved in poison? At least his apothecary was."

"That never came up. He was corrupt, he was venal, but he never needed to poison anyone. All he had to do was to buy them."

“Good point—but there is another wrinkle to all this. Remember Lauzun, the one who seduced La Grande Mademoiselle and was sent to prison for his effrontery? He was put in a cell just below Fouquet, and a while back they were allowed to visit. And—” He chuckled. “He seduced Fouquet’s daughter.”

“What?”

“Fouquet was allowed visitors, including his pretty daughter. But the jailors didn’t know Lauzun had tunneled from his cell to Fouquet’s and they were visiting frequently. Then the daughter showed up, and—”

“And the rascal that seduced Mademoiselle seduced Fouquet’s daughter? *No.*” Desgrez sighed. “Well, so much for security. We may have the same problem at Vincennes. The prisoners should have no chance to communicate with each other, but—”

“Have they been?”

“Very likely. The Voisin girl’s cell was near her mother’s, and Lesage’s cell is not far from them. The whole prison is filled with witches and abortionists and poisoners, and most know each other. I moved the girl, but I can’t vouch for what she’s heard already.”

He sighed. “And I’m questioning her tomorrow.”

* * *

La Reynie stared down from his high desk at Marie-Marguerite Montvoisin, La Voisin’s stepdaughter, who tugged on her tattered cap in a vain attempt to appear proper. She gave her name, her age. Then it got interesting. “Married or single?” he asked.

“Single. But I was supposed to marry Romani, the bastard. He’s here too, isn’t he?”

“I will ask the questions, mademoiselle.” La Reynie made a mental note to make sure Romani was secured far away from this girl. “Do you know a man named Lesage?”

“Of course.” A corner of her mouth twisted up into a smile.

“What kind of business did Lesage have with your mother?”

“Ah, strange things, monsieur.” She smiled eagerly. “After he returned from the galleys, Maman was so glad to see him. Magic, and spells, and *poison*, too. Did you know she almost killed my poor father? Poison in his soup! If I hadn’t been there to warn him—”

“Mademoiselle, we need to take this slowly, from the beginning. What kind of ceremonies or magic did he do with your mother at your house?”

“I was too young to be allowed to witness such things. But—” She smiled broadly now. “Well, one time he and Maman bought a white dove and slit its throat over a glass. Then they took the glass to her office in her garden.”

La Reynie raised an eyebrow. “Really. And who were the clients?”

She thought a moment. “I remember some of it was for the marriage of la Desmarets, and then there was Mme Brisard, she wanted something... and there were others, too, but I can’t remember.” Her eyes averted his.

“Did you take part in these things?”

“Oh, monsieur,” she said with aggrieved innocence. “I was *very* young when all this started and my mother never allowed me to know much at all. She would send me away, but I could smell the incense. I saw many times Lesage carry a stove to the garden. Before he was sent to the galleys, he and the abbé would be locked up together in the garden pavilion. My father said many times that they were doing a mass in there. He even saw a host made of wax, with a figure of Our Lord carved on it.” She shuddered.

“What was the purpose of these ceremonies?”

“My father complained about strange things happening. One time, Lesage forgot to take away a wax figure wrapped in cotton. My father broke it and threw it into the fire.”

“And did your mother find out?”

“Yes! She put poison in his soup. Our maid—you have Margot too, she can tell you—she saved him by bumping his arm as he was about to swallow the soup. My *poor* father. Another time he had to take a counter-poison. He could have died! He had the hiccups for months and his nose bled all that time.” She snuffled into her dirty handkerchief.

La Reynie waited for the clerk to finish scribbling. “What kind of business did your mother have with Romani?”

“He had important contacts through his brother.”

“Such as?” She was staring at the floor, so he leaned forward to get her attention. “Did those contacts involve a petition des-

tined for the King?"

"Romani's brother is a priest," she said in a low voice. "Père La Pierre was the confessor of Mlle Claude."

The pieces were falling into place. "Let's begin at the beginning," La Reynie said. "What did Mlle Claude have to do with the petition?"

"A year ago, I went with my mother to see Père La Pierre. Romani went too." She looked at him warily. "That was when Maman wanted to present the petition to the King. It was important to place the petition directly into the King's hands. Romani said that they could get access to the court through Mlle Claude."

"And why was that? Had it been prepared in a special way?"

"I—don't know," she stuttered. "I never saw it. Romani came by a few days later with the petition, and Maman put it in her bag without unrolling it."

"Did she take it to Saint-Germain?"

"She tried to take it in March just before she was arrested. Maman said when she came home that she was unsuccessful and she needed to return to Saint-Germain. But then she was arrested, and she never got the chance."

"Was the petition about her friend Blessis being held by the Marquis de Termes?"

"I think so. They didn't want the marquis to find out, or all would be lost."

Chapter 31

The Scent of Perfume May, 1680

Looking back on that day at Saint-Germain, it seemed some malevolent fairy had conjured a twisted minuet for Athénaïs and Louis to dance. Back and forth they bowed and curtsied and snarled at each other as they gracefully danced off a cliff.

She awoke late that morning hung over. Last night Gabrielle gave her the news—the King made the languishing Mlle de Fontanges a duchesse. A duchesse—the title Athénaïs had longed for and could never have because of her husband. No matter the title and money were payment for the unfortunate mademoiselle’s services, since she had not recovered from her miscarriage. Athénaïs grabbed a bottle of brandy and retired for the night.

“Café—where is it? I need it *now*, for God’s sake, I’m going to be late.”

Cato brought café au lait then rushed off for clothing. Athénaïs took a long swallow while she examined herself in her mirror—bags under her eyes, sallow skin, the sour taste of brandy in her mouth. Soon she was expected to join the other courtiers to say God-speed to His Majesty, and she was in no mood.

Cato arrived with an assortment of dresses. “I can’t see him like this,” Athénaïs moaned. “I look terrible.” She reached for her snuffbox with a shaking hand.

“Here, madame, your favorite blue gown,” said Cato. “And try this new perfume. It smells delicious.” She presented a sparkling crystal bottle with a top carved from amethyst.

“What kind is it?” She took a whiff. “Lily of the Valley? Ugh.” She ignored Cato’s scowl. “But it is a lovely bottle. It will look pretty here in the light.” She put it on her dressing table and reached instead for her favorite, the sweet smell of orange blossoms wafting away her anxiety. She liberally anointed her hair and her bosom, dressed hurriedly, then ran downstairs to join

the courtiers following the King to his coach.

“Your Majesty.” She smiled prettily.

He nodded in her direction, his face politely expressionless. “Madame.” He handed the footman his walking stick and turned to enter the coach.

“Your Majesty, I just wanted to wish you—” Athénaïs moved closer.

Louis shrank back. “Ah, madame, I find your perfume really too much.”

“My what?”

“Your perfume. Must you wear such strong scent? I cannot abide it.” He turned his back and climbed into the coach.

Athénaïs’ heart fell to the pit of her stomach. “My perfume? There’s nothing wrong with my perfume. How can you say such a thing?”

“Madame, your scent is offensive.” The footman slammed the door shut.

“Well, at least I don’t stink to high heaven as you do!” she shrieked.

Gasps. Stares. Tout le monde—the entire court—knew His Majesty never bathed, and many wished they could hold their noses as he passed by, but how dare she?

Gabrielle rushed to her red-faced sister as the royal coach disappeared in a cloud of dust. “Athénaïs, *please*,” she hissed.

Athénaïs took a big pinch of snuff from her bag and inhaled. “He doesn’t like my orange water, but—but I know why.” She sneezed politely, then dabbed at her nose with her handkerchief. “Remember when he saw a coach painted orange, and demanded that it be repainted? And when he didn’t want oranges served at dinner? Why, he hates everything orange, of course. Because he is off to confront Prince William of Orange, a most detestable monarch!”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes. “It is time for breakfast, Athénaïs.” She led her away from the snickering crowd.

* * *

Sylvie could not forget Louvois, his touch on her face. One afternoon she found Jeannette alone doing the household accounts. They gossiped about this and that, and then, “I met the

Marquis de Louvois the other day," said Sylvie, trying to appear blasée. Jeannette raised an eyebrow. "I have heard stories about him, that he is very powerful. What is he really like?"

"It is true that he is the most powerful man in France, next to the King," said Jeannette. "He has few friends and many enemies." She shook her head. "One day madame came back from hunting, laughing—they had all been riding in pursuit of God knows what—and something happened to Louvois' horse. It bucked him off and he landed hard and he broke his leg. Madame said that he lay there, furious, because they laughed as their horses leaped over him and they went on their merry way."

"No one came to help? Quel horreur."

Jeannette's eyes narrowed as she watched Sylvie, now looking at her skirt. "Yes, it is terrible, but it is hard to like someone you fear, and most fear him. But he is good to what few friends he has, especially the women he likes. I heard that one lady—perhaps his mistress of the moment—got pregnant, and he arranged an abortion. He knows people who can do such things." Sylvie looked up, her eyes wide.

"Sylvie, I must warn you about the men at court—vipers, all of them." She reached for Sylvie's hand and squeezed it tight. "All they desire is pleasure, and when they are done with you, you are ruined, abandoned, with an infant or a disease or both. Guard your virtue."

That night Sylvie prayed to the Blessed Virgin, one Hail Mary after another, to exorcise her demons—the pity for Louvois, the longing for him, the terror.

* * *

"Monsieur Colbert!" La Reynie leaned out the window of his coach. "Driver, stop."

"Ah, Monsieur La Reynie." Colbert waved from his window, and the two coaches clattered to a stop next to each other. "How are you, mon ami?"

"Very well, thank you. I was heading home for dinner. It's just around the corner. Would you care to join me?"

Soon the two were sharing a roast chicken and white wine in La Reynie's dining room and enjoying their view of the garden in the June twilight. Blessed warmth had finally returned to

Paris, and his apple trees were laden with green leaves and little buds of apples.

"I thought the snow would never melt." Colbert settled back in his chair. "Excellent wine, I must say."

"It is indeed. A good vintage, from the Loire." He smiled, grateful for Colbert's company. But he seemed to have aged considerably in the past few months. "I am glad to see you again. Have you been well?"

Colbert chuckled. "Well, monsieur, thank heaven for wigs. I would have more gray hairs every day if I wasn't losing them as fast as they come in."

La Reynie grinned, but he noticed the lines around his friend's eyes had turned into chasms. "More wine?" he asked. "Tell me, what have you heard about Fouquet's death? I hear that some of his friends have directed their ire and grief at you."

"Oh, such absurdity." Colbert waved his hand dismissively as if he was shooing a fly. "What was it that English playwright said? You know, *Much Ado About Nothing*."

"Perhaps, but let me know if you need additional security. I hear that Louvois and His Majesty have gone to Flanders."

Colbert nodded. "Yes, finally, thank God. Perhaps things will settle down. Did you hear about the row between His Majesty and Mme de Montespan?"

La Reynie looked up from cutting his chicken. "No, really? When?"

"A few weeks ago. And I had to make peace—as if anyone could."

"What were they arguing about, if I might ask?"

Colbert took another sip. "I cannot believe her bad temper. Things have been difficult between them for some time, what with him making Mlle de Fontanges a duchesse. But then His Majesty said something to her about her perfume—"

"Her perfume?" La Reynie nearly choked. "What about her perfume?"

"His Majesty took offense at her strong perfume. Orange water, I believe it was. And then, in public, she screamed that he stank. Naturally he was livid, and he has refused to meet with her alone. It fell to me to try to get them to declare a truce."

La Reynie groped for words. Her perfume—how much could

he tell Colbert? “And what happened?” he finally asked.

“Well, His Majesty finally agreed to join her for midnight supper, but only when the rest of the court is present.”

La Reynie took a breath. “Monsieur, do you remember the talk we have been hearing from the witches about poison perfume? I mentioned that to the King.”

“Mon Dieu, I forgot.” Colbert put down his fork. “But surely she wouldn’t—she *couldn’t*.” But then he reflected. “Mme de Montespan is indeed angry. But is there any evidence pointing directly to her? Do you think she would try to harm him?”

La Reynie pushed away his plate, his appetite gone. “I have just questioned the witch la Filastre. Do you remember that before we arrested La Voisin, la Filastre was trying to enter Mlle de Fontanges’ household? Lesage had warned me about her. ‘She can tell you strange things,’ he said, and he was right. La Filastre is connected to Abbé Guibourg who is conducting black masses. She is also connected through her lover to Vanens—remember him, the poisoner and counterfeiter? And to the Vautiers, notorious distillers of poison and perfume. And, perhaps, poison perfume.”

“And she was trying to enter the household of Mlle de Fontanges? *Mon Dieu*.”

“But that is not all. La Filastre had her married lover’s baby and tried to poison his wife. And she offered the baby to the devil in a most bizarre ritual in which—”

La Reynie took a swallow of wine, groping for words. “You know, the King finally agreed for us to investigate and prosecute sorcery and blasphemy, and I almost wish we didn’t have to hear these tales. The witches call themselves seekers, as if that makes much difference.”

“What are they looking for?”

He shook his head. “Buried treasure, sometimes. Also, the Philosopher’s Stone, the ability to turn base metal into gold or silver. And, I gather, diabolical secrets. Imagine a woman offering her newborn, and the afterbirth as well, to Satan.”

“May the holy saints preserve us,” Colbert whispered as he crossed himself. “La Filastre admitted to this without being tortured?”

“She simply shrugged, as if it was nothing of importance. Her

eyes—” La Reynie struggled for words. “I looked into her eyes for some sign of remorse, or even hate, but I saw nothing there. It was odd, even a little frightening, like no one was in there.”

“Does she have accomplices?”

“Yes. She was using an Abbé Cotton to perform the rituals. I questioned him too, and he admitted that one of the ceremonies was designed to cause a death. And they all know the Abbé Guibourg. He has been performing the black mass for her and her friends going on for six or seven years. But worse, there is talk of la Filastre going to Saint-Germain carrying something, allegedly love powders, to a lady of quality. This in addition to her attempt to enter the household of Mlle de Fontanges. By the way, I heard the mademoiselle has not yet recovered from her illness.”

“Indeed. She is spending time now at her sister’s abbey, still bleeding off and on from her miscarriage. Is she in any danger?”

“As far as I can tell, she is only in danger from her ill health. However, I am having her household watched closely.”

They sat silent for several minutes. “More wine?” La Reynie finally asked.

“No, no thank you.” Colbert contemplated his empty glass. “Is there really such a thing as poison perfume? Is that why His Majesty reacted so angrily to Mme de Montespan?”

“I’m not sure, but I did alert him to the possibility.”

Colbert leaned back in his chair, gazing at La Reynie, analyzing. “And would Mme de Montespan perhaps be the one who hired the witch to infiltrate the mademoiselle’s household?”

“Perhaps.”

* * *

Carefully, patiently, La Reynie tightened the net around his suspects. One by one he prodded them into revelations of impiety and sacrilege woven together with poison; strange rites performed in dark cellars, black candles flickering in a circle, wax figurines at the ready. A priest, Abbé Cotton or Guibourg himself, would baptize a wax figure using the name of the victim. Then incantations were muttered imbuing them with the power to either poison or inflame with passion. La Filastre’s intended victim was the wife of her lover; and the priest helped her to

conjure the devil himself, offering him her newborn infant to seal the deal.

The prisoners reluctantly gave up information on the feared Guibourg—one eye, they whispered, rolled about strangely, and he knew how to conjure Satan himself. Most knew him by his title, Monsieur Le Prieur. He'd been the prior at the church of Saint-Denis years back, and was just the one la Filastre needed to furnish a fake marriage certificate.

It took Desgrez weeks of banging on doors, questioning beggars, staking out decrepit churches in seedy neighborhoods to find Guibourg. And, finally, he caught up with the renegade priest.

The prison gates swung open for La Reynie, then clanged shut behind him. The bright summer day slipped into cold shadows, and he had to pause for a moment to see where he was going. "Monsieur La Reynie!" the guard saluted, then led him up the tower steps, the walls slick with green ooze. Finally, they came to the interrogation room.

Sagot and his little scribe were waiting, pen and inkwell at the ready. La Reynie took his place at his high desk. "Send in the prisoner Étienne Guibourg." The clanking of chains reverberated against the stone walls, the door swung open, and the shackled prisoner shuffled in. La Reynie felt the hair prickle up on the back of his neck.

"Ah, Monsieur La Reynie." Guibourg leered at him with his one good eye, the other rolling oddly toward Sagot. His mouth twisted into a toothless grin, and the torchlight caught the web of broken blood vessels on his nose spreading into his pale, fat cheeks. A long scar traced up his left temple past his crossed eye, continuing up his shiny bald head. "We meet at last."

The damp room seemed even colder. Poor Sagot was eyeing the door as if he was ready to flee. La Reynie swallowed hard, suddenly remembering the time as a child he was playing in the woods, and he rolled over a log to see what was underneath. A fat, white slug emerged; faceless, disgusting. He dropped the log and ran.

"Sit," La Reynie snapped. "Name, age and occupation."

"Étienne Guibourg. I am 70 years old, more or less." A corner of his mouth turned up into an ingratiating smile. "I am a priest."

La Reynie and Guibourg began their game. After firing off more questions to find out who knew whom and how, La Reynie could focus on the black mass. Guibourg readily confessed that he knew la Filastre, that Lacoudraye brought him her afterbirth wrapped in a linen cloth the day she delivered her baby. He put it on the altar and said the mass.

“Who else was there?”

“Lacoudraye, and Mme Chapelain, I think. I don’t remember the name of the other woman.” He licked his lips.

“Then what happened?”

“Lacoudraye made the responses during the mass. After the mass, I put the afterbirth back into his hands, and I told them that I had performed on it all that was necessary. But I hadn’t really done anything.” He smiled innocently.

“Did they not tell you to speak the sacred words on the afterbirth?”

“Yes, but I didn’t say the words, although I told them after the mass that I did.”

“Did this ceremony take place in a church?”

“Yes, it was in the Church of Saint-Marcel at Saint-Denis.”

“What was this ceremony supposed to accomplish?”

“They told me it was for love and good fortune. Mme Chapelain told me later she had been helped.” He shrugged. “But—truly—I hadn’t done anything.”

La Reynie stared at his suspect. By claiming that he had only pretended to cast effective spells, Guibourg was wiggling his way out of a blasphemy charge. But La Reynie had acquired even more damning information. “Is it not true that you celebrated masses on the stomachs of women and girls?”

Guibourg put on a contrite air, lowering his head in deference to his interrogator. “I place myself at the mercy of God and the King,” he snuffled. “It is true that my weakness has been taken advantage of.”

“Oh, spare me. Just where and with whom was this weakness taken advantage of?”

Guibourg squirmed. “It was in a château near Montlhéry. I said mass in the chapel of the château on the stomach of a woman.”

“Who was the woman?”

“I don’t know. She was lying on the altar with a linen cloth on her stomach.” Glinting in the torchlight, Guibourg’s one good eye stared coolly at his interrogator.

Now La Reynie himself found his wooden chair uncomfortable. “And the purpose of this ceremony?”

“I don’t know what it was for.”

“How can you not know?”

“It was long ago. I can’t remember the details.”

“And were there other ceremonies like that?”

“Yes, about four years ago. I said a mass on the stomach of another woman in an old hovel at the walls of Saint-Denis. I didn’t know her—I think she was a prostitute.”

“And what was the purpose of this ceremony?”

“They told me that they wanted to call up the devil to make a pact.”

La Reynie paused, horrified. This monster, an ordained priest, had the power to change bread into the Body of Christ, and this transformation happened on the body of a prostitute. “What did you do with the consecrated hosts? Who did you give them to?”

“I gave them to Filastre and to some others. But no, the hosts were not consecrated, even though the others thought they were. When I gave some to La Voisin, she told me that the hosts made the conjuring very powerful.”

* * *

La Reynie spent hours that night reviewing page after page of testimony, a spider’s web of allegations—but who lurked at the center, weaving the plot? Was it La Voisin with the possibly poisoned petition, or perhaps Guibourg himself? And l’Auteur, the mysterious author of the enterprise—was he really Latour? Tortured thoroughly, he revealed nothing. La Reynie put the pages aside and walked over to poke at the fire. Even on a summer evening, he felt cold and very, very tired. He closed his eyes for a moment to try to focus on the evidence—but all he could see was Guibourg, leering at him with one glittering eye.

Chapter 32

In So Many Ways July, 1680

A beautiful summer morning at Versailles, the heat not yet oppressive, so Athénaïs decided to go for a walk to clear her head from last night's brandy and gambling and Gabrielle's pious admonitions about her temper, and her cutting tongue. *How could she save her soul?* she asked her confessor. She had a lot of money, give it to charity, he said. But there were many worthy causes begging her for help. Which one?

Athénaïs turned a corner and spied a young woman seated on a bench embroidering. The girl wore a bonnet, so it was difficult to see who she was. She looked familiar—it was Antoinette's embroiderer. "Bonjour, ma petite."

The girl leaped to her feet and curtsied. "Bonjour, madame."

Athénaïs smiled. "What are you working on? Sit, sit, sit," she said with a wave of her gloved hand. "I will join you," and she sat down. "You know, I never did get your full name."

"I am Sylvie Dupont, madame. And you are very kind."

Me, thought Athénaïs. *Kind?* "What are you working on, ma petite? It looks like bed hangings. Let me see."

"It is just one panel, of course," said Sylvie. "This one will be hanging at the foot of the bed." She unfolded the panel revealing the fanciful floral design, a sinuous branch with little birds, green leaves, red pomegranates, and yellow and blue flowers.

"Why, this is exquisite," said Athénaïs. "I love how you are working the bird, with French knots for his speckled breast." Soon they were engrossed in the various techniques of embroidery.

"Ma petite," said Athénaïs, "what is your education? How well do you read and write?"

"Passably well, madame. I went to convent school where I learned embroidery."

"And your prospects? You are fortunate to have an educa-

tion, for many young women do not.”

“Yes, madame, and I am lucky to have this position with the duchesse.”

“But your future? Do you have a dowry?”

Sylvie looked down, her bonnet hiding her eyes. Athénaïs could guess the rest. “I see.”

“Madame, I wish—do you think...” Sylvie looked up at Athénaïs, her blue eyes alive. “Madame, do you think my work is good enough to obtain a position at the Gobelins Manufactory? Oh, to have the chance to make beautiful things for Versailles.”

“Well... wait, the Daughters of St. Joseph have asked for my support. They educate worthy young women lacking dowries and job skills. I—”

“Madame!”

They looked up and saw Cato approaching, auburn hair flashing in the sunlight, lips pursed. “Madame, you have an engagement in an hour, and I know you wanted to change.”

“Ah, yes,” said Athénaïs, and rose.

Sylvie watched the great lady—her merchant ship full of hope—sail off.

Cato turned on her. “I told you to stay away from madame!”

“I do not take orders from you, chienne!” Sylvie was on her feet and in Cato’s face.

“Ladies!”

They turned, then curtsied low. It was Louvois. “My, my,” he said. “Such a scene.” He got between the two, facing Cato. “And who are you, mademoiselle?”

“I am Mademoiselle Cato, Monsieur Louvois,” she said with a proud tilt of her chin. “I am the personal maid of Mme de Montespan.”

“Cato. Ah, yes. I am familiar with your name.” His dark eyes seemed to assess her for the gallows. “And since you are madame’s personal maid, I am sure she needs you—*now*.”

Cato looked at him, then at Sylvie hovering behind him. Her eyes grew wide. “Yes, monsieur—of course, monsieur.” She fumbled another curtsy and fled.

Louvois turned to Sylvie, still trembling. “Merci, monsieur,” she whispered.

“What was all that about?”

“She is jealous because Mme de Montespan seems to like me. She thinks I am trying to enter her household, but I am *certainly* not. And I will not be threatened by that—”

Louvois laughed. “Yes, I know what she is. Sit down.”

They sat together their bodies close. Sylvie could feel his immense power. He was fat, but are not all rich men fat? But there was much more. His shoulders were broad like a bull; and, like a bull, his brown eyes glinted with raw male energy. And he was her protector, and now she was safe.

“You are brave, Sylvie,” he whispered.

“Yes, monsieur. Papa says I have more courage than I have sense.”

“And who is your father?”

“Sergeant Henri Dupont, in Paris.”

He gazed at her for what seemed an eternity. “Your eyes,” he said, “they are extraordinary. I thought they were blue—at least that is how I remembered them—but they are dark grey now, like a storm at sea.”

“I have been told they change with my feelings.” She smiled. “And I was angry.”

“And now? How do you feel now?” He took her delicate hand in his large one and brought it up to his face. He kissed her palm tenderly and did not let go.

Sylvie shivered, consumed. “I am not angry, monsieur. No, not that... I have never felt this way before.”

“Please do not call me monsieur. My name is Michel, call me that.” He kissed the palm of her hand again, then held it against his face; her hand in his, her fingers tentatively caressing his eyes, his hair. “I will be leaving tomorrow for Flanders with the King. Are you going with the court to Valenciennes?” She nodded. “Ah, bien. I need you, Sylvie,” he whispered. “I need you... in so many ways.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes.”

* * *

The early morning sun had just crept into La Reynie’s bed-chamber, snuck past the bed curtains, and was importuning his eyes when loud knocking jolted him awake. Oh, mon Dieu, what is it now? He heard André answer the door, followed by familiar

thumping of boots up to his bedroom and a polite knock.

"Monsieur!" Captain Desgrez' booming voice now had him thoroughly awake.

"Entrez." La Reynie sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Desgrez swept off his plumed hat. "I am sorry to awaken you, but you need to come to the prison immediately. The Voisin girl tried to strangle herself. I have brought a coach."

"What!" La Reynie threw off his bedcovers. "Is she alive? Conscious?" He headed for his washbasin to clean up.

"Yes, monsieur, she is alive and able to talk."

La Reynie splashed water on his face then grabbed his clothes. "How did she do it? Hadn't her cell been secured? Merde." He hurriedly dressed then picked up his best wig. A bug fell to the floor. "André!" His valet appeared. "Get this cleaned. Damned lice—"

"Yes, monsieur, of course." André took the wig and its unwelcome occupants while La Reynie positioned his second-best wig on his balding grey head. "Please, monsieur," André pleaded, "allow me to get you some bread and cheese for your journey." He rushed off.

"Quickly!" La Reynie called after him. And they were off in the coach with its contingent of four armed musketeers galloping behind. He took a bite of cheese and settled back in his seat as the coach clattered down the cobblestone streets eastward toward Vincennes. "All right, tell me again. She strangled herself—or tried to? With what?"

"Her petticoat, I believe, and she is amazingly well under the circumstances. She has a red mark around her neck and is a little hoarse, but she insists on speaking to you."

"No doubt." La Reynie tore off a bite of bread. "She is a strange one. Wild, but not without wit. Has she had any access to the other prisoners?"

"I have done my best to keep them separated, monsieur." Desgrez peered outside for a moment. Passers-by stared back. "I don't like this area."

La Reynie glanced out. "I agree. We will take another route back."

"And I have other news, monsieur. About the object of La Voisin's petition, the Marquis de Termes, who was allegedly holding

her friend Blessis."

"Good news, I hope. What have you learned about him?"

"He is a relative of Mme de Montespan, and—"

La Reynie nearly choked on his bread. "The Marquis de Termes is her relative? Oh, mon Dieu."

"Yes, he is her husband's cousin. Should I regard testimony about him as sensitive?"

"Yes, of course it is. What did you learn?"

"He is Roger de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de Termes, who married the daughter of a wealthy financier who was ruined when Fouquet imposed a judgment on him. We were tipped off last February about his alchemy and counterfeit operation. Blessis and Vautier were working for him at his château. By the time our men got there, the marquis had fled. Have you questioned the Voisin girl and the others about the petition?"

"If she is to be believed, His Majesty was to be handed a petition that was treated in some manner. Either poisoned or cursed—if she is to be believed."

"And the method of poisoning?"

"The petition itself, of course. How long has it been since we spoke last, about a month? Well, here's what happened. The Voisin girl said that a few days before La Voisin's last trip to Saint-Germain, la Trianon the abortionist cast a horoscope and predicted that her trip to Saint-Germain was getting her into something she would never get out of alive. To which La Voisin replied that she must seize this golden opportunity and escape to England."

"Why wasn't the petition delivered?"

"A strange twist of fate. The Voisin girl said her mother tried twice to get to Saint-Germain but missed the coach both times. La Voisin even had a letter of introduction, and she bragged that she would be received by a great lady that the Voisin girl remembered having seen several times."

"A great lady—who?"

"I'll get there. When her efforts to deliver the petition came to naught, she returned home Friday in a rage, announcing that she had to go back on Monday or perish in the attempt. 'What?' Her husband replied. 'Perish? That's a bit much for a piece of paper.' So I pushed the Voisin girl to reveal just what was in—"

or on—that paper her mother had tried to give the King. She claimed she had no idea, and that if she had known, she would have told me sooner.”

Desgrez smiled. “But you got the information, no?”

“Finally. On July 12th I came down hard on her. I said, ‘You knew all along what your mother was doing, didn’t you? You knew what was on that petition.’ She burst into tears. ‘Yes, yes,’ she said, ‘It was poison.’ ‘And the great lady? Who was she?’ I asked. All she would say was that a lady sent a carriage to aid in the plan. Apparently, the lady and the others talked about her mother getting 100,000 écus and safe passage to England.”

“But at least the plan failed.”

“Yes, thank God. La Voisin planned on returning Monday to Saint-Germain, but we arrested her on Sunday. Wait—when did the Marquis de Termes flee the country?”

“One moment, I have it here somewhere—” Desgrez thumbed through the papers in his satchel. “Ah, here it is. The marquis left Paris with a huge quantity of distillery equipment and chemicals on January 13 and took it to his château. By the time the police got there at the end of February, he had fled.”

“How interesting. We arrested La Voisin in March, and now her accomplices claim that the petition she was attempting to deliver the week before her arrest was to ask the King to free Blessis from the marquis. But he had already fled the country by that time. So much for their alibi.”

“The Voisin girl claimed she didn’t know the mysterious great lady in the coach. Could she have been Mme de Montespan?”

“She either doesn’t know or won’t tell. I talked to Lesage, and I’m still sorting it all out. He said La Voisin had been with the mastermind, le Grand Auteur, at the Vautiers’ house manufacturing poisons. He claimed that back around 1676, people were dying in that neighborhood due to the Vautiers’ poisons in the air. Lesage saw the hot furnace and distillery. He knew they were making poison because La Voisin was always looking for toads to use, plus she had a mysterious venomous serpent called a norever kept in a pot covered with a linen cloth.

“Lesage confirmed that Guibourg has been celebrating black masses over the bodies of naked women for years, and some of

the ceremonies were held at the Palais when Madame Henriette lived there. Some were performed on the bodies of women who wanted to poison their husbands.”

“Good Lord. And didn’t you suspect Madame could have been poisoned by her husband Monsieur?”

“Possibly. The autopsy didn’t reveal much, but there may have been another victim. Lesage confirmed that Guibourg had an elderly Italian client, a lady who appeared very devout, but also very evil. He claimed that she was behind the poisoning of Lionne.”

“Foreign Minister Lionne? He died of poison—when, about nine years ago?”

La Reynie leaned his head back on the seat and sighed. “A good man. We thought then it was probably his wife who did it or perhaps some Dutch involvement. Yes, he died after he had worked with Madame Henriette on the secret treaty with England. More pieces to put together. Anyway, Lesage wasn’t done with his revelations. He next pointed the finger at none other than the Duchesse de Vivonne, claiming the duchesse had a black mass celebrated over her body in which la Filastre’s infant was sacrificed to the devil. The duchesse herself earlier had an abortion performed by La Voisin.”

“And we have Sylvie working for her. Mon Dieu.” Desgrez turned to look out the window, his face clouded.

“Are you worried about her?”

“Frankly, yes. Who knows the kind of people she is dealing with?”

“True. Look, this is probably old news, going back years. But I do need more information from Sylvie about the duchesse, and her sister-in-law Mme de Montespan. Do you think she can help?”

“I will contact her. But what about the rest of it? May I assume that the testimony is too sensitive to go to the judges?”

“Sensitive is not quite the word. This case is starting to smell like a dead fish. Now there are allegations against Mme de Montespan’s one-time maid Mlle Claude. Just yesterday I interrogated Romani, who was up to his neck in the business of delivering the petition. He would make a perfect courtier with his air of boredom and polished manners, flicking his handkerchief

to make a point. Romani used to be a valet, and he is slick enough to have made his way into court and get that petition delivered.”

* * *

“How did you get involved in the matter of Blessis and the Marquis de Termes?” La Reynie demanded.

Romani shrugged. “Blessis was recruited by the marquis to turn base metal into gold, and when he refused, the marquis took him hostage to force him. Vautier and I tried to set him free, but we failed.”

“Including giving the marquis a poisoned robe.”

“Oh, please, monsieur, how could you think such a thing?”

“But that didn’t work, did it? So you recruited La Voisin.”

“Yes. She wanted to present the King with the petition asking for Blessis’ freedom. Actually, there were two petitions. If our first try failed, we had the other petition just in case.”

“And I also understand you planned to enter the household of Mlle de Fontanges, the King’s latest mistress?”

Romani sighed, much aggrieved. “Yes. A stupid idea. Blessis came up with the plan of selling gloves and fabrics to Mlle de Fontanges. The gloves were so well made that they would be irresistible. We all agreed that this could make our fortune.”

“But how could you get an introduction?” Silence. “Monsieur, I expect an answer.”

“Through—through Mlle Claude.

“Why her?”

He paused, a long pause. “Her father confessor is my brother.”

“How convenient. And did she go along with the plan?”

“She said she would do all she could to place me there.”

“And so, you were engaged in a plot to kill the mademoiselle, no? By means of poison gloves and fabric?”

“Oh, monsieur, I could *never* do that,” he sniffled into his lace handkerchief.

“But did not Blessis have the secret of poison perfumes used on gloves?”

“Oh, no, monsieur! All we wanted to do was to enter that household to gain prestige and money, certainly not kill anyone.”

“But whose plan was it to pose as a foreign merchant?”

Romani’s practiced façade was crumbling. “Oh, *monsieur*,”

he whined. "I heard that plan along with a million other things. The entire affair has caused me great misery. I wish I had never been born." And he sniffled.

* * *

La Reynie pulled aside the curtain and saw the tower of Vincennes looming above. "We have arrived at last." He turned to Desgrez. "While I am questioning the Voisin girl, I want you to inspect her cell. Check for any other items of self-destruction she might have at hand. And I hear that Mlle de Fontanges has still not recovered from her miscarriage. It still doesn't make sense, even though La Voisin may have tried to poison her. I will continue to push the Voisin girl. Meet me at my office when I have finished with her."

* * *

"You talked to Romani, didn't you?" Marie-Marguerite glared at La Reynie as he inspected the marks on her throat. "The bastard was supposed to marry me."

"Is that why you tried to strangle yourself?"

She pouted. "Do you think he told the truth? Did he tell the whole story?"

"I don't know. About what?" Silence. "Tell me about the plan to sell fabrics and gloves to Mlle de Fontanges. Just what was in or on these items?"

"The pieces were accommodated—"

"Accommodated? Like the petition?"

"Yes, monsieur," the Voisin girl said with an eager smile. "They were designed to kill her. Romani had another plan to kill the Marquis de Termes with a poisoned robe and hat made out of the same stuff. The Vautiers were in on it too."

La Reynie paused. "There was a plan to poison Mlle de Fontanges—but what if she didn't buy the items?"

"I heard Romani tell my mother that if the mademoiselle didn't take the fabric, she still would not be able to resist the perfumed gloves, because they came from Grenoble and were perfectly made. He said that the ladies never could resist trying them on. The gloves would have the same effect as the fabric."

"So, the gloves and fabric were poisoned, just like the petition—and the plan was to kill both Mlle de Fontanges and the

King?"

"The King would die first, then people would think that the mademoiselle died of grief."

"And who was your mother's client, the one who paid for this venture?"

"Mme de Montespan."

La Reynie sat back, stunned. "But why would Mme de Montespan want to kill the King?"

"She had tried many other things, spells and conjurations, but they hadn't worked. Maman said that it is a good thing when lovers quarrel." She folded her arms and smirked.

"I see." La Reynie studied her face. "Mme de Montespan must have been a good client of your mother. For how long?"

"For six or seven years. Maman many times carried powders for her to Saint-Germain and Clagny."

"What kind of powders?"

"They were love powders passed under the chalice during the mass, and she burned some bundles of sticks while reading the names of the lady and the King."

"Tell me exactly what she said."

"Oh, yes, I remember." Marie Marguerite's eyes shone as she conjured up the words: "She chanted, 'Faggots, it is not you I burn, it is the body, the soul, the spirit, the heart, and the judgment of Louis de Bourbon; and he can neither go nor come, rest nor sleep, until he has accomplished the desire of that lady, and that spell would last forever.'"

La Reynie blinked. "Was Mlle Claude a client of your mother?"

"Oh, yes, for two or more years. But we weren't allowed to call her by name. When Maman wasn't there and she called, we said when she returned that the brunette lady with the double-trained dress had called for her. Sometimes she would leave a letter."

"Double-trained dress?"

"Yes. Her dress was gathered in two flounces in back."

"And did Mlle Claude come for Mme de Montespan?"

"Not always. She often came on her own business."

Then it all came tumbling out—Maman never let her see the petition or the powders. When La Voisin returned from her failed

trip to Saint-Germain and found the missionaries outside, she burned the incriminating document in her room. She explained if she couldn't succeed with the petition, she had other methods, and it was better to burn it than to be found out.

"Wasn't the purpose of the petition to release Blessis from the hands of the Marquis de Termes?" La Reynie asked.

"Not really—Maman wasn't that worried about Blessis, because she had other ideas in mind to free him."

"And did Mlle Claude know something about the petition?"

"Maybe," she shrugged.

"Why didn't you speak sooner about the plot to harm the King?"

"I couldn't say anything before without incriminating my mother, but now she's dead. Besides, I didn't think I had to talk about it. Please believe me, I told you everything I know."

"Don't you know that lying to me is a crime?"

"Of *course* I know," she sobbed. "What did you expect me to do? I couldn't say anything! Do you know what she would have done to me if I had talked? She tried twice to poison my poor father, what do you think she would have done to me?"

La Reynie looked over at the jailer to take her back to her cell. Then a man's laughter—more like a cackle—reverberated off the stone walls in the distance.

The Voisin girl froze. "Is that le Prieur?" she whispered.

"Guibourg? I have no idea." La Reynie looked around. Guibourg? Lesage? The only sounds were clanging chains and slowly dripping water. "Come along." She hurriedly made the Sign of the Cross and muttered a prayer as she was led back to her cell.

Chapter 33

The Plot July, 1680

La Reynie cast an ever-widening net. He was after Mme de Montespan, and her maids, and her sister-in-law the duchesse, plus the witches, sorcerers, thieves, and poisoners that had either conspired with them or duped them. And he had to do it in near secrecy. His crucial witness la Filastre was now so ill she could become the latest to cheat the executioner. But if she mentioned “that person of exalted station” the room would be cleared and La Reynie would proceed alone. He could not report to the *Chambre Ardent*, the judges were rendered powerless, and Boucherat was furious that he had been excluded from the process.

La Filastre’s co-conspirator was Mme Chapelain, possibly the conduit to Mme de Montespan. Mme Chapelain was a poisoner and abortionist extraordinaire. It was in her house that Vanens had been arrested, and where La Reynie had seen the remains of a Black Mass.

“Guibourg showed many people a pact he made with the devil,” la Filastre admitted. “He said now that he could deal with the devil, he could better satisfy his clients.”

“Do you remember the names of his clients on this pact?”

She paused. “I think—I think one of the names was Mme de Montespan. Guibourg talked about how powerful the pact made him, and he said when he performed a mass on a prostitute, he did it in her name.”

“But specifically, did Guibourg use Mme de Montespan’s name during the Black Mass?”

She pondered, swaying slightly. “No,” she finally said.

“But you said that Mme Chapelain named Mme de Montespan as one of her clients.”

“I did? No, really, I don’t believe she mentioned Mme de Montespan.” She had avoided his trap.

* * *

The enormity of the crimes came from Guibourg's long-time mistress Jeanne Chanfrain. Like la Filastre, her eyes were blank, her story almost unbelievable. She had borne him seven children; at least three were dead, their throats slit on the altar. The carnage started with her third child, a girl. She had given birth alone in a field. She gave Guibourg the infant wrapped in a handkerchief—why, she didn't explain. She later looked for the child but it was gone. Jeanne went to Guibourg, "Where's my baby?" But, of course, she knew. She slapped him, beat on his chest. "Evil man—you killed my baby!"

But she kept getting pregnant. The next two were twins, again placed into Guibourg's hands, never to be seen again. The sixth child, a girl, was rescued by a nun. The last one, a son, was still alive at age 14.

That evening after her interrogation, La Reynie put down his pen. His hand was shaking. *Mon Dieu, a blood bath. How long has it been—four, five years ago—all those rumors and accusations about infants kidnapped, sacrificed, their throats slit—it's all true.* He closed his eyes, trying not to see what persistent memory recalled, mounds of freshly dug dirt in La Voisin's garden, shallow graves with tiny bones. And Mme de Montespan and her sister-in-law were Guibourg's clients.

* * *

"Tell me what you know about Mme de Montespan," asked La Reynie.

The Voisin girl smiled eagerly. "Every time something new came up to upset Mme de Montespan, every time she feared a lessening of the King's good favors, she came running to Maman for a remedy. Then she would call in one of the priests to celebrate a mass and send Mme de Montespan the powders to be used on the King."

"You knew then of a plot against the King?"

Now she avoided his gaze. "I only know what Maman told me, when Mme de Montespan realized that all the methods she had used before weren't working. Maman said that the lady was prepared to go all the way to achieve her desires. What she wanted Maman to do was really disgusting." She pursed her lips in

disapproval.

But La Voisin's once-loyal stepdaughter wandered in her testimony, refusing to be pinned down. She had never seen the powders. While there was talk about poison powders to be used against the King, the only powders she knew of that were connected to Mme de Montespan were love powders delivered to Clagny. And Mlle Claude received them.

"Do you know Mme de Montespan personally? Did you speak to her?"

She pursed her lips. "No, I never talked to her."

"But didn't you go with your mother to Saint-Germain, or Versailles, or Clagny?"

"Well, no, but I did go to Versailles seven or eight times on mother's orders to deliver letters and powders to another client who wanted to marry her employer."

"Did you take anything to Mlle Claude?"

"No."

"But you did speak to her. You said she came to your house in a double-trained dress."

"No—no, I never spoke with her." She squirmed on the sell-ette. "It's been a long time since I have heard about her. Maman told me later that she was Mme de Montespan's maid."

"Do you swear that is true?"

"Of *course* I swear. You see, I know another girl called Cato who works for Mme de Montespan. I saw her two or three times at my house. She has light auburn hair, not brown like Mlle Claude." She sighed. "But I know little about those things."

"You know little? You are *lying*. You were right in the middle of a conspiracy against His Majesty involving Mme de Montespan and the Abbé Guibourg—*weren't* you?"

She blinked, tears tracing down her dirty cheek. "No. I—I saw masses performed by Guibourg in my mother's bedroom," she whispered. "He said mass on the stomachs of some women."

"When did these take place?"

"The first time was about six years ago. I helped mother prepare for it." Her eyes stared into the distance. "I put a mattress on a bench and two stools on both sides holding candles. Guibourg went to the next room and dressed in vestments. Then Maman led in a woman on whose body the mass would be said, and she

made me leave. When I was older, I was allowed to stay." She fell silent.

"Then what happened?"

"I saw the woman lie all naked on the mattress, her head lying on a pillow placed on a chair, a napkin on her stomach, and on the napkin a cross. A chalice was placed on her groin."

"Who paid for the ceremony?"

"Mme de Montespan. She was at the first ceremony, but she said that she didn't have the time to attend the other masses, so they were celebrated over Maman's body for her intention."

* * *

Sylvie waited anxiously for days, besieged by guilt but longing to feel Louvois' hands touching her body before he finally sent for her. Thus, began the furtive meetings late at night, sneaking back to her bed by moonlight. Jeannette would stare at her then turn away, her lips tight with disapproval. She said nothing, and neither did Sylvie.

My body was asleep before, she thought. Now I am deliciously awake, safe in his arms. He is my bear, like the great bear in the starry sky, and he will protect me from the evil in this court... They would lie together, then his body would come alive and he would want more and more and so did she, again and again, until they were exhausted and again, lying still.

It was just the two of them, stolen moments in their little room that Louvois arranged. It was deliciously intimate—a table with a white cloth, two comfortable chairs, a bottle of brandy and crystal glasses, a canopied bed—utterly luxurious—and an inviting fireplace. It was theirs maybe once a week. Louvois was the busiest man at court, always running somewhere, planning the King's eternal wars.

One night he dozed off on his side while Sylvie lay at his back, her arm around him. A full moon shone through the curtains, its pale light bathing them with silver. Then she saw the scars on his back, the marks of a whip, scars gone white with age. She gently touched one of the scars. He flinched and sat up. "I must go now," he said, and reached for his clothes.

"Mon cher," she whispered, "your back. What happened?"

He paused. "I was wild as a boy," he said finally. He pulled on

his trousers.

"It must have hurt very much."

"Yes." He sat next to her on the bed but did not look at her. "I had to learn discipline." He said this flatly, as if he was writing a dispatch. "My mother—my parents expected greatness. I had much to learn." He reached for his shirt.

Then Sylvie dared to say what she had heard. "They say you are cruel. Are you?"

"Of course I am," he said while lacing up his shirt. "And so is the King."

"He is? I did not know that."

"He plays the game, acts civilized, and lets his ministers do his dirty work... Colbert. Now there is a cold-hearted bastard. He made short work of Fouquet, destroyed him, utterly pitiless. No wonder some want him dead."

He went over to the table and poured himself a drink, then sat down on the bed next to her. She put her head in his lap and he caressed her hair while he drank. "Yes, I am cruel," he said. "Especially toward enemies of France, whoever they are—the Dutch, the Huguenots, anyone who defies the King."

"Are the Huguenots that bad?"

"You do not understand the power they have. Fouquet was playing a dangerous game with the financiers in La Rochelle. They were Huguenots and they were lending the Crown money through him. Some of it went to the treasury, the rest into his pockets. When the King needed money, he had to go to Fouquet and his friends, and that made him beholden to all of them—and the Huguenots are in league with the Dutch."

Sylvie blinked, at a loss. She had many relatives in Poitou Province that were Huguenots, fine people. "So... are the Huguenots dangerous?"

"Of course they are. They are not Catholic like us and they cannot be trusted. Many in the nobility are Huguenot and they have too much power. His Majesty demands one king, one faith, one law, the only way to maintain order. The Huguenots have been taking advantage of us for almost a hundred years, but their little party will be coming to an end. Soon."

He kissed Sylvie on the forehead and got up. "I must go now. Au revoir, chérie." And he was out the door.

* * *

For days, La Reynie kept pushing for witnesses, accomplices, locations. Finally, the Voisin girl shifted again—obliging her inquisitor with an eager smile, she described how Maman would meet Mme de Montespan in secret. La Voisin would remove her traveling mask when she saw the lady and pretend to spit. The lady would walk by without stopping and La Voisin would slip the packet of powders into her hand. Maman stored the magical items used for Mme de Montespan—including the caul of a newborn infant—in her garden cabinet.

“Did you ever personally meet Mme de Montespan?”

“Yes, more than eight years ago she came to our house.”

“You gave these packets of powders to Mme de Montespan personally?”

“Yes, many times, and Mlle Claude also came to get them.”

“The lady must have paid well.”

“I don’t know how much. But about a month before Maman was arrested, she told me she had sent Blessis to Clagny with a letter asking for 2,000 écus. Romani needed the money to buy the goods to pose as a merchant to fool Mlle de Fontanges.”

* * *

La Reynie was up late that night writing yet another memo to Louvois, putting together a puzzle with very confusing parts.

“In the interrogation of August 13, the Voisin girl denied ever having personal contact with Mme de Montespan, ever having seen her face to face, ever having spoken to her.” He paused to dip his quill in the ink yet again. “But in the interrogation of August 20, it turns out that she has seen Mme de Montespan, has spoken to her.”

He stopped to think. *Which statement was a lie? Which was the truth?* He shook his head. “Clearly, the Voisin girl has been caught in a lie,” he wrote. “However, all the rest of what she says is said with such an air of ingenuousness that one may be easily taken in by it. I put little reliance on her testimony because it seems to me—I am not sure why—there is more reason to believe these horrible things are false, than to believe them true.”

The next day, he hammered on her again. “Was Mme de Montespan really a client?”

Marie-Marguerite hesitated. "Well, it's hard to remember." She smiled, her head cocked to one side like a puppy desperately trying to please. "Many ladies, of all sorts and conditions, came to Maman's house wanting to get rid of their husbands or other persons."

"And you assisted your mother in getting rid of these persons?"

"No—I didn't hurt anyone! I mean, what was I going to do? I couldn't leave, I had *nowhere* to go. I've told you, I am sorry for what I have done, I've been sorry a long time!"

* * *

The following week, in their little room, Louvois asked Sylvie about the duchesse, especially her past and her strained relationship with Mme de Montespan. She regaled him with the latest gossip but did not tell him the rest.

Then, as they were dressing, she finally got the courage. "You are Minister of War. Does Monsieur La Reynie report to you?"

He put down his waistcoat and stared. "Yes, he does. Why, do you know him?"

"Yes, of course. I have known him since I was a little girl. When I obtained my position, he asked me to tell him what was going on with the duchesse and Mme de Montespan."

Silence for a long moment. "So you have been giving him information? Have you been telling him things that I should know?"

"Well, I—" Sylvie, flustered, did not know what to say. He was angry. Why? "I am sorry, I did not know I should tell you," she whispered. "But I can tell you everything now."

"Good." He came over to her and kissed her on the forehead. "There's my good girl. Now sit down and tell me everything you told him."

She did—the duchesse's affair with her groom, resulting in the son now being engaged to Colbert's daughter; rumors about an abortion, visits to witches, and a mysterious missing piece of paper. She hated Mme de Montespan; they were on speaking terms, but no more. And Mlle Claude took Cato from the household of the duchesse and placed her in Mme de Montespan's household, then left when she had a baby by the King.

When she told Louvois about the groom, he chuckled. "Did

you know I wanted my daughter to marry that little bastard?" Then he thought a moment. "What do you think about Cato and Mlle Claude?"

"Antoine thinks they somehow were part of the evil in this house."

"What did he mean? What do you think was going on?"

"I am not sure. The servants find it suspicious that Cato went to Mme de Montespan because she has no talent for anything except intrigue. Mlle Claude seemed to have a lot of influence with madame, until—I wonder how Mme de Montespan felt when her maid had a baby by the King."

"Indeed." Louvois got up and poured a drink. "That made it all very complicated—especially for the investigation."

He turned back to her, his dark eyes intent. "Do you think the duchesse is evil? Or Mme de Montespan?"

"The duchesse is guilty of something, I know. When Captain Desgrez and his men came to the château to serve the arrest warrants, she was terrified. I do not know about Mme de Montespan. I hear about her terrible temper, but she has been kind to me. I wonder what Cato could possibly be doing for her. The servants here were glad when she left."

"And Cato is your enemy. Interesting. How often do you speak to La Reynie?"

"Oh, hardly ever. I send him messages through Captain Desgrez."

"Through Desgrez? How?"

"I put my letters in the chapel behind the statue of the Blessed Virgin. He retrieves them and sometimes leaves a message for me."

He pressed further. "And how often do you speak to Captain Desgrez?"

Sylvie was glad the room was dark. Her face felt hot—but why should she care about her captain now? "I—very little. There is really no reason to speak with him."

"Good." He took her in his arms and kissed her. "Good. And from now on you will give me your information. I will tell La Reynie that you are reporting to me."

Chapter 34

Bottles of Wine September, 1680

“Madame, are we there yet?” With no regard for her station, little Tou-Tou (Mlle de Tours) poked her head out the coach window yet again, trying to catch a glimpse of Versailles.

“Oh, *stop*. That’s the tenth time you’ve asked.” Athénaïs grabbed her little girl and plopped her down next to her brother and their erstwhile governess Françoise. The expedition to the conquered territories had been tiresome in the extreme. First, His Majesty insisted that Athénaïs bring his boisterous children along—he really does adore them—then a broken axle on their coach had forced Françoise and her maid Nanon to ride with mother and children. The ladies had been coldly polite for the past several miles.

But seven-year-old Tou-Tou had no intention of being quiet, her eyes welling with tears. “I’m *tired*. I want to go home. Why can’t I ride with Papa?”

“Oh, shut up, you monkey!” The 12-year-old Duc du Maine, who had his own household and should know better, poked his little sister in the ribs. She screamed and hit him on the head.

Athénaïs got a warning look from Françoise just before she could box her children’s ears.

“Hush, both of you.” Françoise grabbed Tou-Tou and plopped her down out of reach of her brother. “His Majesty’s coach is full. Don’t you see your mother is tired too? We all are. At least you got to sleep last night. I can’t believe that we had to sleep on beds of straw after bouncing around in coaches all day. Half the court is ill with coughs.” She sighed in affected despair. “The sacrifices we must make.”

“The sacrifices *we* must make?” Athénaïs said with a raised eyebrow. “Surely you are not referring to yourself? I haven’t noticed any sacrifices on your part lately. You seem to be doing quite well. How many hours have you been spending with His

Majesty lately?"

Nanon edged closer to her mistress and glared at Athénaïs, while Françoise remained as cool as her reputation. "His Majesty desires my conversation, and much of the time his new daughter-in-law joins us. He wants me to guide her carefully. I am afraid she is quite naive and susceptible to court intrigue." She smiled.

The little Duc du Maine glowered at Athénaïs, his eyes darting back and forth, assessing the two ladies.

Athénaïs caught the look. "Well, my son," she smiled brightly. "Tell us about your studies. I hear you are succeeding admirably with your Latin."

"Yes, madame, I am now reading Julius Caesar. Papa recommended it to my tutor."

"Why, isn't that wonderful," exclaimed Françoise. "My little man is so bright. And how perceptive of His Majesty, preparing you for leadership by reading the greatest of generals."

The young duc was now all smiles. "Yes, madame. Do you remember what Caesar said when he saw Gaul?"

The two were immediately engrossed in a discussion of Caesar, leaving out Athénaïs. She peered out the window yet again. It was going to take hours to get to Versailles. How to spend the time?

THUMP! The creaking of axles, and the passengers were jolted from side to side as the coach lurched its way out of a rut, causing Tou-Tou to fall into her mother's lap in a heap of giggles. The women laughed too, their enmity forgotten for a moment.

"Ma chère." Athénaïs' broad smile turned into a wistful one. "Remember years ago, the time our coach nearly turned over, and La Grande Mademoiselle howled with consternation? And we laughed because she sounded just like a donkey. That was such a delightful journey. Back then we enjoyed discussing everything under the sun, as long as it was interesting." She took a leap. "Let's declare a truce. There is only one woman in all of France who is possibly as witty as me." She slyly arched an eyebrow. "And that is you."

"Moi?" Françoise gasped in mock surprise. "Surely not."

"But of course. We can entertain ourselves with conversation for the rest of the journey."

"Maman!" Tou-Tou cried as she poked her head out the win-

dow yet again. "Are we any closer? When will we get there? I want to go home!"

"Hush!" Athénaïs shouted. "I don't want to hear any more, or you will ride in the last coach with the servants." Her stern demeanor was rewarded with silence and a tear sliding down her little girl's cheek.

"My *poor* child," Athénaïs sighed in mock pity. "Children, are you hungry? Here, I packed a basket myself just before we left. Can you find it, Nanon? I think a glass of wine would be wonderful. Would you like one, Françoise?"

Nanon fumbled about under the pile of cloaks on the seat until she found the basket. She pulled out some bread and cheese, arranged napkins on the children's laps, and they eagerly starting munching.

Athénaïs started digging through the basket. "I brought some white wine. We can't possibly make it through the journey without wine, and it's from my estates in the Loire. Here." She presented her friend with a glass and pulled the cork from the already opened bottle.

Nanon stared, first at the bottle, then at her mistress. Athénaïs saw the odd reaction but was intent on pouring herself a glass. Françoise eyed the bottle, then Athénaïs. "It's all right, Nanon." She smiled nervously at Athénaïs. "Nanon is worried about my digestion. Pour me some, please. And I would like to try the cheese." She took a sip and a bite, while her maid settled back into a corner of the coach, watching both ladies closely.

Françoise dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "I hear the construction at Versailles is finally back on schedule. Colbert says that the envelope of the old building is nearing completion and the Grand Galerie is finally done, except for the fresco on the ceiling. His Majesty will be meeting with Le Brun, but he hasn't quite decided on the central theme. I am sure it will be magnificent don't you agree?"

Athénaïs bit her lip. Again, the governess was the center of royal attention. Rumors abounded about the charming and witty Mme de Maintenon's hold over the King, likened to an iron grasp. She had her favorites and her enemies, and God forbid if you were one of the latter.

Athénaïs tossed back another swallow. "I do hope the ex-

pansion will not detract from the charm of the setting," she said, hoping to voice an opinion without starting an argument. "The gardens and woods are so inviting, especially during the summer."

"Have you heard from Sister Louise?" Françoise asked.

"Sister Louise? Oh, of course, Sister Louise de la Miséricorde." Startled, Athénaïs remembered her old rival who became a nun several years ago and remained secluded in a convent. "You know, I really should write her. It has been simply forever." She found herself enveloped with feelings of nostalgia wrapped up in guilt. *Change the subject.*

The ladies gossiped as the coach plodded on through hoof-sucking mud, then choking dust, then mud again. Finally, Tou-Tou, tired and cranky, resumed her complaints. "Are we there yet?" she whined yet again. Her mother moaned.

Françoise sighed. "Ma chère, the child is tired. Perhaps she could lie on my lap and you could tell her a story to put her to sleep."

"Yes! Madame, please?" Tou-Tou clapped her hands in excitement. Even the bored little duc looked interested.

"Well..." Athénaïs stopped to think. "All right, a story about Versailles." She smiled at the happy memory. "Yes, a story about the gardens, the magic gardens. Now lie down and be still, and I will tell you a story about the enchanted garden at Versailles that I designed myself."

"Yes, I remember, and the fountain, don't forget the fountain." Tou-Tou promptly lay down with her head on Françoise's lap.

Athénaïs laid back on the coach seat, drifting back to that magical time when she and Louis were so much in love and in love with Versailles. "Once upon a time, when you were very little, His Majesty and I had the gardener, Le Nôtre, create a little bosquet, an enchanted little forest."

"And the fairies? Don't forget the fairies."

"Of course, there were fairies. The fairies love to splash and play in the fountain. For you see, in the middle of the bosquet is a pond with graceful white swans swimming about. And there in the middle of the pond is a tree, but not any ordinary tree, for I designed it myself. It is an oak tree made of bronze that

shimmers like gold in the sunlight, with delicate green tin leaves rustling in the breeze. The tree is surrounded by arching metal reeds that are actually fountains spurting jets of water. That's where the fairies dance and play."

Athénaïs saw that her daughter was now fast asleep, and she closed her eyes. *I can hardly wait to get back to Versailles, and to my own little bosquet*, she mused. She looked over at Françoise, herself nodding sleepily. *And back to the same old enmity.*

* * *

A cold breeze blew into France from the North Sea, and as the seasons shifted, so did the testimony of the wretched gang of miscreants that La Reynie had to report to Louvois.

"Lesage said *what?*" Louvois looked up with surprise.

"I admit," said La Reynie, "I was also surprised. He claimed that none other than the Duchesse de Vivonne, sister-in-law of Mme de Montespan, had a black mass celebrated over her body in which la Filastre's infant was sacrificed to the devil. Not only that, she asked the witch to perform an abortion on herself. Lesage said La Filastre agreed—as long as a black mass was performed at the same time as the abortion, and the fetus was offered up to Satan." He shivered.

"Brandy?" Louvois pulled out bottle and glasses from his desk drawer and poured drinks for them both. He took a long swallow. "And did la Filastre confirm this?"

"Yes. She claimed the duchesse's pact with the devil needed a priest to facilitate, so la Filastre said she carried the paper to Abbé Cotton who transcribed it and carried out the rite." He paused to take a sip, grateful for the warmth. "Then the abbé confessed to performing ceremonies for la Filastre, at least one of them designed to kill, using the powders she got from an enterprising shepherd named Galet."

"Oh, him, yes, I remember. Did the abbé know the Duchesse de Vivonne?"

"Indeed he did. He said he received a paper from the duchesse, a pact with the devil. In return, she wanted to get rid of her husband and to send someone—he couldn't remember who—away from court." He paused to take a sip, thinking. "And all of this happened in 1676, when Mme de Montespan and the King

were separated.”

“I understand you interrogated Mme Chapelain. She hired la Filastre, correct? Did she admit to buying poison?”

“No. She claimed she was never involved in poison. She said she didn’t buy the poison from Galet—it was the Duchesse de Vivonne, not her, who told la Filastre to go to Normandy to buy powders from Galet.”

“But why?”

“The plan, she said, was to seduce the King and eliminate Mme de Montespan.”

“Mme de Montespan, a potential victim?” Louvois stared. “Do you think the duchess is dangerous? Perhaps she should be watched.”

“We have a source in her household that Captain Desgrez is working with. The duchesse does not seem to be dangerous, at least not now.”

“Captain Desgrez is very... efficient.”

La Reynie took another swallow of brandy. Somehow the room felt colder.

* * *

Now squirming before La Reynie on the sellette was the one-time shepherd Galet, who had found a more profitable calling as a talented chemist employed by la Filastre.

“Did you manufacture poisons?” La Reynie got to the point.

Little Galet nervously fiddled with his wispy beard. “No, no—I never poisoned anyone.”

“Well, you certainly told la Filastre that you did.”

“Yes, but I was just boasting, don’t you see. What I made for her was just dry bread mixed with Spanish fly.”

“And that mixture was destined for the King, no?”

“Yes, well—but it was a love potion, harmless.”

“And who was the client?”

“I was told it was for Mme de Montespan.”

“How long ago was this?”

“It was in 1676, I think. Yes, in the spring, in May. Look, I also sold this stuff to la Boissière. She came back to tell me that the lady she sold it to complained that it didn’t work, so I sold her some more. Nobody got hurt.”

La Reynie pushed harder. "Didn't you also sell them arsenic?"

"No, never! If I had had some sort of evil plan, I would have used something more subtle than arsenic." He nervously tugged on his little beard.

La Reynie sat back to think while his clerk finished scribbling. Chemists like Galet had a steady business selling arsenic used for rat poison. And my, Galet did indeed look like a rat. "Of course, you sold arsenic to your clients. Surely they came to you to help them kill rats?"

Galet's pale blue eyes rounded in shock. "Of *course* not. I wanted them to think my potions had killed many people and animals, but my powders never hurt anyone. All I sold them was just bread, Spanish fly, and iron filings."

"But isn't it true that la Filastre asked you for love powders and poison powders?"

"Yes, but—but they didn't hurt anyone."

"And her client was again?"

"Mme de Montespan," he sighed. "La Filastre told me that she was upset because the King was ignoring her, so I gave her Spanish fly."

* * *

"Well, monsieur, do you think Galet's telling the truth?" Desgrez set to work kindling a fire in La Reynie's office.

"The truth? Oh, please. Something's going on here, and I don't think that any of the suspects' testimony has been entirely true. Did you notice how their testimony keeps shifting? Galet didn't mention Mme de Vivonne, even though la Filastre did, but he seems to have worked only with the witches, not directly with their clients."

"Do you think Mme de Vivonne and Mme de Montespan were clients or not?"

"At least one of them, yes, but—" La Reynie turned to the fire, pondering. "When Galet said his powders were destined for Mme de Montespan, I think the truth was that they were going to the Duchesse de Vivonne instead."

"But what were the powders for?"

"Let me think. Remember years ago, in 1668, when Lesage

was questioned about his clients? The duchesse came up then, too. Remember, her father is the president of Parlement. Perhaps he sent Lesage to the galleys rather than to prison. Also, the duchesse's husband is the Admiral of the Fleet and in charge of the galleys—and like magic, a few years later Lesage winds up back in Paris with La Voisin."

"Justice, indeed. But what about the powders? Do you think Mme de Montespan wanted to poison the King, perhaps out of jealousy? My sources say she has a terrible temper and has argued violently with him."

"Not likely. Consider. What would she gain by killing His Majesty? She would lose her position at court immediately upon his death. No, I think Galet was working for the Duchesse de Vivonne, who had her own designs on the King. She wanted the love powders for him, and the poison for her sister-in-law. Even la Chapelain said that la Filastre's first trip to Normandy was to find something to gain the love of the King and to get rid of Mme de Montespan."

Desgrez arched an eyebrow. "Mme de Montespan an intended victim? Now, there's a turn of events. Do you think she should be warned?"

"If we do, that will alert her to the investigation, and it could spread across the entire court. Besides, we are dealing here with old business. We have no proof that the duchesse still wants to harm her."

"But Colbert's daughter is about to marry the duchesse's son. Shouldn't you tell him?"

"Oh, mon Dieu." La Reynie sank back into his chair. "I had almost forgotten. No, I cannot. The interrogations have become so sensitive that even the judges aren't getting all of it, so how can I tell him? And the allegations are that the duchesse planned to hurt Mme de Montespan, not Colbert."

A knock on the door interrupted them—a courier. La Reynie opened the leather satchel. "It is a letter from Louvois. Let me see..." He fell quiet, staring at the letter.

"What is it?" asked Desgrez. "Something serious?"

La Reynie took a breath, then let it out. "Let me read it to you. 'Monsieur La Reynie: I believe you have made the acquaintance of a Mlle Sylvie Dupont in the household of the Duchesse

de Vivonne. I am writing to inform you that you will no longer need her services, as she is reporting directly to me. I can assure you that she is safe and under my protection. Yours very truly, et cetera, et cetera..."

"Under his protection," Desgrez muttered. "Cochon." He turned to stare at the fire, his jaw working.

La Reynie put down the letter and closed his eyes. His captain had just called the Minister of War a pig—and he was right. "Dear God, I pray that she is safe. I was stupid to allow her to work for the duchesse. And now—"

He got up and began to pace. "And now we have a possible conspiracy against Mme de Montespan, and another one against Colbert, whose daughter is marrying her nephew. The wedding is set for late October, I believe. I wanted to ask Sylvie—" But he couldn't bear to say any more. He went to sit with Desgrez at the fire, in silence.

* * *

Sylvie sat curled up in the window seat embroidering madame's bed curtains, her daydreams unfolding into the flowers. She reached for a skein of wool and flinched. Her arm was still tender. Louvois got drunk last night, jealous over Desgrez. How much time did she spend with him? What did they do? He grabbed her, hard. But he didn't mean to hurt her. Surely not.

"Ah, there you are."

Sylvie looked up—it was Christine. She started to get up, but mademoiselle waved an imperious hand for her to sit and pulled up a chair.

"You are very talented. Let me see what you are working on." Christine inspected the embroidered flowers and vines with a smile. "I could never embroider, you know. I kept sticking my fingers." Soon the two women were laughing together, and Christine's admiration made Sylvie forget her troubles.

"And you have other talents as well," said Christine with a sideways glance. "Since you were apprenticed to a midwife."

"Yes, but not for long. She had to—to move back to Poitou. She was getting too old."

"But you learned a lot. I mean, you have been helpful to the duchesse with her change of life." Christine smiled. "With the

herbs, I mean.”

“Yes, of course. My aunt used many herbs to solve female problems.”

“Indeed. So, if someone came to you with a problem, perhaps their monthly courses were late, then you could—” A jingling of keys close by, and she dropped her voice to a whisper. “You could make a lot of money with that kind of training.” Here came Jeannette with a basket of mending. “I really must go,” said Christine. “We will talk later.” And she was gone.

* * *

“Monsieur!” Desgrez strode into La Reynie’s office, breathless. “There has been an attempt to poison Mlle de Fontanges.”

“No, no, that’s just rumors. The doctors have said—”

“No, monsieur. Her doctor has summoned you. He has found six poisoned bottles of wine just delivered to her.”

La Reynie grabbed his hat and cloak. “Summon your men.”

“They are ready at our coach.”

An hour of bone-jarring coach ride, soldiers galloping behind, and finally their coach pulled up at the ancient Abbey of Chelles.

“Messieurs! You are here at last.” The doctor ran up to the coach. “I do not know what happened. I give you my word that I had nothing to do with the water, nothing whatever. I—”

“We will speak inside, doctor. Captain Desgrez, start questioning the guards.”

La Reynie led the little man into an archway away from the others. “First, doctor, what is the mademoiselle’s condition? Did she consume any of the poison wine?”

“No, no, *grâce à Dieu*. We found it just in time.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“It’s all very strange. Yesterday morning I ordered the mademoiselle some spring water to drink. But in the afternoon six bottles of wine were delivered to her. The nuns said they thought I had ordered them, but of course I had not. So, I opened the bottles, and smelled the contents, and found them to be—well, suspicious. They smelled odd.”

“Who delivered them?”

“I really don’t know.”

“So, the wine may or may not be poison, and we don’t know who delivered it.”

They went to the kitchen, shooing away a bevy of curious black-robed nuns. “Here it is,” said the doctor pointing to a crate.

La Reynie pulled out one bottle. It had a white substance around the neck and when he pulled a cork, a musty smell filled the kitchen. “The wine is bad, certainly. I’m no chemist, but it does not smell like any poison I know.” The doctor looked a little sheepish. “But you were probably right to summon us. How is the mademoiselle? May I see her?”

“She is quite ill, a condition related to her miscarriage months ago. Her lungs are very bad. But please visit her. She heard about the attempt to poison her, and she is frightened.”

A nun led them down the halls to her rooms, where they were greeted by a large, very angry abbess. “Monsieur La Reynie. My poor sister came here for refuge from the court, to try to recover her health, and now look—is this how you protect the beloved of the King?”

“Monsieur?” came a whimper. Grateful to be redirected from that virago, La Reynie went over to the bed. Mlle de Fontanges, her huge grey eyes now sunken relics, reached out her pale hand. “Monsieur,” she whispered, “they want to poison me.”

“No, madame.” He clasped her hand. “You are safe here. Nothing can harm you now.”

“No monsieur, no.” She coughed, a deep gagging cough, and spit into a handkerchief. “She hates me. Mme de Montespan hates me, and she is trying to kill me.”

* * *

Athénaïs woke the next morning with a dreadful headache. Last night His Majesty and the Queen retired early, giving the courtiers an open invitation to get too drunk and gamble like fools, especially Athénaïs. She had been playing reversi amid the cacophony of triumphant yells and moans of misery, but she couldn’t ignore the giggles and whispers from the table behind her.

“I see the King and Queen have retired early tonight,” came a woman’s voice.

“Yes, and together,” a gentleman snickered.

“What, and it hasn’t even been two weeks, and they are sleeping together again?”

“You dreadful gossips,” hissed another. “How do you know they are sleeping together?”

More titters. “You are new at court, aren’t you? I guarantee you, tomorrow the Queen will be rubbing her little hands with joy and heading straight off to mass to pray for a child.”

“My, how unexpected, the King sleeping with the Queen. What brought about this change of affairs?”

“Why, didn’t you know? Mme de Maintenon herself is responsible.”

“Mme de Maintenon? But isn’t she herself, ah—”

More giggles. “I hear that the Queen is ever so grateful to Mme de Maintenon for reminding His Majesty of his husbandly duties.”

“But I thought—”

“What, that she herself? The pious, moralizing Mme de Maintenon? What better way to retain the royal favor, and still get him off her back—so to speak.” The entire table burst into laughter.

Athénaïs wanted to spit. She took a swallow of brandy and tried to concentrate.

Alas, Primi Visconti wobbled up to her table. “May I join you, mes amis?” he slurred. Not waiting for an answer, he pulled up a chair.

Dangeau looked up with a scowl. “Just let us finish this hand, monsieur.”

“Of course, monsieur, of course. I’ll just watch.” Reeking of brandy, Visconti leaned over to Athénaïs to see her hand.

She wrinkled her nose in annoyance as she put down a card. Time for another swallow.

Visconti motioned for the valet to bring him a drink. “Did you hear the latest gossip?” he announced with a smirk. All eyes turned to him.

Athénaïs looked up from her cards. “Please monsieur, can’t you wait until we are done?”

But the rest of the table had lost their concentration on the game. “What gossip?” asked the Comtesse du Roure. Her sister-in-law had fled the country one step ahead of La Reynie.

Visconti glanced around as if he possessed a state secret. "I just heard from the Abbey of Chelles," he hissed, "that Mlle de Fontanges is getting sicker and sicker, and—" He hushed his voice as he leaned toward his eager audience. "She *insists* she has been poisoned."

Gasps. Stares. "And—guards have been posted."

"Oh really, monsieur, how ridiculous." Athénaïs was by now quite annoyed. "What a silly story. Who on earth would want to poison *her*?" She shoved a few more écus toward the middle of the table.

Athénaïs' fellow players stared. Dangeau looked down at his cards. The silence was broken by a soft thump—Visconti had passed out face down on the table. That was all they needed. Those sitting next to Athénaïs were the first to leave with muttered apologies, then gradually the rest began to disperse. Finally, it was just Athénaïs, Dangeau, and the snoring Visconti. Dangeau looked at Athénaïs sympathetically and folded his cards. "Perhaps another time, madame."

Athénaïs sat very still. *Could people possibly believe—Oh, mon Dieu, is that why in the coach Nanon was staring at me and the wine?* She put down her cards and rose. "Yes, monsieur. Another time."

* * *

Sylvie was sitting as usual in the window seat, her needle stabbing the fabric, up and down, up and down. Christine's request for herbs was now a demand. Herbs to make her bleed, *soon*, Sylvie.

"Have you heard about Mme de Montespan?"

She looked up. The voices were coming from madame's dressing room.

"She is trying to kill that poor Mlle de Fontanges," the servant continued.

"No, really?" said Christine. "How like her. That woman is a dog's whore. I'm surprised she herself hasn't been poisoned, what with Cato in her household."

Ouch. Sylvie stuck herself with the needle. She shoved her bleeding finger into her mouth and shrank back into the window seat.

Now they were giggling as they headed toward the back stairs. “You mean Cato—”

“Yes,” Christine laughed. “What a perfect opportunity...” Their voices trailed off.

Sylvie wrapped her finger in her handkerchief and inspected her embroidery for blood stains. *Opportunity for what?*

Chapter 35

The Love Powders September, 1680

“Your Majesty, we have enough information to arrest the Duchesse de Vivonne,” La Reynie said.

“And there are serious allegations against Mme de Montespan,” said Louvois.

The King took a deep breath. “Explain.”

La Reynie pulled out his notes. “La Filastre confessed that she had attended a black mass some years ago, where a note was passed under the chalice stating Mme de Montespan wished to be loved by ‘a person of consideration.’ She then admitted she was trying to enter the household of Mlle de Fontanges with the design of attempted murder. And, Your Majesty, you were also a target. La Chapelain and la Filastre made trips to the provinces in search of ingredients destined for you. The first trip was for Mme Vivonne who wanted something to make you love her, and another substance to kill Mme de Montespan.”

“To *kill* her? But—” He sighed. “Did you verify this?”

“Well,” said Louvois, “the stories don’t quite add up. La Filastre said la Chapelain manufactured love powders for a lady of quality at court, name unknown. Plus, the chemist Galet claims that he sold la Filastre poison powders for Mme de Montespan. The witch has denied that, but he is staying with his story. The Voisin girl claimed that her maid Mlle Claude came often to her mother’s house as a client. Then we heard that la Filastre wanted her to take love powders to Mme de Montespan in return for 10,000 écus. But she was afraid and refused.”

“10,000 écus?” the King raised an eyebrow. “Mme de Montespan’s yearly salary as Superintendent of the Queen’s Household is only 5,000 écus. Before that position, she was entitled to only to 2,000. This testimony does not seem credible.”

Louvois turned to La Reynie. “Didn’t Abbé Guibourg himself say that Mme de Montespan was one of his clients, and had a mass celebrated over her own body?”

“Not quite. I interrogated Guibourg last week, and I swear I don’t know if the man is evil or not in his right mind. He described a man who brought him powders to be passed under the chalice, intended to restore Mme de Montespan to the King’s favor. Then later, the same unknown man took him to a hovel in Saint-Denis, where a mass was performed for Mme de Montespan on the stomach of an unknown woman. We returned to la Filastre, who claimed that Guibourg told her that the woman on the altar was Mme de Montespan. I went back to Guibourg and he just sat there looking confused. Finally, he refused to confirm that.”

“So.” The King pursed his lips in disgust. “We have allegations that Mme de Montespan is involved with satanic practices and poison—or not. Now there are claims that the Duchesse de Vivonne plotted to use powders to poison her and seduce me. Is Mme de Montespan safe? Is there a risk that the Duchesse de Vivonne still plans to kill her?”

“Well, Sire...” La Reynie fumbled for words.

But Louvois interjected. “I have an informant in the household of the duchesse,” he said smoothly, “who will report to me if there is any danger.” He smiled at La Reynie, who struggled to smile back.

“Then there is the poison petition, which may or may not be true.” The King turned to La Reynie. “You wrote that there is more reason to think these horrible things are false, rather than to believe them. Do you think the Voisin girl is lying?”

“I’m not sure. She has been very convincing otherwise.”

“I hope la Filastre might help us get to the bottom of this, but I heard she is gravely ill. Will she survive the torture that long?”

“The doctor said she should be able to withstand it. Torture should reveal the truth.”

“Good. Try to get as much information as you can before the torture, in case she doesn’t survive. These allegations may be unbelievable, but they are frightening. The Duchesse de Vivonne is about to marry her son to Colbert’s daughter, and of course she has unlimited access to Mme de Montespan, who may or may not still be a target.”

“Yes, and there was another threat against Colbert,” said La Reynie. “Abbé Cotton said the duchesse asked for the death of

Colbert in order to bring back Fouquet. Which of course does not make sense, since she is his friend.”

“Then there is the problem of the Chambre,” the King continued. “To allow the judges to hear these tales would spread scandal and compromise national security. If it became known that I have been the target of spells and love potions, I would become the laughing-stock of Europe. Any one of the judges could leak this, and within a week we’d be reading it in the Dutch press. I hope keeping the transcripts from them will solve this for now.”

* * *

Sylvie had her hand on the latch to enter their little room, but paused, fighting back tears. Today she received a letter from Maman; Papa was not speaking to her. They found out, naturally they would. The letter was almost apologetic: If they had only been able to provide a dowry, this might not have happened. Louvois was very rich, he could care for her—but she had not told them that she refused his money. And the family was in mourning. Uncle Bertrand of the Huguenot branch of the family had died, refusing Catholic last rites and setting off a fight in the little village over where he would be buried. The Crown’s pressure on the family to convert was intensifying. Would Louvois have pity on Sylvie’s Huguenot relatives?

No, of course he would not, and that shamed Sylvie as much as when she went to confession. The priest would sigh over the banality of how many times, and from how many women he heard the same story. While Louvois was married, at least she was not, so twenty Our Fathers and twenty Hail Marys, put some money in the poor box and she was done. And Christine? Sylvie was still searching for the right herbs.

She stood at the door, her body longing for the warmth of his touch and her soul terrified. *Why is my heart pounding? He hasn’t really hurt me. Well, just a little, he didn’t mean it.* But his eyes, black with rage—or is it me he sees? Every time he gets a report from La Reynie... She opened the door.

“You need to help me, Sylvie.” Louvois was drinking, and pacing, back and forth.

“What is wrong, mon cher?” She sat down at the little table, trembling.

He sat down next to her. "I need to confirm the stories about the duchesse and Mme de Montespan. Do they hate each other? What have you heard?"

"I think I have told you everything." She nervously smoothed her dress. *Think, try to remember, make him happy.* "They certainly do not like each other. The servants have talked about their relationship years ago when Mme de Montespan became the King's mistress. That made the duchesse angry."

"Did you hear anything about the duchesse wanting to kill Mme de Montespan?"

"The duchesse kill her? Mon Dieu, no."

"Years ago, I mean."

She paused. "I never heard that her hatred was ever that serious. But I did hear about her visit to the witches, and it seemed she was being blackmailed. There was all that talk about a piece of paper that someone had and her fear if it was ever discovered."

He poured himself another glass. The bottle was now almost empty. "Do you think the witches could have conspired with her against Mme de Montespan?"

"I don't know anything about that, but—Just a minute." She shut her eyes tight, remembering. "Antoine said something about the evil in the household, that it started when the duchesse visited the witches, and Mlle Claude was involved too. Then there is Cato. I heard some gossip that Mme de Montespan was trying to kill Mlle Fontanges, but somehow Cato—" She took a sharp breath. "If I wanted to harm Mme de Montespan, I would place someone in her household, someone I trusted."

Louvois took another swallow. "Of course. Who, Cato?"

"Yes. Mlle Claude brought Cato from our household to Mme de Montespan's, but she was totally unqualified. If madame or the witches had wanted to harm Mme de Montespan, a maid would be perfect for the job."

He nodded. "You are right. Plus, the talented Mlle Claude had a baby by the King, and that could make her untouchable."

"Yes, but what about Cato? She is still there in Mme de Montespan's household. Is there a chance Cato could harm her?"

"It's possible. We are hearing the same thing from the witches. How ironic—her, a possible victim. Perfect."

"But if there is a plot to kill her, would you—would you let

that happen?"

He caught the horrified look on her face. "Such a tender heart. Chérie, I am Minister of War and I cannot afford such luxuries as pity. You know that, don't you?" She dropped her gaze to the floor, unable to look at him.

"You have no idea how many plots and intrigues we have uncovered. There are so many against Colbert I have lost count, not that I personally care if either of them lives or dies. Especially her—you have no idea how deep that bitch has sunk."

"So... if there was some kind of a plot against her, you would not protect her?"

"Protect *her*?" he laughed. "Well, I suppose I must. If I have a conspiracy on my hands, then the public order must be maintained." He pulled Sylvie to his embrace with a grin. "Come here, my little spy."

* * *

La Reynie, yet again, looked down from his high desk at a defendant. Some of them were liars, often smiling; some actually quite helpful, especially when terrified.

Here sat la Filastre, pale, coughing. Was Mme de Montespan her client? the Duchesse de Vivonne had allegedly demanded to know if she was.

"Hah! I am sorry not to have known her. I could have earned ten million livres."

"But you did have a pact drawn up for the duchesse and two other ladies, no? And you were using it to blackmail them."

"No! No, that is not true!"

That was this morning. Now La Reynie glared down at little Abbé Cotton, shorn of his religious raiments, trembling, staring at the floor. They had been at this for an hour. Time to get to the point.

"You wrote a secret pact with the devil?" La Reynie raised his voice a notch.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Speak up. Who was it for?"

"Yes. La Filastre drew it up for the Duchesse de Vivonne."

"What was in it?"

"She wanted to restore the fortunes of Fouquet and... and

the death of Colbert.”

La Reynie sat back in his chair, surprised. Why would she want that?

Back at his office, La Reynie was surprised to find Desgrez waiting for him.

“Monsieur, I have a letter from Louvois with instructions for you to read immediately.”

La Reynie went over to the window to read. “It says—” He glanced through it quickly to get the gist. “It says His Majesty wants to postpone an arrest order against Mme de Vivonne until all the evidence is in. He also wants to see what la Filastre and Abbé Cotton reveal under torture before making up his mind about how to proceed.”

“But first there has to be the trial, no?” asked Desgrez. “And he doesn’t trust the judges with all the evidence. National security, he told them, so they won’t ask too many pointed questions. But what if la Filastre lies under torture?”

“Well, torture usually reveals the truth. And His Majesty has selected a confessor to meet with her afterward to make sure she tells the whole story.”

“Aha. The confessor hand-picked by the King. Interesting. So, neither the trial nor the torture might reveal too much.” Muttering to himself, Desgrez went over to the fire to scrape his muddy boots on the fender.

* * *

“No! cried la Filastre to the judges arrayed high above her—a row of ravens, pecking at what soon would be her corpse. “No, the only reason I wanted a position with Mlle de Fontanges was because I wanted to help my family.”

“But did you not buy powders from Galet for Mme de Montespan?”

“No! It was Galet who boasted to *me* that he sold them to her.”

“Abbé Guibourg claimed he had said a mass for Mme de Montespan. Was she there?”

“No.” she shook her head. “All I know is that he said the mass, but I am sure she wasn’t there.”

“And did you not sacrifice your child to the devil?”

She looked around the room frantically, as if searching for escape. Or an answer. "No—yes! I mean—" She burst into tears.

The judges found la Filastre guilty of sacrilege and selling poison; the hapless Abbé Cotton was guilty of treason against the divine order, sacrilege, profanations, impieties and conjurations, all because he, an ordained priest, had participated in abominable rites. The judges sentenced both to be tortured, then burned alive.

* * *

The next day at the Bastille, an exhausted La Reynie made his way down the dark corridors to his office. The tortures of la Filastre and Abbé Cotton were finally over; the screams, the pleas for mercy stopped reverberating off the dank stone walls, and all he wanted was to go home. But Louvois was waiting for him.

"How did it go?" Louvois was pacing. "Did you get any more out of them?"

La Reynie sat down at his desk, tired. Now he had to deal with Louvois. "I didn't get much from the abbé. He said his incantation for the devil wasn't for Mme de Vivonne, it was for la Filastre. Mme de Vivonne was never named in it, but she was designated by the first letters of her name in another pact, which was transcribed by Filastre's orders."

"I expected better answers than this. What did la Filastre say about the powders?"

"Mme Chapelain sent her to buy love powders for Mme de Montespan to give to the King, and poison for Mlle de Fontanges. Mme Chapelain wanted to place la Filastre in Mlle de Fontanges' household to poison her, on the orders of Mme de Montespan."

"Good—good." Louvois nodded. "And Guibourg. Did he plot against the King?"

"Possibly. She said Guibourg claimed he performed a mass for Mme de Montespan, and for a gentleman who wanted to harm Colbert. But she denied there was a plot to harm His Majesty, other than what was said about Mme de Montespan being against Mlle de Fontanges."

"Merde. I take it la Filastre is now with the confessor."

"Yes, and I hope he can get the truth out of her."

"Don't count on it." Louvois finally sat down, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. They waited in silence.

Finally, the guard appeared. "Messieurs, la Filastre has finished her confession and she has asked for you to see her. She says it is urgent."

They found la Filastre, too weak and mangled to stand, sitting on the mattress with the priest at her side. "I have something important to say, messieurs," she said, her voice stronger than it had been in months. "Everything I said to you about Mme de Montespan, everything I said about Mme Chapelain, was false." Her anxious eyes glanced up at the priest, who was gently smiling at her with encouragement. Then she turned to her irritated audience.

"You lied?" La Reynie snapped. "Why?"

"To free myself from the pain. I was afraid that if I didn't say those things I would be tortured even more. But now, I don't want to die knowing that I have wrongly accused others."

"But the poison?" Louvois was clenching his fists. "Did you not get poison from Galet?"

"Yes, monsieur, I did, but it was to poison the wife of my own lover, not to kill Mlle de Fontanges. And no, I never sacrificed my own child to the devil."

"And what about Mme de Montespan?" asked La Reynie.

"I never met the woman."

* * *

Now what? On a drizzly morning, La Reynie's fellow judges Boucherat and Bezons joined him and Desgrez at his office. Each judge was clutching a letter from Louvois, red wax seal ripped open. His Majesty had decided to suspend all proceedings of the *Chambre Ardente*.

"I don't understand." Bezons lit his pipe from the fire while André served coffee. "Why suspend the proceedings now? We were just starting to get to the bottom of this sordid affair."

"And this is so sudden!" Boucherat exclaimed. "Did he even consider all the evidence?"

"Messieurs," said La Reynie, "the transcript of the trial and torture cannot be read to the entire *Chambre* as required by law. The information is too sensitive. There is the chance that

irresponsible individuals would take la Filastre's testimony and make up their own stories, or perhaps start malicious rumors."

"Are the judges to hear nothing?" Bezons snapped. "That's inconceivable."

"There may be a way around that. I will recommend that they hear the testimony, but all reference to an attempt on the life of Mlle de Fontanges must be removed along with la Filastre's retraction. Then the Chambre will be suspended. Suspects will be questioned, but there will be a temporary hold on further trials."

"But what about your investigation?" asked Boucherat. "We must find out the truth about Mme de Montespan and the Duchesse de Vivonne. And then there's the maid, Mlle Claude. Her name keeps coming up."

"Yes, monsieur, it does." Desgrez pulled out his notes. "The Voisin girl claims she was a frequent visitor buying powders, and Romani named her as someone who could facilitate the delivery of the petition."

"But," Boucherat asked, "did you verify that Mlle Claude was involved with the witches?"

"Not really," said Desgrez. "It's hearsay so far."

"And what about Mme de Vivonne? Do we have enough to arrest her?" Bezons pursed his lips in disgust. "Even if we could arrest her."

La Reynie paused to consider. "I have no doubt that the lady had commerce with these witches and sorcerers, possibly for years. Proving it is another matter. Neither la Filastre or Abbé Cotton were reliable witnesses."

"What about her relationship with Mme de Montespan?" asked Boucherat, leaning forward with a frown. "She is accused of plotting to eliminate her."

"Yes, they seem to detest each other." Desgrez looked at his notes. "But what I wish to remind you is that in 1668, when Lesage and Mariette were convicted, Lesage was sentenced by the duchesse's father to the galleys—and the duc de Vivonne had just been promoted to Admiral of the Fleet. Lesage somehow was able to return to Paris a few years later."

The gentlemen glanced at each other warily.

"And there are repeated tales from Lesage and others that

Mme de Vivonne made a pact with the devil designed to get rid of her husband and kill Mme de Montespan and Colbert. Someone is holding the document and possibly blackmailing her.”

Bezons shook his head. “She was using witchcraft? It sounds bad. And the duc’s son has been formally betrothed to Colbert’s daughter.”

“And the wedding is this month,” said La Reynie. “You know, it’s interesting how all these allegations have surfaced just now. It’s almost like someone wanted to stop the wedding by defaming the duchesse.” He turned to Desgrez. “Didn’t someone else want to marry into the Vivonne family? Wasn’t it—”

“Louvois.” Desgrez took a breath, then let it out. “Yes, monsieur. It was Louvois. Mme de Montespan was insulted that he, a man of common birth, would dare to suggest marrying his daughter into her family.”

Silent suspicion mingled with the grey smoke curling up from Bezons’s pipe. “Could Mme de Vivonne have been defamed?” Desgrez finally asked. “Defamed by—”

“No,” La Reynie said firmly. “Back in 1668, Lesage and Mariette said their clients included Mme de Montespan and the Duchesse de Vivonne. No, I tend to believe most of what the suspects say about her. Remember, one of them said that the duchesse demanded to know if Mme de Montespan was a client. Although what you have learned about her character seems to fit, we have no real hard evidence. Given her status at court, we must be very sure before bringing charges.”

“But the threats against Colbert,” asked Boucherat with a worried frown. “Could he be in danger? What do you think, Desgrez?”

“Colbert has had threats against him for years,” said Desgrez, “some of them serious, most of them mere rumors, all stemming from his prosecution of Fouquet.”

“Yes,” added La Reynie. “Perhaps the witches had clients request spells and poison to kill Colbert, and these people were all lumped in with Mme de Vivonne, who on the contrary has been Colbert’s friend. Lord knows how many enemies he has. It’s possible that Fouquet’s recent death reminded our suspects of the plots.”

The group fell silent, listening to the rain pound against the

windows.

Bezons knocked the burned tobacco from his pipe into his saucer. "What about the rest of the investigation? How can we proceed without the involvement of the Chambre?"

"And above all," said Boucherat, "What about Mme de Montespan? Could she be guilty of having a black mass celebrated for her? Not to mention the powders she bought."

"Indeed," said La Reynie. "Now I can ask the Voisin girl anything without fearing that something too sensitive would get back to the rest of the judges and the public. Then I can question Guibourg, who is—" He paused. "Who is as close to evil as I ever want to get." He put down his coffee cup with a clink. "Mes amis, with or without the Chambre, I will continue the investigation until the bitter end. I will not stop until we know the truth."

Chapter 36

The Sacrifice October, 1680

No matter where the court traveled—no matter which château—behind the glittering façade there was always a back stair. Servants could come and go discreetly up and down the narrow, dimly lit stairs, then through hidden doors into the salons and bedchambers and out again laden with chamber pots and laundry.

And back stairs was where Christine, after days of hints and snide remarks, trapped Sylvie. “I need those herbs *now*.” Then, “You must be using them too, no? What would the duchesse say if she knew why?” She laughed. “And if she knew who you were with?” Then she was gone.

Sylvie sank to the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees, shaking. Then a sound—a creaking stair behind her—she froze.

“Sylvie?”

She gasped. It was old Antoine.

“Sylvie, are you all right?”

“Antoine, I—” tears choked her.

“It was Christine, wasn’t it?” Antoine pulled her to her feet and put his arms around her, held her close and let her sob. “My poor little one. I was on the stairs and heard her. Was she threatening you?”

She nodded. “If I don’t give her what she wants, she will tell—”

He pulled out his handkerchief and dried her eyes. “I know about her. And I know what you are, too.” She tried to turn away, but his wrinkled hand brought her to face him.

“Sylvie, I know about you and Louvois. You are no worse than any young woman who has fallen in love with the wrong man. The only difference is, well—Louvois, and what has been going on for years in this house. Does he want information from you?” She nodded. “Then, there is what Christine wants from you. It must be bad.”

"It is herbs she wants," she said, her voice shaking. "Herbs to end a pregnancy. And if I don't get them for her, she will say I am a spy. But Antoine, Louvois said there might be a plot against Mme de Montespan from Christine and Cato. Could she be in danger?"

"Ah, yes," Antoine said. "Such grandiose gestures Christine has, right from the stage. Are you familiar with Jean Racine?" She nodded. "Years ago, around 1666, Christine was an actress, a rather poor one, and Mlle Claude was wardrobe mistress. And those two were friends with Racine's mistress, Thérèse du Parc, who was a client of La Voisin. I heard that Racine got fed up with Christine and dismissed her. Then she was hired by the duchesse and Mme de Montespan hired Mlle Claude. And all of them were seeing the witches."

"My, what a coincidence."

"Then Mlle du Parc died, from a miscarriage or an abortion. You should have heard the duchesse and Christine carry on. They blamed Racine because he would not allow La Voisin to visit his mistress on her deathbed; and because Mme de Montespan was his friend, that's when the battle lines were drawn. They were jealous of her anyway. I could hear the duchesse and Christine whispering with Mlle Claude, planning something, I am sure."

"But that was years ago. Is there still a threat?"

"I don't know. But I remember them laughing when Mlle Claude got Cato into Mme de Montespan's household."

"She could be in danger? I should tell Louvois about this, but—no, he will just laugh. Someone should warn her."

Antoine thought a minute. "Ah, of course. The Duc de Vivonne is her brother. I have served him for years and he should listen to me. I will try. But Sylvie—what are you going to do about the herbs?"

* * *

Athénaïs was going to hell. Yes, she knew that. This morning, sitting at her dressing table, head throbbing from last night's brandy, she knew that. The nightmares were relentless, devils pursuing her with a whirring flail to whip her back just like Maman had, running, running, waking in tears, night after night, so now she had candles lit and a contingent of ladies in her bou-

doir chattering into the night to lull her to sleep. Otherwise, the shadows seemed to move...

Her dressing table was her refuge. Powders and patches and rouge lay before her promising instant beauty, for beauty was power and she had so little power now. She held her cup of morning coffee with shaky hands, staring into the mirror at the dark circles under her eyes. Wait—were those lines around her mouth? *Helas*. How much could paint and powder conceal?

“Is madame up yet?” Her brother’s voice boomed outside Athénaïs’ door. She nearly dropped her coffee.

Cato ushered him in her boudoir then paused at the door, curious.

“Leave us, mademoiselle.” The duc slammed the door behind her.

“My dear brother, what possibly could be so important at this hour?” Athénaïs pasted on a smile. “Please sit down. Café au lait?”

But the agitated duc de Vivonne paced. He went to the door and opened it a crack to peek outside, then shut it. “My wife.” He pulled out his lace handkerchief to mop his sweating fat face. “My wife is being accused of consorting with witches.”

“What?”

“Yes. And they say that she has even plotted to kill you.”

Athénaïs got up to pour them both brandy. “Who says this?”

“I heard it from—from someone in our household. I knew years ago that she had an abortion. It all fits together. I went to one of the judges who said the witches are claiming that Antoinette visited them for poison to get rid of you, and love powders to gain the heart of the King.” He dropped his bulk onto her creaking settee and took a long swallow of brandy. “By the way, that is supposed to be a secret.”

Her knees wobbling, Athénaïs sat down. “When was this?”

“I just found out.”

“No, I mean when did she try to get rid of me?”

“My source can’t say. It must have been a long time ago, I think around 1667. Apparently, Lesage said something about it years ago when he was arrested the first time, and now it’s come up again.” He paused. “I don’t believe that you are any danger now—I think.”

"You think? Are you not sure?"

"I don't know, because the story is just so ridiculous."

"Did you discuss it with Antoinette?" Her brother was now staring at the floor. "You weren't supposed to say anything to her, were you?"

He shook his head. "No. She found me upset, and it all just came out."

"What did she say?"

"That's old news,' she said. 'Of course, I wanted to be the mistress of the King. Everyone did.' She said that years ago she and her friends went to La Voisin on a lark to see if they could succeed and have you fail. I asked her if she wanted you dead, and she said that idea was idiocy."

"Is it idiocy? What do you think? Does she still want me dead?" She went over to him and peered into his face, for he still wouldn't look at her. "Brother, tell me."

"I don't know, she has disliked you for years. But you must know that."

Athénaïs sat next to him, trying to collect herself. "Do you think she is capable of hurting me? Would she do that?"

The duc tossed back the last of his drink. "I don't know. I'm sure there's more."

Athénaïs shut her eyes tight. "Where is Antoinette now?" she finally asked.

He shrugged. "Gone, as usual. Perhaps to our château." He got up to pour himself another glass of brandy then took both bottle and glass back to the settee. "I never know where she is. And I have never really cared."

"What do we do?"

He plastered on a courtier's smile. "This whole thing could be nothing more than ridiculous rumors. I even heard that she plotted the return of Fouquet and the death of Colbert. For God's sake, why would she do that? She hardly knew Fouquet, and Colbert's daughter will be marrying our son this month. It's absurd."

"What? Do they believe that? The, the—" she stammered. "The wedding—what about the wedding?"

"I don't know. The King hasn't said anything, so I think it will go on." He stared at the empty bottle. "Right now, I'm going home to get drunk." He put down glass and bottle and got up to leave.

“By the way, everyone is pointing to Mlle Claude.”

“Oh, mon Dieu.”

“Yes, and Cato was mentioned too.” He paused at the door and turned to her, his hand on the latch. “Didn’t you know that Cato used to work for Antoinette?”

Athénaïs put her face in her hands.

“Yes, indeed. En garde, madame, en garde.” And he was out the door.

* * *

Back in the high keep of Vincennes, La Reynie couldn’t help but stare. La Voisin’s daughter was cheerily explaining how her mother handed over the entrails of an infant to a distiller of poisons. “Were others involved with this?” he finally asked.

“Oh, yes,” replied Marie-Marguerite, her eyes wide-eyed. “La Lépère aborted an infant and she brought the pieces to Maman, and they took them to Pelletier, who made a distillation, and—and Pelletier carried an after-birth to Saint-Denis, to Guibourg, the priest, and—” And she went on, and on, with the clerk scribbling furiously, about the many times an aborted or still-born infant—or even a dead one that had been baptized—would have its entrails carved out and taken to Guibourg for a black mass.

“How long ago was this?”

She paused to think. “About ten or eleven years ago.”

“Guibourg conducted these rituals with your mother?”

She blinked rapidly. “Yes—yes! Guibourg baptized an infant at our house, an infant that la Lépère had aborted. And there were others,” she said excitedly. “I saw him consume at least three or four little ones in the oven. One of them was an infant presented at a mass for Mme de Montespan on Maman’s orders.”

La Reynie swallowed. “Was this a live infant?”

She frowned. “No, it looked like it had just died premature. It was brought in a basin, and Guibourg slit its throat and drained the blood into a chalice. He consecrated the blood with the host and put them in a glass vial that Mme de Montespan carried away. The body was burned in the oven.”

“Ah, Mme de Montespan was a client. And there were others?”

“Mlle Claude came with an English milord.” She blushed.

"After the baby was sacrificed on the body of a woman, the milord put, ah, his filth in the chalice with some powders. And everything was put in a tin box with a separate packet of powders that Guibourg gave to the English milord. Guibourg and Maman should have gone to England with him."

Now she really had his attention. "Why didn't they go?"

She shrugged. "Maman was arrested. After that, a man came to me with a letter offering to help get me out of France, but I didn't want to go. Then I was arrested."

"How often did this English milord visit with Mlle Claude?"

"I saw them three or four times at my house. I don't know their plan or why they came."

"And an infant was sacrificed for Mme de Montespan. What did she want from that?"

"She wanted the love of the King. After the consecration, Guibourg said their names—the names of the King and Mme de Montespan."

* * *

Sylvie was trudging up and down the gravel paths in the vast Versailles herb garden, looking, looking. She could stall no longer, not for Christine, or for herself. They both needed the herbs. Now. She looked around, going over the list in her head of suitable herbs to make women bleed, pregnant or not. But it was fall. Yesterday's rain had flattened the tired, brown plants, making them hard to recognize. Little was growing except the tall hedges.

Voices. She turned to see Mme de Montespan in the distance. *What is she doing here?* Sylvie positioned herself discreetly behind a hedge.

"Ah, Monsieur Le Nôtre!" Athénaïs called. "Just the man I need."

"At your service, madame," he replied. He doffed his hat. "How may I assist you?"

"I can't seem to find my garden."

"Your garden, madame?"

"Yes, the one I designed, the one with the bronze oak tree and the reeds in the pond. It should be near here." She looked around. "So much has changed. Where's my bosquet?"

Le Nôtre fiddled with his hat. “Madame, there has been much renovation. We—”

“I see the renovation. But surely my garden wasn’t on the list to be removed.”

“Madame, many changes had to be made to accommodate the new construction. Several things were removed.”

“It’s gone?” Athénaïs gasped. “It’s *gone*, and no one consulted me? I designed it myself! How could you just get rid of it, like, like—” Her face was turning red as the nearby autumn leaves. “Who made this decision?”

Poor Le Nôtre stared at his muddy shoes. “His Majesty, madame.”

She opened her mouth to assail him again when, “Mme de Montespan!” a third voice called. “I was told you would be here.”

“Why, Monsieur Colbert, what a surprise.” She turned back to Le Nôtre, her hauteur now intact. “I’m sure His Majesty has an even more exciting creation planned for the gardens, no? Bonjour.”

Le Nôtre fled. Sylvie froze behind the hedge, fascinated.

Colbert kissed the hand of madame, formalities were exchanged, then their voices dropped to a murmur. Were they talking about the duchesse?

“But how do you know Antoinette won’t try to hurt me?” Madame exclaimed. “She has always hated me.”

“These are old stories, but dear God, she’s soon to be my daughter’s mother-in-law. And... there are other allegations.”

“What? What do they say?”

“I cannot discuss what they say. But I must ask, what do you know? Has she been a client of the witches?”

“No—no, I don’t know. At least, not to my knowledge, or—or if she did, I am sure it was only for entertainment. You know that many people of quality visited the witches.”

Colbert lowered his voice even more. Something about La Voisin, a compromising document...

“Blackmail?” Madame exclaimed. “What has she done?”

“She is probably innocent of everything, except being stupid.” The two kept slowly walking and were now closer to Sylvie.

“But... will there be a wedding? Will she be arrested?”

“No. There is not enough evidence. The wedding will go on,

but—Madame, I wanted to speak with you on that very matter. I cannot give you any details. I can only tell you that you are under investigation by La Reynie—”

“What? How dare he. I was born a Mortemart, my lineage is one of the oldest in France. What effrontery! His Majesty will hear of this.” She abruptly turned to go.

“Madame, *shush*. Stop it. Your temper and your animosity toward Mlle de Fontanges have done terrible damage to your reputation. She was your rival, and now she is ill. Worse, you are suspected of consorting with witches.”

“But—it’s not true what they say,” she stammered.

“What who says?”

“What the witches say...” Her voice trailed off.

“What did the witches say, madame?”

A long silence, then, “What must I do?”

“I must beg you to hold your tongue, madame. Please, no word about our conversation. Most importantly, control your temper, especially with His Majesty. I hope all this will be resolved. However, if it appears that you will be charged—”

“Charged?” she gasped. “With a crime?”

“If it appears you might be charged,” he said firmly, “I have retained an attorney for you. Monsieur Duplessis is the soul of discretion.”

“An attorney? A woman of my breeding, mother of the King’s children. How can you, of all people, believe those things? *No*, no, I am innocent, I haven’t—”

“Haven’t what?” He waited. “Madame, what *have* you done?”

“I have done *nothing*,” she spat. “And His Majesty knows I have done nothing. I am sure that he will rein in that—that *fool*, La Reynie. Why should I need an attorney? I am Superintendent of the Queen’s Household.”

“But, madame, do you not recall what happened to the last holder of that title?”

Stunned silence. “How can you compare me to that bitch?”

“Hush, madame. You must act as if nothing has happened, and not do anything that will bring more suspicion down on your head. And that includes losing your temper.”

Madame dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, then she reached for Colbert’s arm. They walked down the gravel path

past Sylvie, their voices mingling with the autumn mist... Then madame mentioned Cato. What was that she said? Then they were gone.

Sylvie turned back to face the dying herbs. It is finally catching up with her, whatever she has done. I know God will forgive madame, but what about me? The herb garden stretched before her, endless rows and squares and circles of dying vegetation succumbing to autumn's chill. She had to find something—There, pennyroyal and motherwort, perfect. Sylvie sat down on the gravel path and wept. I am going to hell. Yes, I know I am.

* * *

The cold came early with a wind whipping around the massive tower of Vincennes, seeping through the stone walls and chilling La Reynie's bones as he climbed the stairs to the interrogation room. Winter already, and only October 10th.

"Ah, messieurs, here we are again," he greeted Sagot and the scribe at his little desk. La Reynie took his place at his own high desk and called the guard. "Send in the prisoner Guibourg."

The door clanged open and Guibourg shuffled in, his chains dragging on the floor. Once seated on the sellette, the elderly priest grinned through his rotting teeth while his one good eye rolled into position, fixated on his opponent.

La Reynie felt like a lamb being eyed by a wolf. "Monsieur Guibourg, you have had dealings with Mlle Claude de Vin des Oeillets who connected you with Mme de Montespan, yes?"

Guibourg's gap-toothed grin widened. "Why, yes, monsieur, you are right. The first mass I said for her was on the body of a woman who came in with another woman. That one was taller, as I recall."

"You made a conjuration at this mass?"

"Yes, I did." He smiled sweetly. "You want to know what I said, of course," he said softly, as a priest might speak to a parishioner. His rolling eye focused somewhere in the distance. "Let me see, what was it I said?" His smile hardened. "Ah, yes. Hail, As-taroth and Asmodeus, Princes of Friendship!" Guibourg's harsh voice rang through the stone walls.

La Reynie shrank back into his chair. Sagot and his scribe froze.

"I conjure you!" Guibourg sang out shrilly, the bulging veins on his face throbbing. "I conjure you to accept the sacrifice of this child in return for the favors asked of you: that I should have and keep the love of the King and that of Monseigneur the Dauphin, and I continue to be honored by the princes and princesses of the court, that nothing I ask of the King be denied me and my family." He turned to La Reynie. "And in my conjuration, I named the names of the King and Mme de Montespan." He smiled in contented reminiscence.

La Reynie gulped. "And you sacrificed a baby in this ceremony?"

"Yes, I bought an infant for an écu which had been presented to me by a young lady." His smile narrowed. "I pierced the throat of the infant with my penknife and poured the blood into a chalice. After that, the baby was taken away and its heart and entrails were removed and brought to me for a second mass. The gentleman told me to make powders for the King and Mme de Montespan."

"Do you know who he was?"

"Why no, a total stranger."

"You said the mass over the body of a woman. Who was it?"

"She always wore her coif down, covering her face and half of her breasts."

"Where did this take place?"

"It took place three times. The second was in a hovel near the walls of Saint-Denis over the body of the same woman. The third one was at La Voisin's, over the same person, maybe eight or nine years ago. Or longer."

"Was this woman Mme de Montespan?"

"I think it was five years ago I celebrated the same mass at La Voisin's, and they told me it was Mme de Montespan. It was for the same purposes. After I was finished, when I removed my coat from a chair, I noticed a paper with writing that seemed to be a copy of a pact."

"Do you remember what it said?"

"Ah, yes, I remember it distinctly: 'I—so-and-so—daughter of—so-and-so—ask the friendship of the King and Monseigneur the Dauphin, that it continue, that the Queen be barren, that the King abandon her bed and table for me, that I obtain from him

all I request for myself and my family, that my servants and domestics be agreeable in his eyes, that cherished and respected by the grand seigneurs I might be called to the council of the King and know what takes place there, and that this friendship be doubled over the past, that the King abandon and no longer look at La Vallière, and that the Queen be repudiated so I might marry the King.”

“Did you keep the paper?”

“No, when I got to that point it was taken away from me.”

“And you made these conjurations as a priest?”

“Of course I made them as a priest. I wore an alb, a stole, and maniple.”

“And was Mlle Claude present at any of these rituals?”

“Yes, she was there. She said she wanted the spell for the King, and she was accompanied by a man who had given her the incantation.” He slowly licked his lips. “Since it was necessary to have the sperm of both sexes, Mlle Claude put her menstrual blood into the chalice. The man who came with her went to the side of the bed with me and ejaculated his sperm into the chalice. The mademoiselle and the man each added to the chalice the powdered blood of a bat and a little flour to give the mixture a firmer composition. After I recited the incantation, I poured the mixture from the chalice into the little vessel that they had brought.”

* * *

“Incroyable,” muttered Desgrez as he scanned the freshly penned transcript. “Can all this be true? Could Mme de Montespan really be guilty of these abominations? Guibourg could have made it all up.” He looked up at La Reynie with a worried frown.

“No,” said La Reynie. “It’s simply impossible that Guibourg could have made this up. There were so many details in the pact that he had probably written and recited it more than once and knew it by heart. And how could Guibourg have known about Mme de Montespan if she was innocent?”

“He does seem to know a lot about the court as well, not to mention Mlle Claude.” Desgrez frowned. “This is really damning. I wonder if she was doing this as an agent of Mme de Montespan,

or if she was acting on her own behalf? Then there's what Romani said, that she was the contact person at court for the petition. What if the petition was connected to this English nobleman? That is, if we assume that the man Guibourg describes is also the English milord. The mademoiselle needs to be brought in for questioning immediately."

"No. No, not yet. We must be careful. Remember, we cannot prosecute anyone right now, for fear—"

"But look what these people have been plotting!" Desgrez slammed down the papers on the desk. "Wouldn't you like to see them to squirm in the boot? And the rest of them must be brought to justice."

La Reynie opened his mouth to speak, then paused. He motioned to his law books arranged row on row in the bookcase behind him. "Regardez. That is justice. That is the law. And according to the law, we cannot try defendants without the judges having all the facts. And we cannot give them all the facts, because if we did all Europe would know that His Majesty's mistress was involved with poisoners and witches, not to mention allegations of having abominable rites celebrated over her naked body."

"But Guibourg is a *monster*. He and the rest of them must be punished."

"Yes, I know. I have to find a way out of this terrible mess. I am writing Louvois—"

"But what can you say? How can this be solved? We have spent so much time and effort bringing these criminals to justice, and now it seems that all our work is evaporating, just because their testimony is too shocking."

"Louvois will direct my concerns to His Majesty. I am sure that in his wisdom he will find a way to solve this dilemma."

"His Majesty. Wisdom. If he had kept his trousers on—"

"Desgrez! You forget yourself."

Desgrez paused, then set his mouth firmly shut and brought himself smartly to attention. "Yes, monsieur." He retrieved his plumed hat from the chair. "You are correct. I have forgotten myself. A thousand pardons." He bowed low to La Reynie, sweeping his hat before him. "I await your further instructions." He turned on his heel and walked out, his boots echoing on the stone floor.

* * *

“Sire! Beware the hand raised to strike you again!” La Reynie jerked up in bed, gasping, inhaling the cold night air like a balm to quell his terror. “A dream,” he muttered. “It was just a dream.” He mopped his sweating face with the sheet, then collapsed back onto his damp pillow. “Curse her.” He rolled over onto his side. Perhaps the nightmare would not return. “That evil woman. Somehow, I must warn His Majesty, he must listen to me.”

But he couldn’t sleep, so he wrapped a blanket against the chill and lit a candle. He had to figure this out.

So, on this late Friday night, one day after Guibourg’s revelations, La Reynie was back in his study. The flickering candlelight danced across page after page of notes with columns of pros and cons, arguments for and against suppressing some—or all—of the evidence. Desgrez’ remarks had stung. What to do about the most recent interrogations? Will these miscreants go unpunished just because of fear of scandal? How could he deceive his colleagues? To lie to the judges, to not give them all the facts, would ironically dishonor the King’s justice. Plus, all these proceedings are linked one with another, so the judges could not be able to decide any of it.

“Besides,” he wrote, “even if we found a legitimate way to conceal from the judges the facts which must be kept secret, even for the sake of justice itself, these facts will crop up again from the defendants when under trial. If the facts were placed in evidence, it would be for the good of justice to make the knowledge public.” But then, what would be the consequence?

“I must trust in the superior spirit of the King that God has placed in him, as king, as judge, as father of his subjects; that he can examine and judge the evidence.” Or could he?

He struggled to keep his pen from shaking. “I swear that my spirit is confounded. I have done what I can to assure myself that these facts are true, and I cannot get to the bottom of it. I have researched, on the contrary, all that could persuade me they were false, and this has been equally impossible for me. I recognize anew that I am not able to pierce through the heavy shadows that envelope me. I must have time to think this out, and perhaps to find my way to a better idea.”

But there is no obstacle against investigating, only in the prosecution. “Thus far, I can think of no other course than, some-

how, to continue the search for the truth. I hope that God will uncover this sink of iniquity and show us the appropriate method; and, finally, to inspire the King to make the best decision.” His candle finally sputtered out. La Reynie put down his pen and felt his way through the darkness back to bed.

Chapter 37

Calumnies October, 1680

Louvois loomed over Sylvie, fists clenched, her great bear enraged, reeking of brandy.

"Please, Michel," she cried, "why? I have done nothing."

"Nothing? Tell me about Desgrez, all that time you spent with him, tell me again, what did he do with you? Tell me!"

"I have told you everything, please, we were never alone." Sobbing, her head reeling from his blow, she clutched at his boots.

"But I know him! He is like all men and he cannot be trusted." He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet. "And women! You are all alike, like that whore, that witch—"

"Michel, I was a virgin!" She reached out her hands to his face, caressing, soothing, to make him stop. "Michel," she whispered, "I gave you my maiden's blood."

And then, he stopped. The great Michel le Tellier, Marquis de Louvois, stopped, and stared. "Ma douce Sylvie!" he cried. "Forgive me, please." He wept, his tears anointing her face as he held her tight. "You could not know what I know about women." Then he kissed her hard, desperately, and her terror flamed into passion and he pulled her to the bed, and she wrapped her legs around him and he took her quickly, frantically. Then he dropped off to sleep and she lay there, watching him.

Compromises, deals with the devil. She gave Christine the herbs with a pert smile to make her back off. And she remembered... Yesterday at mass she spied the great lady herself kneeling in prayer, her eyes raised to the crucifix with deep longing and sadness. They were alike, Sylvie and Mme de Montespan, both trapped in a spider's web of sin.

Louvois jerked awake. "Chienne. Monstrous—evil—*woman*."

"Michel? Who do you mean?"

"Mme de Montespan. What she did." He lay back down on the pillow, sweating.

“What did she do?”

“Guibourg,” he whispered. “The priest we arrested, what he said.” He stared into the dark at the shadows beyond the candles. “Evil, evil man. And her—unbelievable depravity.”

He took her hand in his, kissed it, then held it to his face like that first time. “I have always detested that woman, and now I know why. For years she was consorting with the devil himself and conspiring to kill the King. And she hates me, I am sure of it, who knows what—” He fell silent, holding her hand tight. “Sylvie, there is a curse on me.”

“A curse? How do you know that?”

“Long ago I consulted—someone—about my suspicions. It’s true. I will be dead at the age of fifty.”

“Quel horreur! Who would do such a thing to you?”

“There is quite a list. The witches’ clients hate me. Especially—I am sure of it—Mme de Montespan. What she did with Guibourg in a terrible obscene rite. Oh *mon Dieu*, what power she must have.”

“Will she be arrested?”

“I hope so, but I doubt the King will allow it. Sylvie!” He held her tight as if she was his savior, his talisman. “Sylvie, I am sworn to protect the King and France from all enemies—witches, poisoners, spies, Huguenots—but now I am facing the devil himself.”

* * *

“Mademoiselle—” Athénaïs had been putting this off far too long, and now her nerves were getting the better of her. “This dreadful new hair style, *à la Fontanges*. It’s ridiculous, I hate it. So unbecoming. It makes my face look fat.”

“Yes, madame, it is unflattering to many ladies.” Cato went on swooping up Athénaïs’ hair to the top of her head in a style inspired by the King’s one-time favorite. Instead of masses of curls adorning one’s face, now ladies must wear their hair all piled up, topped with a white starched bow.

Athénaïs carefully positioned a beauty patch above her lip. She took a deep breath. “Mademoiselle, I have heard that the investigation of the witches is turning to me, and—”

“What, madame?” Cato paused, the white bow in her hand.

“How can that be? You are the mistress of the King.”

“Was. I was once. And now, now I am nothing, and La Reynie is after me. And there is talk about you,” she said. She looked up to the mirror to see Cato glowering.

“And what do they say about me, madame?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly, except you used to work for my sister-in-law, and—and she is also under investigation.”

Cato just stood there. “And?” she finally said.

“Well, you have been mentioned too. You should probably go away.” Athénaïs turned to her with an eager smile. “I will of course give you enough funds to leave.”

“You want to hire Sylvie Dupont, don’t you? Why don’t you just say so?”

“Who?”

“You know who, your sister-in-law’s embroiderer.”

Athénaïs blinked in confusion. “Her? What makes you think that? Really—”

“You need to know the truth about her. Don’t you know she is Louvois’ mistress?”

“What? She is?” Athénaïs shook her head. “Oh, that poor child. I wouldn’t wish that on anybody. Look, this is ridiculous. It has nothing to do with her. I just said that you need to go because of the investigation. And I can give you enough money to leave the country.”

Cato stared at her, hard. “Madame, that is kind of you. I will of course consider your offer, but—I need to think about it.” She gently turned Athénaïs back to the mirror.

“But Cato—”

“Do not fear, madame.” Cato returned to placing the bow in madame’s hair. “We still have friends, important friends that I can call upon if needed.”

Athénaïs watched Cato in the mirror, her faithful maid Cato who knew so much. Too much. She swallowed hard.

“Madame, you never did try this perfume.” Cato handed her the crystal bottle, its amethyst stopper glinting in the candlelight. “Just try a little. It will relax you.”

* * *

As La Reynie hoped, His Majesty was duly inspired and fi-

nally made a decision: La Reynie would be the only person to interrogate the suspects, all transcripts to be held in greatest secrecy. However, La Reynie would not interrogate the Duchess de Vivonne, and the wedding between her son and Colbert's daughter went on as scheduled. And of course, Mme de Montespan would not be questioned either. There was only one notable woman left.

A knock on the door of La Reynie's office at the Bastille: "Bonjour, monsieur," said Louvois. "Mlle Claude has arrived; or should I say the mysterious lady in the double-trained dress, as the Voisin girl describes her. And I hear you arrested one of her friends—or a former friend."

"Mme de Villedieu's testimony is pretty damning," said La Reynie. "She claims the mademoiselle was in deep with La Voisin, and that she bragged she would never be arrested because of her relationship with the King."

Louvois arched an eyebrow. "Sounds like she is out for vengeance. This could be embarrassing to His Majesty. I will bring her in."

Louvois left and a moment later La Reynie heard him returning, the rumble of his voice trying to sooth another cultured Parisian voice. "You will see, monsieur, I am *sure*." Then he stood in the doorway with Mlle Claude. La Reynie checked her dress for a double train as described by the Voisin girl but found none. Fashions had changed.

"Monsieur," said Louvois gravely, "May I present Mlle Claude de Vin des Oeillets. Mademoiselle, Monsieur Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie."

"Mademoiselle," said La Reynie with a curt bow. "Please come in and sit down."

She perched on the edge of the chair and removed her gloves, yanking at each finger. "Monsieur La Reynie, this is ridiculous. Those people never saw me at La Voisin's home, I swear it. I can assure you that it is all a mistake, or some kind of conspiracy against me."

"You never met La Voisin?"

"Yes, but a long time ago, it has been at least ten years. I went there with my friends, five or six young ladies of my neighborhood. Monsieur!" she snapped, "Tout le monde went to La

Voisin. Would you arrest all of Paris?"

Louvois ignored the barb and turned to La Reynie. "I told the mademoiselle that several prisoners claim to know her well," he said. "She said they could not possibly know her. She insisted on coming here to see if they recognize her."

"Most assuredly, they will not." She glared at La Reynie. "Monsieur, can we proceed? This whole affair has become tiresome." She snapped open her fan and fluttered the cold air.

La Reynie nodded. "Monsieur Louvois will accompany you."

It took less than an hour. "Outrageous!" Her refined voice, now shrill as a fishwife, rang up the stairs. "Absurd!" The red-faced mademoiselle swept into his office again, Louvois just behind her. "It can't be—they could not *possibly* know me."

"But madame, how could they have recognized you if they had not met you?"

"They must be mistaken," she sputtered. "I—I have a niece, and a— a cousin. Both of them love to go to fortunetellers, and they look just like me. And! There is a maid working for the Comtesse de Soissons who looks just like me, and they both hate me and Mme de Montespan. Besides," she snapped, rising to go, "how can you believe those low-life criminals?" She gazed coolly at La Reynie. "Why should you believe them, and not me?"

* * *

Sylvie paused on the landing with her sewing basket passing by madame's boudoir. She heard voices, laughter, Christine and madame.

"Poison? Curses?" laughed the duchesse. "Oh, this is too amusing. But how?"

"Madame, it would be unwise for me to reveal too much, but you remember Cato is right there, all the time. And so is the perfume."

Sylvie froze. *What?* Her basket fell to the floor, the scissors clattering. The door swung open and Christine grabbed her arm, hard, and pulled her into Mme de Vivonne's boudoir.

"You little slut!" Christine shoved her toward madame. "Here, madame," she dramatically declared, "is Louvois' mistress, spying on us."

Sylvie stood straight and glared back at them. She was ready

for this. "Yes, madame, I am Louvois' slut. And you, madame, have been under suspicion for years."

The duchesse froze.

"But madame," Christine declared, "your embroiderer is a good friend of Mme de Montespan. Aren't you, Sylvie? And isn't that why you are spying on us?"

"You salope!" The duchesse came at Sylvie, ready to strike.

"Oh, really, madame," said Sylvie. "You should know who your friends are, as well as your enemies." She curled her lip in a cynical smile, so necessary at Versailles.

The duchesse paused. "What do you mean?"

"Madame, surely you realize that Louvois detests your sister-in-law. And, conveniently, Mme de Montespan has taken a fancy to me."

The duchesse frowned, puzzled, but Christine pushed on. "But you are spying on us."

"Well, of course I am, I spy on everybody. I am no threat to you. Why do you think the wedding went off as planned?"

The duchesse blinked. "Do you mean—"

"Yes, madame, how could you, a suspect in the Poisons Affair, be allowed an alliance through marriage into Colbert's family?"

"So, I was a suspect." The duchess turned to Christine. "You said everything was all right, that la Reynie was not looking at me."

"Explain!" Christine snapped.

"Madame, years ago you were missing an incriminating document, no?" Both ladies recoiled as if she was a venomous snake. Sylvie laughed. "Oh, come now, don't you realize? They could not find it either, so the case has been dropped. Then there is the embarrassment to His Majesty. Heavens, having the sister-in-law of the royal mistress under investigation."

"And what about Mme de Montespan?" asked Christine. "What will happen to her?"

Sylvie shrugged. "That has not been decided. But they all do hate her as much as you."

The duchesse glared, her pale blue eyes like ice. "So Louvois hates her too. What if she came to justice, say, in some other manner?" She gave Christine a sideways glance.

Sylvie took a deep breath. "I—I am not at liberty to say. But

I assure you, mesdames," said Sylvie as she curtseyed low, "that I shall not interfere with any of your plans. Bonsoir." She exited gracefully, picked up her basket, ran to her room and locked the door.

Chapter 38

The English Milord May, 1681

The icy chill in Vincennes slowly gave way to passable comfort. Lesage gained a new infestation of lice in his ratty wig; Abbé Mariette was now dead from old age or the prison's cold; and Guibourg and the Voisin girl had no more stories, because La Reynie could ask nothing more for now.

All winter and into spring La Reynie struggled to put the remaining pieces together, interrogating suspects, poring over mountains of notes, then placing them all into black leather caskets and shipping them off to Louvois and the King, with copies destined for Mme de Montespan's attorney. Delay, delay, while the King pondered and the accused rotted in prison, and the dangerous ones walked freely. *Who was l'Auteur, and who was the mysterious English milord? And was Mme de Montespan guilty?*

Finally, on this glorious spring day La Reynie had been summoned to Versailles for a meeting: *the* meeting, fourteen years since he had begun the poisons investigation. How to proceed? How could the suspects be interrogated further if they incriminated the loftiest members of court? Could the judges be trusted to be discreet? His Majesty, Colbert, and Louvois had been studying the contents of the caskets of testimony since January. Now—come to Versailles. We are ready.

* * *

His Majesty commanded a spectacle! The huge Galerie de Glace—as long as a cannon shot—was finally finished. La Reynie wandered among the hundreds of chattering courtiers, awaiting the exotically garbed ambassadors of Czar Feodor of Russia, come to be presented to His Majesty.

La Reynie hated crowds and he was already annoyed. When he'd arrived last night and was walking through the enormous new wing housing the hundreds of nobility, he found in a dark corner of the stairwell a gentleman relieving himself against the

wall. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Versailles is going to hell already.

Look how much everyone has changed in the past fourteen years. It used to be all flounces and furbelows, lace cascading from men's knees, women's curls dancing about their faces, their décolletage revealing just about everything they had to offer. La Reynie's sober black robes no longer made him stand out; now the courtiers were stiffly formal, all very proper in an effort to impress His Majesty with their presumed virtue. The court of years ago had been light and gay, but now there was no life in this room.

He saw Mme de Montespan stuffed into a brocade dress, her blonde hair swept up on top of her head with a bow, à la Fontanges, his chief suspect forced to wear the hairstyle inspired by her chief rival. She spotted him. Her blue eyes blazed for a moment, then she tilted her chin higher and turned away.

The last time he had been in this room, the parquet floor was still being hammered down and the ceiling was bare. Now, vaulted above the expanse, Le Brun's murals proclaimed the Sun King's triumphs in battle, his detested Dutch and German enemies thinly disguised as classical foes prostrate at his feet. Silver candelabra graced marble tables, massive silver urns held fragrant orange trees, solid silver benches and stools, crystal chandeliers, countless mirrors opposite countless glass doors flooding the huge space with sunshine. And at the end of the room, His Majesty's gold throne awaited the ambassadors. La Reynie smiled for his friend Colbert. His artisans at the Gobelins manufactory had hundreds of silversmiths, tapestry weavers, even glass makers spirited away from Venice—and they had created a masterpiece.

La Reynie scanned the room for familiar faces... there, could it be? Sylvie. Older, thinner. And somber too.

Sylvie turned and saw La Reynie. Her heart stopped. What an opportunity—would Louvois find out? Their eyes met. She lifted her fan to cover her face and slid through the crowd to stand beside him. "I must speak with you," she whispered.

"Certainly," he said. "Perhaps two o'clock?"

The cacophony of voices hushed: Bontemps appeared at the end of the Galerie calling out His Majesty's arrival. The milling

throng parted, everyone jostling for position against the wall of mirrors on one side and the glass doors on the other to make way. Sylvie and La Reynie were pushed back to an orange tree in a silver tub, taking refuge behind the leaves.

"Where shall I meet you?" he whispered.

"In the chapel, at the statue of the Virgin." She disappeared into the crowd as the trumpets blared.

* * *

"Your Majesty, it pains me to bring you such a distasteful matter." The King, Louvois, and Colbert turned to La Reynie, here to summarize the damning evidence against the King's mistress. It was Colbert's chance to defend her. But if either of them pushed too hard they might risk their careers. And before them sat the three black leather caskets, one for La Reynie; one for Colbert; the third sat before the King.

His Majesty dipped his quill in his inkwell, blank note paper before him. "Proceed."

"Sire, the evidence points to Mme de Montespan ordering black masses, including infant sacrifice, to be performed in her name by Abbé Guibourg to ensure the love of Your Majesty. As part of these blasphemous rites, she has apparently made a compact with the devil in which love powders were passed beneath the chalice. Further, from 1667 on, she was in the hands of La Voisin and in contact with Lesage and Mariette. They were interrogated back then and indicated at that time that they knew her well."

"And you believe their testimony?"

"Yes, Sire. Their testimony is highly credible, since back in 1668 Lesage and Mariette both confirmed knowing Mme de Montespan and stated they had seen and had spoken to her many times. They claimed that from 1667 on, she went to them for charms, spells, and love potions. At first, it was to woo you away from Mlle de La Vallière, and then to protect herself from her other rivals. If their testimony is true, it will be one of the strongest pieces of evidence against Mme de Montespan.

"The two allege that she later sought more potent doses from la Filastre and Galet through la Chapelain. These facts were well substantiated not only by la Filastre, under torture, but also

by Guibourg and Galet. Please note that the account of one confirms the account of the other, in practically every detail. Many of these charges appear to be substantially proven.”

The King sighed. “Appear to be. What about the credibility of the Voisin girl? Can you believe what she said about the poison petition?”

“Yes. It’s incredible that an attempt could have been made on your life with a poisoned petition; but also, hard to believe that she could have invented such a story.”

“But it was never corroborated by the other suspects.”

“Well, the petition was, but not the fact it was poisoned. It may have been treated in some manner, perhaps with a spell. While there was no other corroboration, if the others had talked about the petition, they would have faced terrible punishment for being involved in a plot against the King. However, Mme de Montespan did have a motive to kill Mlle de Fontanges, so there might have been a plot to poison her with gloves and perfume. Romani’s friend Vautier claimed to have mastered the technique and admitted that he hoped to sell them to her. From that,” La Reynie paused for emphasis, “it follows that La Voisin’s daughter did not invent what she said about the plot to kill the mademoiselle. And if that is so, everything she said can be presumed to be true. Therefore, if the plan for the gloves and perfume is true, it is not impossible that her story of the petition is true.”

“Wait a minute,” Colbert interjected. “If it’s true that Mme de Montespan was going to get Romani and Bertrand to sell Fontanges poisoned merchandise, doesn’t this discredit la Filastre’s claim, that Mme de Montespan ordered la Chapelain to tell Filastre to get a place in Mlle de Fontanges’ household to kill her?”

La Reynie paused to think. “Well, possibly. This would have meant that after La Voisin’s arrest and the collapse of the plan to kill with poison gloves, Mme de Montespan sought out la Chapelain and plotted a new way to kill her rival. This would have happened while La Voisin was in jail and might talk. I admit that is hard to believe.”

“But La Filastre never said that she had seen Mme de Montespan, nor spoken with her,” Colbert replied. “And while it might be true that la Chapelain had spoken with la Filastre, it does not follow that she had been working for Mme de Montespan. La

Chapelain could have been working for someone else and was deceiving la Filastre.”

La Reynie turned to His Majesty. “There are rumors that Mlle Fontanges has been poisoned, even though there is no proof. Tell me, Sire, what is her condition?”

The King shook his head. “The doctors still believe that her miscarriage may have resulted in an infection. Her condition is grave.” He stared at the papers before them. “I too have heard the rumors. Ridiculous. It is my wish that we can have the investigation and trials proceed and put these stories to rest.”

“And then there is the sorcerer Guibourg,” La Reynie took Guibourg’s testimony from the pile. “First, Your Majesty, there is no doubt Guibourg performed obscene parodies of the mass on naked women which involved child sacrifice. These scoundrels have given so many details about them that it is difficult to doubt it. For example, Guibourg recited the words of the pact with the devil as if he had read it thoroughly. He was very specific in the details of the sacrifice of the infant.”

“But Your Majesty,” Colbert insisted, “it does not automatically follow that Mme de Montespan played any part in this. Guibourg said that the mass was performed for her, and claimed it was over her body, but he admitted that the woman’s face was covered. How could he have been certain that it was her? Besides, would an upper-class woman visit so poor an area of Paris as Saint-Denis?”

The King lifted a hopeful eyebrow.

“However,” said La Reynie, “Guibourg’s claim appears to be true, that at La Voisin’s he saw a pact drawn up in Mme de Montespan’s name. If that’s true, Guibourg’s other claims are probably valid. For example, when both Guibourg and the Voisin girl described the ceremony, they agreed on details so specific and so horrible that it is hard to believe that two people could have imagined things exactly alike without each other’s knowing.”

Colbert frowned. “‘Appears to be true’, you say; ‘probably valid’. But probably not. I must point out that Guibourg said he had been hired by an employee of Mme de Montespan’s uncle, the archbishop. However, the archbishop was her husband’s uncle, not hers, and had publicly condemned her from the pulpit. He therefore had no motive to incriminate her.”

"I agree," said La Reynie reluctantly. "That doesn't make sense."

"But," insisted Louvois, "we must consider Mlle Claude. According to the Voisin girl, she came with an English milord to La Voisin's house to see Guibourg. He made a mixture of her menstrual fluid and the milord's semen plus the blood of an infant killed by La Voisin, and said a mass invoking the name of the King. The plan was to kill the King by use of a charm, right out of La Voisin's book. Mlle Claude left with the abominable concoction and the Englishman went with her."

"I thought that the infant was killed during the rite, not before. Is that correct?" His Majesty started looking through the transcript.

"There are two stories," Louvois replied. "The Voisin girl said that the infant had been killed before, but Guibourg said he killed the child during the mass. The difference may not be consequential."

"But it is a discrepancy." The King shoved the papers away in disgust. "The allegations against Mlle Claude are disturbing and hard to believe."

"Your Majesty," said Louvois, "I can understand your shock, since you knew the woman well." With that understatement, the King looked down at the papers, not at his ministers. "However," Louvois continued, "Lesage verified La Voisin's dealings with Mlle Claude. He said that she was to provide the 100,000 écus the witch bragged about and confirmed that La Voisin's plan was to kill you by magic. When she saw that Lesage's magic wasn't successful, she wound up working with Latour, who created the poison powders which were given to Mlle Claude. The plan was for the powders to go to Mme de Montespan to give to you without her knowing their true purpose."

"Wait a minute," said the King. "Was that Latour or l'Auteur, whom some of the suspects claimed was the author of the enterprise?"

"La Voisin claimed it was Latour, Sire. He was an expert on poisons and her former lover, but we never did pin that down and we still don't know who was behind all this."

"So, there may, or may not, have been a mastermind. And, since Mme de Montespan did not know the true purpose of the

powders, she would then be a dupe, not an accessory." The King perused the documents again. "Monsieur Louvois. You were there when Mlle Claude was presented to the prisoners for identification. Did they recognize her?"

"Sire, the prisoners recognized her immediately, all except the Voisin girl. She initially failed to recognize her, then later said she didn't want to name her because it might embarrass her. A silly story. And Mlle Claude came up with various excuses, the most interesting of which is that the Comtesse de Soissons and her retinue hated her and Mme de Montespan, and the comtesse's maid looked just like her."

"Considering what we know about the comtesse, that is possible," said Colbert. "But I must say that the Voisin girl's difficulty recognizing Mlle Claude says a lot about her credibility. Note that she described the mass with Guibourg and the English milord, but she failed to state over whose body the rite was performed. She could be lying about everything, and so could Mlle Claude, who could be guilty of buying powders for her own use."

The King leaned forward, "So, there is a possibility that Mlle Claude could have been deeply involved in this from the beginning, and the actual purchaser of the powders, rather than Mme de Montespan?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"But, I must repeat, she could be a dupe—not an accessory." The King rose, bringing his councilors to their feet. "We will meet again tomorrow." He turned to Colbert. "I am most interested in what you have to say in Mme de Montespan's defense."

* * *

La Reynie searched through the shadows of the chapel for Sylvie, finally finding her kneeling before the altar of the Virgin. He knelt next to her pretending to be just another worshiper. "Bonjour, mademoiselle," he whispered. "It is good to see you again."

"Bonjour, monsieur. I wish circumstances were better. Please," she glanced over at him, "please do not tell Louvois that I am speaking to you."

"Of course not. You look worried. What has been happening?"

"I—I have been hearing things about Mme de Montespan and her household. I fear for her safety." In halting whispers, it all tumbled out: how Mlle Claude planted Cato in a plan to control madame, the whispers about the witches, the jokes about giving her perfume.

"Perfume?" He turned to stare at her. "What about perfume?" He took a breath and turned again to the statue.

"Mme Christine was joking about the perfume bottle that Cato brought madame. I finally asked Louvois about it, and he said that with any luck Cato would use poison perfume. He laughed and said it would be perfect. Could there be such a thing as poison perfume?"

"We are not sure if it's possible, but we do keep hearing about it."

"Is madame in danger?"

He shook his head. "I—I don't know. Anything else about Mlle Claude?"

"I heard she had another lover, an English milord."

La Reynie's head snapped around again. "Who? Did you get his name?"

"No, but Mme Christine said he has been a frequent visitor to the court for years, always in and out of trouble in England. He once had a mad passion for Madame Henriette. I think his sister was in her court. She laughed that she didn't know which was bigger, his wig or his pomposity."

Sylvie turned to la Reynie and found him staring ahead, lost in thought. "Monsieur? Monsieur, I really think Mme de Montespan is in danger. Should she be warned?"

La Reynie paused a moment. "I don't know, but probably not. Cato has been in her household for some time and nothing has happened." He took a deep breath. "Mademoiselle, the information you have given me is useful. Is there anything else?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"I must go, mademoiselle. I owe you my deepest thanks." And he was gone.

Sylvie stared after him. "But—but what do I do now?"

The following day it was time for Colbert to defend Mme de

Montespan. Wincing from his gout, he got to his feet to address his King and colleagues, a stack of papers before him.

“Sire, my thanks to you for allowing us to consider the brief of Maître Duplessis, a most respected attorney whom I have retained to represent Mme de Montespan. And he surmised: the aim of the suspects in naming Mme de Montespan was to save their skins by prolonging the enquiry and delaying their trials. And that strategy has worked, has it not?

“Observe: all of the suspects have admitted they have never met her face to face. If la Filastre incriminated Mme de Montespan, she later retracted one of the charges made under torture. She never claimed to have met Mme de Montespan, and her stories about her were based on hearsay. The others, la Chapelain, Abbé Cotton, la Vigoureux, la Trianon, and both Vautiers never saw her. Romani and Bertrand never met her. Guibourg never saw the face of the woman over whose body he had said the mass, and he heard her name only from others.

“The Voisin girl’s testimony has many inconsistencies, and her allegations have escalated with each successive interview. She claimed her mother and accomplices were about to deliver a poisoned petition, which she had never seen. That entrance to the court would be made with the help of a great lady, unidentified. That the love powders and even poison powders were delivered to Mme de Montespan, whom she had never met, even though *she* was the one to deliver them. The Voisin girl is a lying whore and criminal who is attempting to save her skin by denouncing Mme de Montespan, and she has only done that after the death of her mother.

“And then there is La Voisin herself, who refused with her dying breath to incriminate Mme de Montespan. It is fairly clear that there was a business relationship of long standing between La Voisin and Guibourg. Note that Guibourg claimed Mme de Montespan had been his client as far back as 1667. But why would she avail herself of his horrible rites when she was already in the company of Lesage and Mariette, who were only sacrificing birds and toads?

“And, please note—if La Voisin had been in some kind of conspiracy with Mme de Montespan, she would have had no trouble getting the petition to His Majesty. She tried twice and

failed both times.

“And that goes to Mme de Montespan’s possible motives, and her opportunity, to harm you. If she had wanted to kill you, she could have done it easily. She ate with you often and was frequently in your company. Why should she conspire to have La Voisin give him a poison petition? Why was there a plot by La Voisin to enter her own household? Why not just ask her? But then, Sire, why should she even want to kill you? Most of the time she had no doubt of your affection, and it was only in 1678 when she experienced some trifling jealous anxieties.”

La Reynie raised an eyebrow. Mme de Montespan’s very public jealousy had started with Mlle La Vallière, spreading to other rivals, including Mlle Claude, pregnant by the King. Then there was His Majesty himself, whose conscience got the better of him at Easter, 1675.

Colbert had reached the last paper in his stack. “In regards to Mme de Montespan’s motive, you must agree that she would have had nothing to gain by His Majesty’s death. Look again at Guibourg’s testimony. He claims that she wanted the favor not only of the King, but also of the Dauphin. But the Dauphin was a little boy at that time. Why should she care? Guibourg said she wanted him to turn away from the Queen, but Her Majesty was never a threat to Mme de Montespan’s position. Finally, despite all the claims that Mme de Montespan is some kind of Medea plotting revenge, Mme de Montespan’s position at court is entirely dependent upon His Majesty. If something, God forbid, happens to you, she has nothing.

“But gentlemen, someone else may have intended an attempt on the King’s life. What if there were other factions using Mme de Montespan as a dupe? They could have given her poison powders to be added to what she believed to be an aphrodisiac, thereby using her as an unwitting accessory. Meanwhile, they would have brought her to power and infiltrated her household to take advantage of that. To aid their scheme they could have been plotting to infiltrate Mlle de Fontanges’ household and kill her, thus keeping Mme de Montespan in power.” Colbert rubbed his eyes. It had been a long meeting. “And—who knows, perhaps Mlle Claude could have had her own agenda.” He put down his papers.

Louvois looked irritated. "But you must admit that the prisoners tell very similar stories."

"Yes, but it is probable that the prisoners could communicate with each other, since no one could prevent that. That could have led to them coordinating their accounts."

"And that," said the King, "could explain their similar testimony, and perhaps that aided their ability to recognize Mlle Claude. Monsieur Louvois, did you not comment last year that lax security was allowing prisoners to get information from the outside?"

"Yes, Sire." Louvois shifted in his chair.

"Monsieur La Reynie?"

"I must agree that there may have been a problem."

At that, they all paused to think. Had the investigation been compromised? If so, how?

Colbert took a deep breath. "Sire, I would like to conclude my remarks. If all the people who had gone to have their fortunes told or to purchase good luck charms were to be brought to trial, the century would not be long enough to see the end of the affair. La Voisin had hundreds of clients. Why not prosecute all of them? Look at the credibility of the suspects. The testimony against Mme de Montespan is execrable calumnies, the babble of lunatics! The Voisin girl is a low-life whore, and Guibourg must certainly be mad.

"And Your Majesty, you know Mme de Montespan. Is she even capable of wanting to kill you, or indeed of consorting with Guibourg? If she had been involved in those terrible things, how could she stay near you and maintain any semblance of ease? These are things that cannot be conceived of. Your Majesty, who knows Mme de Montespan to the very bottom of her soul, will never persuade yourself that she could be capable of these abominations." He sighed. "Yes, and I know her well. She is loud, and imperious, and vain, all on the surface for everyone to see. She is stupid to have gotten mixed up in this affair, but she is not someone to plot and scheme." Colbert finally sat down.

Now was La Reynie's chance. He rose and eyed his audience carefully. "Your Majesty, we have covered the main suspects, but there is more, possibly a grand design. The suspects keep discussing other co-conspirators, such as an English milord. Also,

there may have been a grand auteur, the source of the 100,000 écus that La Voisin bragged about. I believe we have something now. For years before La Voisin was arrested, Milord George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham, was a frequent visitor to the underworld of Paris. We have information that he was involved with Mlle Claude and a party to those obscene rites.”

His Majesty’s eyebrows shot up then worked themselves into a frown.

La Reynie took a deep breath. “I beg you to consider, Sire. Milord Buckingham is a known libertine, and, as you know, has practiced alchemy and debauchery and perhaps a good deal more. His sister was a lady-in-waiting at Madame Henriette’s court years ago at the time Guibourg said he was there, celebrating a mass to kill Monsieur.”

“Buckingham? Oh, surely not.” Louis shook his head. “Milord Buckingham was useful to me in arranging the Treaty of Dover. He is a gentleman. He couldn’t possibly be involved in this sordid affair. Your sources must be mistaken.”

Stark silence while His Majesty’s audience had to regroup. La Reynie bit his lip, trying not to dig himself any deeper. Colbert looked hopeful; perhaps Buckingham’s involvement could exonerate Mme de Montespan. Louvois, eyes narrowed in calculation, could face royal displeasure if the investigation went too far. Must they turn from this tantalizing lead?

The King shook his head. “I have my sources as well. Milord Buckingham has recently adopted a more, ah, sober lifestyle, and has retired to his estates in England. And I frankly doubt there is any way at this late date to confirm his participation in these abominable crimes.” He paused, staring at his papers, not meeting the eyes of his council.

“However,” said Louvois carefully, “it is likely that there is a foreign hand in this. The Dutch, the Germans, the English, God knows how many countries, have sent spies to infiltrate your kingdom and even to kill you. Monsieur La Reynie, you told us that La Voisin had a scheme to leave the country, is that right?”

“Yes, with the help of an Englishman and 100,000 écus, according to her daughter.”

“And if she had not been arrested, the petition would have been delivered and she could have fled to England, no?”

“Yes. A frightening thought.”

The King slammed down his quill. “William! Of course, William of Orange must be behind this, orchestrating spies from England and Holland to infiltrate the court behind the back of Charles, who frankly isn’t much of a king.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” added Louvois eagerly. “And we cannot overlook the possibility that Protestants—English, and certainly Dutch—and the Huguenots are behind this. Even though King Charles is Catholic, he cannot control the English heretics, let alone the spies. For the sake of our national security, we must double our efforts to convert the Huguenots.”

“By force?” La Reynie frowned. “I have heard of the dragonnades, your troops’ unfortunate excesses—”

“And the conversion of the Huguenots proceeds,” said Louvois proudly. “The billeting of troops in their homes has had a salutary effect in bringing them to the Church.”

“However, that billeting has resulted in rape, looting, and torture, has it not?” La Reynie tried to smooth the edge of his voice. “Is that how the Church gains converts?”

“Paris is exempted, Monsieur,” Louvois harrumphed, “so you do not have to be concerned.”

“Well, I am concerned,” Colbert retorted. “If the Huguenots are forced to leave, many of France’s finest craftsmen will be gone to other countries, including Holland. We have exports and a balance of trade to consider. Besides, most of them are upstanding citizens—”

“Gentlemen.” His Majesty intervened. “I have heard complaints about the soldiers’ cruelty. There will be no more forcing people to convert by billeting soldiers in their homes, and violence will not be tolerated. Your zeal is admirable, Monsieur Louvois, but your methods leave much to be desired. I wish to hear no more about your troops behaving like brigands.”

Louvois did not reply, his fingers clenched tight on the arms of his chair.

His Majesty began gathering his papers into a neat stack. “As for the case at hand, we have discussed this enough. I am not convinced that there is sufficient evidence to further investigate or prosecute Mme de Montespan. Now—how can we prosecute the other defendants without the judges knowing too much and

risking national security?"

* * *

La Reynie practically stomped out of the meeting, tugging at his itchy white lace collar and longing to discard his hot black robe.

Desgrez was waiting for him at the carriage. "What is the decision, monsieur? Is the case going forward?"

"They decided that the Chambre's biggest problem is lack of security. Mme de Montespan's lawyer also felt that torture can only be justified under French law if there has been an imminent threat to His Majesty's safety. They wanted to withhold information from the judges. I strongly objected. They are flesh and blood, living men, *not* abstractions." He sighed in disgust. "Louvois said that because they are human, they cannot be trusted."

"What are we going to do, close the case?"

"No. His Majesty came up with a solution. We can reopen the trials and recall the judges only with the proviso that the Chambre not be deceived. The judges simply need to be told that certain evidence was being withheld from them. However, if the removal of the testimony makes it impossible to even consider a case, the King himself would have to sit in judgment. And since we have threats against the Crown, including regicide, the suspects must be questioned thoroughly, with torture if necessary. Louvois will supervise the torture himself." La Reynie turned to the window, his jaw set tight.

Chapter 39

The Chart June, 1681

Athénaïs nervously smoothed the ruffles on her bodice, awaiting, listening to the sweet chanting of the nuns at midday. She found herself slowly calming, quieting.

A door opened and Sister Louise de la Miséricorde appeared in the chapel adjacent to the convent parlor. She knelt a moment to pray before the cross, then haltingly limped over to the grille separating her from Athénaïs. Her brown habit was carefully darned; instead of shoes, she wore simple sandals. Athénaïs bit her lip so as not to exclaim with dismay. This austere outfit was nothing like the starched black and white habit of her sister Marie-Madeleine, a prioress.

Athénaïs forced a gay smile. “Ma chère, how are you? It has been so long since we have seen each other. Mme de Sévigné said the other day that you had mentioned me. I thought, what a marvelous idea to visit you.”

“I am delighted you have come, Athénaïs,” said Sister Louise. “I am happy to see you again.” She paused. “She told me about Mlle de Fontanges, her terrible illness.” Louise’s grey eyes gazed steadily into Athénaïs’ blue ones. “And that you have your own troubles.”

“Gossips. Such gossips.” Athénaïs fished in her bag for her snuff, her composure crumbling. “They—the court—have always blamed me, that I am the cause of His Majesty parting from you, then your leaving court. They all love you and have never ceased criticizing me for your departure. They blame me for everything. Jealousy, that’s all it is, jealousy.”

Her eyes scanned her surroundings, searching for a change of subject. “How can you live like this, in such—such poverty? Did you have to be a Carmelite? Why not a Dominican, or some other order more suitable to your station?”

“I have suffered no misfortune,” said Sister Louise quietly. “I am much happier now, here in the silence of these stone walls,

than I ever was in the excitement of court. It was difficult at first, I admit, but now I am at peace." She looked closely at her former rival. "When I left, you were young and beautiful, and he adored you. You were more of a queen than his wife ever could be. You had Versailles in your hands to do as you willed, and now—" her words were interrupted by Athénaïs' sobbing. "And now you too face your own affliction." She waited until her friend could compose herself. "How could you not see this coming? How could you think he would be faithful to you after what happened to me?"

"Oh, Louise, how can he be so cruel? How can he do this to me?"

"And how could you do the same? How many times did you take advantage of my confidence in you, my trust, by thrusting a dagger into my heart? The King was a young man seething with desires, and you lured him like a Circe."

Athénaïs turned her head away, afraid to look at her friend.

"Eventually I was able to see him as he is—powerful, dazzling, master of the world, but not master of himself. Athénaïs, please listen to me." Louise's cool hand reached through the grille to clasp Athénaïs' gloved one. "Please, ma chère. I waited too long to leave. If I had not been worried about my children's fate without me, I would have left much sooner. Do not linger, for you risk his contempt. You could found your own convent, you know."

"Oh, but I could never be cloistered like you. I need the pleasures of society, of cultivated discourse. Are you not lonely? This is such a dismal place, and your attire is, is so... drab. Look, I could speak to his Majesty, and he could make you prioress of an abbey more suitable to your station."

Sister Louise drew back, releasing Athénaïs' hand. "How can I command others, when I was not able to control myself? Athénaïs, I am no longer part of the world. My role is now humility and obedience, and to pray for the salvation of the world. And, Athénaïs, you especially need our prayers. Turn to God and find peace."

"But I *love* him, I sacrificed everything for him, my marriage, my children. And we had a wonderful life together. Oh, why can't he at least treat me with affectionate regard, instead of just pass-

ing the time of day as if I were some nobody?"

A jingle of a carriage outside interrupted them, then the voices of visitors. Athénaïs dried her eyes and began to gather her things.

Sister Louise again quickly reached through the grille to clasp her hand. "Athénaïs," she whispered, "this kind of intimacy, once broken, cannot be renewed. However skillfully it may be patched up, the rent always reappears." She withdrew her hand. "I will pray for you."

* * *

Late at night in their little room, Sylvie sat waiting for Louvois, her stomach in knots. She clutched in her hand yet another tear-stained letter from Maman: the Maréchal de Marillac was still billeting dragoons in Huguenot homes with license to do anything they wished to force conversion. The Huguenots had a choice—convert to Catholicism, submit to torture, or try to escape.

He walked in and she looked up, her eyes red with tears. She had to risk telling him.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"I have news from my family. We have relatives in Poitou, Huguenots—"

"And you are going to complain to me?" He grabbed the letter, scanned it, then wadded it up into a ball and threw it onto the floor. "This is no business of yours."

"Please, Michel, surely you do not intend—"

"How dare you!" he slapped her hard. "How *dare* you question me. I am about the King's business."

Tasting blood, her head ringing, Sylvie stood her ground. She gazed steadily at him, her blue eyes glinting like a steel blade. She was done.

Louvois stood looking at her for a long moment, face red, fists tight, ready to strike again. But finally, he took her trembling body into his arms. "I am sorry, Sylvie," he whispered. "But you made me do it. Please do not ever cross me again. Ever."

Sylvie did not reply, trapped in his embrace.

* * *

It's late, I really should go home, but look—another link, La

Reynie thought to himself. He had a mandate to uncover any plots against His Majesty and now the detritus of his effort, so many allegations, plots, conspiracies, so many suspects rounded up and tortured, littered his desk. It was too much to make sense of it all. *Perhaps if I drew a chain, a diagram*, he wondered.

He found a large piece of paper and dipped his quill in ink. *Where to begin?* La Voisin, and Guibourg, and who else... A few hours later at the bottom of his scribbled chart was the prime suspect—a mysterious Chevalier de La Brosse seemed to be behind a plot to poison both the King and Colbert. But who was he?

A rapping on the door and in strode Desgrez, breathless.

La Reynie smiled. “Ah, mon capitaine. Have a seat. You may find this interesting.”

Desgrez glanced at the chart. “Yes monsieur, but first I have news. I have just come from the abbey. Mlle de Fontanges has died.”

La Reynie sat back in his chair. “How sad. But she had suffered for a long time.”

“The death was due to her miscarriage, but her relatives are furious. They are insisting she was poisoned and demanding an autopsy.”

La Reynie was silent, gazing first at Desgrez, then at his diagram. “An autopsy might not be such a bad idea. Take a look here.” La Reynie led Desgrez through his chart, from Fouquet to Guibourg down the list of suspects and plots, to the name at the bottom.

“The Marquis de Termes—the relative of Mme de Montespan?”

“The very one. I will ask His Majesty tomorrow for an arrest warrant.”

* * *

Not long past dawn and Sylvie, on foot, was about halfway from Versailles to Clagny. She had to see Mme de Montespan, the rumors about her swirling like smoke. She overheard Christine proclaim that the great lady had killed poor Mlle de Fontanges, and now, finally, there would be revenge. Meanwhile the anxious letter from her Huguenot relatives was stuffed in her bag; Louvois refused to help. Perhaps the great lady could ask the King,

make the persecution of her relatives stop. She paused to take a breath, shading her eyes from the morning sun. The pond of Clagny lay before her, glinting in the sunlight, willows nodding sleepily into the water; and beyond loomed the magnificent château of Clagny, Versailles in miniature. Surely anyone who could afford such extravagance would have influence with the King.

* * *

Morning light streamed through the window above Athénaïs' dressing table, glinting off the array of perfume bottles and shimmering over the ivory boxes of cosmetics. The sunlight revealed every wrinkle on her face and made her head pound. Half asleep, she was nursing a cup of café au lait and glowering into the mirror at the dark circles under her eyes—and look, still more lines. Beauty and status were commerce, and she was going broke. Since the news of the poor mademoiselle's death, the court's veneer of politeness was stripped away into public sneers. They backed away from Athénaïs as if she had the pox.

Behind her, Cato chattered away as she fussed over madame's hair. "Sacrebleu!" Athénaïs snapped. "Stop pulling my hair."

"My apologies, madame," Cato muttered. "I am almost done."

A knock on the door, and in came a valet. "Madame, a young woman to see you."

"Did she give her name?"

"Her name is Mlle Dupont. She says she is your sister-in-law's maid."

"Sylvie?" Athénaïs turned from the mirror.

"Madame is busy," Cato snapped. "She does not have the time—"

"No, mademoiselle," said Athénaïs. "I do have the time. Send her in."

The valet left, and Cato turned on Athénaïs. "*Really*. This is quite an imposition."

"Mademoiselle, I choose if it is an imposition or not."

Cato opened her mouth to snarl a reply when Sylvie was ushered in. The girl curtsayed deeply. She was thinner than Athénaïs remembered; and was that a bruise on her cheek?

"Leave us, mademoiselle," Athénaïs said to Cato.

Cato stalked out, slamming the door behind her.

"Merci, madame," said Sylvie, fidgeting with her bag. "It is very kind of you to see me."

"Such a surprise. How are you, ma petite? Please sit."

Sylvie pulled up a low stool suitable to her station. "Merci. Madame, I—I recall you are from Poitou Province, no?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"As is my family. Do you know what is happening there with the Huguenots?"

"I have heard about the dragonnades—terrible." She shook her head. "But the King said the excesses are over."

Sylvie pulled a letter out of her bag. It was neatly folded but very wrinkled. "No, madame, it is not over. I just received this from my family. They live in Paris, but we have relatives near La Rochelle, and—" She bit her lip. "Please read." She handed it to Athénaïs.

It took only a moment. "This is an outrage!" Athénaïs exclaimed. "Mon Dieu, who is responsible for this?" She sighed in disgust. "Louvois, of course, he gave the orders." Then she noted the bruise on Sylvie's face. "You tried to tell him, didn't you?"

Sylvie nodded, her eyes on the floor.

"So, you brought the letter to me." Athénaïs read it again, then went to her writing desk. "This is abominable. I will get this to Colbert immediately." She scribbled a note and summoned a lackey. "Deliver this to Monsieur Colbert at once, before he meets with His Majesty at 10:00." She put her note and Sylvie's letter into an envelope, sealed it with sealing wax and her personal stamp, and sent him off.

"Oh, merci, madame." Sylvie began to cry and fished in her bag for her handkerchief.

"But what about you, ma petite? You really need to leave here, get away from court."

"I wish I could, madame, but I have nowhere to go."

Athénaïs contemplated her guest. "Sylvie, this is a matter I have been thinking about for quite a while. You know I love to embroider, and I have money that really needs to go to a good cause. There are other young ladies who have no prospects, like you. I have founded a school for girls, run by the Ursuline nuns, where they will be taught embroidery."

Sylvie shook her head. "Thank you madame, but I already have those skills."

"Ah, indeed you do. You are very talented. But I wish I could do something."

Sylvie rose to go. "Madame, just please get the letter to His Majesty, that is all I ask."

"Of course, but what about you?" Athénaïs gave her an encouraging smile. "We need to find you some kind of position."

"I am grateful for your concern. All I have ever wanted is to help create beautiful things for Versailles, but—" She curtsied. "Many thanks, madame."

Athénaïs stared at her, the young woman's hopelessness echoing her own. She could not let her go just yet. "Tell me, mademoiselle," she asked, "what do they say about me in your household? Do they say—do they say I am a murderer? Tell me, please, I have heard stories."

"Yes, madame." Sylvie gazed at her steadily. "Indeed, some do. There are even tales about your relative, the Marquis de Termes."

"Him? That stupid oaf?"

"But I do not believe those stories. On the contrary, I have wanted to—"

Her eyes fell on the dressing table with its array of patches and powders, brushes and perfume bottles. She froze. Glittering in the morning light was a crystal bottle with an amethyst stopper. "Madame—" But what could she say? "Madame, that is such—an unusual bottle, the one over there on the left. May I see it?"

With a frown of curiosity, Athénaïs handed it to her.

Sylvie held it gingerly. "What is the scent?" she asked. "Have you worn it often?"

"It is lily of the valley, and I cannot *abide* lily of the valley, so I have never worn it."

Sylvie felt like she could breathe again. "May I ask who gave it to you?"

"Why, I am not sure—Mlle Cato, yes. She is always after me to put it on."

"Of course. Yes, she would be." Sylvie caught the confused look on Athénaïs' face. "Madame, please trust me. I am in a posi-

tion to hear things.” She held up the bottle.

Athénaïs stared.

“Madame, please have Mlle Cato come back in.”

Athénaïs went to her door, summoned a valet, and whispered a command. Then shrill protests from down the hall, and the valet ushered in Cato. He had a firm grip on her arm and a satisfied smirk. Cato was apparently none too popular.

Sylvie yanked off the stopper and shoved the bottle under Cato’s nose. “What’s in the bottle?”

Her eyes wide, Cato struggled but the valet pinned both her arms behind her back. “Let me *go*.” The sickening sweet smell of lilies permeated the room. “No, please!”

Sylvie smiled sweetly. “Why Cato, I thought you liked perfume. Let me anoint you.” She raised the bottle over her head, preparing to pour.

“No!”

“No? Why not?” She started tilting the bottle. “What is it? Poison?”

“No!” Cato’s eyes were fixed on the bottle, the liquid just at the lip. “Please, it’s not poison, not exactly—”

“What is it, exactly?”

“It’s cursed,” she whispered, turning to glare at Athénaïs who fervently crossed herself.

Sylvie slowly lowered the bottle but kept it right at Cato’s face. “Who cursed it?”

“Guibourg.”

Athénaïs sank into a chair. “Oh, dear God.”

Sylvie glanced over at Athénaïs. “Madame? Why would he curse you—Oh, the duchesse.” She turned back to Cato. “The duchesse planned this, didn’t she? And placed you here, with her quarry. Who else is involved?”

Cato stiffened. “Please,” she whispered, “they’ll kill me.”

“Who? They are all in prison.”

“Not all of them. There are others, l’Auteur—” She shut her mouth tight.

“Yes,” said Sylvie, “I have heard about him.” Making sure the valet still had a grip on Cato, Sylvie went over to Athénaïs. “Perhaps,” she whispered, “if we guarantee Cato’s safety, she will cooperate.”

Athénaïs stared at Cato a long moment. “Yes. Yes, I have to know.” She rose and confronted their prisoner. “Mademoiselle, I will get you to the border with enough money to make it across. Now tell us the truth.” Cato nodded reluctantly.

“Let’s start with that missing paper the duchesse was worried about,” said Sylvie. Athénaïs frowned, but Sylvie continued. “What was on the paper?” Cato glanced over at the bottle, still in Sylvie’s hand. “I see,” said Sylvie. “A curse?”

Cato sighed. “Yes, this curse, the curse on madame.” She looked at Athénaïs. “Your sister-in-law sold her soul for the love of the King, and to kill you.” Athénaïs gasped. “But the paper disappeared, and she was being blackmailed. Then Vautier got involved.”

Sylvie stared at the bottle. “So, the perfume was cursed, and—the petition? Was the petition cursed or poisoned?”

“Petition?” asked Athénaïs. “What about a petition?”

Cato shrugged. “Vautier bragged a lot, but he could not make perfume or paper poison to the touch. But because perfume is used in casting spells, they used it to put curses on the petition to give the King, and a curse on the perfume to give to madame. And they were going to put a curse on the gloves to give to the mademoiselle.” She turned to Athénaïs. “La Reynie thinks you planned that.”

“That I planned *what*? And did they give a cursed petition to the King? Mon Dieu.”

“No, La Voisin wasn’t able to give it to him. She was arrested before she got the chance.”

“La Voisin? Her? But why—”

“La Voisin and the others made up a story that they were trying to free their friend Blessis from your cousin, so that was their excuse for the petition. L’Auteur had Guibourg curse the petition so the King would die.” Cato shuddered. “I backed out then. It was too much. I told them I would just be in madame’s household and not get involved in the other stuff.”

“You mentioned my cousin. Which cousin?”

Cato burst out laughing. “The odd one, Marquis de Termes. He was just arrested.”

“But, but he’s not—”

“Yes! We started a rumor that he sent poisoned wine bottles

to the *poor* mademoiselle, then she conveniently died." She giggled. "So now they will think you are behind it. You wanted her dead—didn't you?"

* * *

La Reynie met the King, Colbert, and Louvois with a satchel full of notes that morning.

"Before we get into the poison investigation," said the King, "there is something we need to discuss." He placed on his desk a letter that looked like it had been crumpled up, then smoothed out. Louvois stared, gripping the arms of his chair so tightly his knuckles were white. Colbert's cool visage betrayed a hint of a smile.

"I have news here from Poitou," said the King. "Information that I have substantiated, outrageous acts of brutality against the Huguenots. You told me, Monsieur Louvois, the dragonnades were going to be under control and that those unfortunate excesses were going to be curbed. Why has Maréchal Marillac disobeyed your orders—or did you fail to tell him to stop?"

"I did indeed tell him to control his men," said Louvois evenly. "He has apparently disobeyed my orders and will be disciplined." He released his grip on the chair, stretched out his fingers, relaxed them, and smiled. "I do want to say that the conversion of the Huguenots in that province is going very well."

"Yes," Colbert retorted, "it is indeed going well, since hundreds of them have fled."

"Then why are the borders not sealed?" His Majesty snapped. "I told you that I do not want to hear any more reports of problems. See to it."

He turned to La Reynie with a smile, the previous unpleasantness put aside. "Monsieur La Reynie, I understand you have had further developments in the Poisons Affair."

La Reynie rose to speak. "Your Majesty, for years we have been hearing stories about plots to kill you and Colbert, coinciding with other schemes involving Mme de Montespan and her sister-in-law the Duchesse de Vivonne. The duchesse was accused of plotting to kill Colbert, a design that we finally agreed did not appear plausible. We have now uncovered what may have been the real conspiracy."

“That seems to be how it started,” Louvois interrupted. “It began with a plot to kill Colbert, inspired by the faction that was plotting to get Fouquet out of prison and back into power. But then we received more allegations that Your Majesty was a target. I made certain that the plots ended there, and we have all the information.” He smiled with eminent satisfaction. “I supervised the torture of the suspects myself.”

“There were so many conspirators,” said La Reynie, “that I finally drew this chart.” He placed on the table a large paper with four familiar names at the top: La Voisin, Guibourg, Fouquet, the poisoner Sainte-Croix; and the suspect with no name—the English milord.

“It looks like an octopus,” said His Majesty, peering at the tentacles trailing down the page to more names and dates.

“Follow me, please.” La Reynie placed his finger on Guibourg’s name then traced the line. “The mysterious Chevalier de La Brosse and his valet Dubois,” he said, “who plotted to free Fouquet and return him to power by killing you, Sire. But those names were aliases. Who were they really?” Down the chart went La Reynie’s finger. “More tortured suspects, more confessions; the preferred poison, toad venom.” He traced an arrow, “Then we come to Fouquet’s chemist Glaser, who had furnished poison to the Marquise de Brinvilliers and her lover Sainte-Croix.”

The King shook his head. “It seems that Fouquet is reaching from beyond the grave.”

“Indeed,” said La Reynie, “and it does not stop there. Guibourg verified the scheme to poison you and Colbert in order to reestablish Fouquet, and we questioned more suspects until we arrived—here.” His finger stopped at the bottom of the page.

“The Marquis de Termes?” exclaimed Colbert. “He posed as the Chevalier de La Brosse? He is Mme de Montespan’s relative, the one La Voisin claimed was holding her friend Blessis, and who was the subject of the poisoned petition.”

“Yes,” said La Reynie, “that is the one. And his story is rather confusing.”

* * *

“Monsieur,” the Marquis de Termes had honked plaintively while blowing his misshapen nose, “there must be some mistake.

Why have I been arrested? What are the charges?"

"That will be explained in due time, monsieur," said La Reynie, assessing his two rather odd captives. Desgrez had first arrested the marquis, then found his equerry Monteran. The two were allegedly the sinister Chevalier de la Brosse and his valet Dubois, but they just didn't seem to fit the part. The oddly featured little marquis lifted his extravagant moustache in disdain at the glaring Monteran, who looked nothing like an equerry devoted to secretarial duties.

"Captain Desgrez, please take Monsieur Monteran to his cell." Desgrez led him away, chains clanking in the distance.

The marquis was trembling. "Monsieur, please. My alchemical experiments have been harmless, I assure you."

"A little more slowly, please, I am having difficulty understanding you."

"A thousand pardons. I was born with a hole in the roof of my mouth, which makes my speech difficult to comprehend." He nervously chewed on his moustache. "Monsieur, is this about my search for the Philosopher's Stone? Surely that quest is not illegal."

"No, monsieur." La Reynie's eyes narrowed. "Although you have kept some interesting company—Blessis, for example. Why were you holding him in your château? La Voisin was most interested in getting him released."

"Oh, him." The marquis rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I let him go, let's see, when was it? Oh yes, over two years ago."

"Why were you holding him in the first place?"

"I was running an experiment that required some technical knowledge and a little physical strength. He had the expertise, so I hired him. But soon he demanded to leave, and my experiment had not been completed, so I, ah—I had Monteran lock him in the keep so we could keep the experiment running." He scowled. "Did Monteran get me into this? I wouldn't put it past him."

"Did you know La Voisin?"

He shrugged. "A disgusting woman, vile. I knew about her mainly through others. Blessis was her good friend, and Monteran knew her too." He looked at La Reynie closely. "Is that why I am being held? I did not know her well, and I never—"

"No." La Reynie leaned back in his chair, just to stretch out

the questioning a little. "No, this is much more serious than that. How well did you know Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Fouquet?" he stammered. "Why, not well at all. He—he was a friend of my father's, and I met him at court years ago, I think, before he went to prison."

"And when he was imprisoned, you were ruined financially, correct?"

"Well, I, ah—" He sighed. "Yes, I was, along with many others."

"And did you try to recoup your fortune with attempting to turn base metal into gold?"

"Well, yes, but there is no harm—"

"And did you not desire revenge on Colbert and His Majesty for imprisoning Fouquet?"

His eyes widened. "No!"

La Reynie leaned forward, intent. "And did you not therefore pose as the Chevalier de la Brosse to obtain poison to further your ends?"

The marquis gaped in utter bewilderment. "*Who?*"

* * *

"Is the marquis the Chevalier de la Brosse?" His Majesty looked up from La Reynie's chart. "And this?" He pointed to an arrow leading down to Monteran. "Monteran is, again?"

"Monteran is—or was—the equerry of the Marquis de Termes. La Voisin prepared the poison petition to free her friend Blessis, who was being held by the marquis."

"I would bet money on the Marquis de Termes," Louvois said. "He has had a very suspicious past, with links to—look here." He pointed to La Voisin's name at the top, with an arrow pointing first to Blessis, then an arrow from him to the marquis. "And, not to be ignored, he is a relative of Mme de Montespan. And she, perhaps, should go—here." He penned in her name between La Voisin and Guibourg, drawing a line from her directly down to the marquis.

Silence—then an insistent scratching at the door, and Bontemps' head appeared.

"I gave orders not to be disturbed. What—"

"Your Majesty," said Bontemps, wiping sweat from his brow. "Mme de Montespan insists upon being admitted."

The King turned to his startled counselors. "It's about time we talked to her. Let her in."

Athénaïs swept into His Majesty's study with a flurry of silk petticoats, a red face, and a distinct odor of brandy. "Louis, I *must* protest. First there was a plot to kill me, thank God that is over, but do you know what everyone is saying about me? They are not only saying that I had something to do with Mlle de Fontanges' death, there are even stories about the Marquis de Termes being involved, and people think—" But she stopped at the sight of his guests and forced an eagerly polite smile. "Why, I had no idea you were having a meeting. My deepest apologies." She turned to leave.

"Madame, please join us. We are most interested in what you have to say."

"Ah, thank you, but—" Athénaïs scanned the expressions in the room, and found them all too interested in her. "Perhaps another time."

"*Madame*. Sit, please."

Athénaïs sat down, nervously smoothing her skirt.

"Now," said Louis, "what was that you were saying, madame? About your relative, the Marquis de Termes. What exactly is it that people are saying?"

"Why, surely you are aware. They are saying that he is suspected of poisoning Mlle de Fontanges. He was arrested for putting poison into her wine bottles." She sniffed and pulled out a handkerchief. "The very idea. And of course, he's a suspect because he's a relative."

The gentlemen looked at each other with surprise, then at her. "Really?" said His Majesty. "That is what they think? How interesting."

"But he is not *my* relative, he is my husband's cousin. And my husband *hates* me. Why should a relative of my husband want to murder the mademoiselle?"

The King smiled, relieved. "Excellent point, madame."

But Louvois edged forward. "Tell us what you know about the Chevalier de La Brosse."

"Who?" She turned to him in puzzlement. "I don't recall ever hearing that name."

"Have you not heard of him in connection with Fouquet?"

“Why, no.” The haze of brandy began to lift. “Please tell me what this is about.”

Louvois’ veneer of politesse barely held. “We think your cousin—rather, your husband’s cousin—may have posed as the chevalier as part of a plot against His Majesty.”

She sat for a moment, stunned, then she burst out laughing. “What? *Him* pose as a chevalier with some diabolical plot? He couldn’t pose as anything more than a court jester.” They looked at her with consternation. “Your Majesty—gentlemen—haven’t you heard him speak? Why, you can hardly understand anything he says with that hole in his mouth. How could he pretend to be anyone but himself?”

La Reynie bit his lip. How indeed?

Athénaïs turned to the King with pleading eyes. “Oh, Your Majesty, surely you recall me telling you about him. You sent him to the Bastille years ago.”

She fluttered her fan in annoyance. “And I suppose this relative conspired with me to murder poor Mlle de Fontanges. Why on earth would I want to murder *her*? She was never competition for me. Why, the entire court said that she was as beautiful as an angel and as stupid as a basket.” The King glowered, but she went on. “Why, next you will probably accuse me of conspiring to murder Mme de Maintenon.” She stopped at the blank looks on her audience’s faces. “What, I haven’t been accused of that too?” Athénaïs turned to her former lover. “She is my real rival, my best friend who took you from me!” Tears came to her eyes.

“Madame,” said Colbert, “your point is well taken. There have been no accusations that you have wanted to harm Mme de Maintenon.” He turned to Louvois his eyes cold. “Monsieur, the suspects in this case seem to have only the barest familiarity with Mme de Montespan.”

La Reynie swallowed. He had missed that one too.

But Louvois, with the barest of smiles curling his plump lips, presented their chief suspect with the chart. Her eyes widened. There was La Voisin, with arrows going down the page from her to Athénaïs’ fool relative. And there, at the top, was Athénaïs’ own name next to Guibourg. She turned her head away.

“We have a few more questions, madame,” said His Majesty. Athénaïs reached for her snuff, her hand shaking. “Could I

have some brandy, please," she whispered. "My nerves."

Colbert found a bottle of brandy on the buffet and poured her a glass. She took a long sip and beheld her questioners—accusers? The King, her lover, father of her children, who had betrayed her again and again. Colbert, her friend. Or was he? So distant of late. La Reynie, where did he stand? Persecuting her friends for mere foolishness. And Louvois, that *pig*.

She lifted her chin in defiance. "Surely you could not think that I would be involved with that—" She waved her hand toward the chart. "Those people."

"Sadly, madame, your name has been linked with theirs." The King's dark eyes bored in on her. "What was your relationship with La Voisin?"

"It was innocent. I only went to her for charms and such, like all my friends." She took a long swallow of brandy.

"When did you meet her?" asked the eager Louvois. "What year?"

"I—I don't really remember." She could not look at him.

"Come, madame!" Louvois barked. "Surely you remember when you met her."

"It was, it was years ago," she stammered.

"Who introduced you?" asked Louvois.

"It was Mlle Claude." Dead silence. "But it was just harmless folly." Athénaïs had no clue where they were going with this and began to panic. "It was stupid, I was just stupid, *please*." She burst into tears, then gulped more brandy.

"How long did you know La Voisin, madame?" Louvois got up and moved in closer, too close, between her and the door. His bulk filled the room like a bull ready to charge.

She felt dizzy, disoriented, a memory so strong. She was back in her carriage on her first visit to La Voisin's house, and striding across the courtyard was a man with a broad back, like a bull... Why hadn't she recognized him before? "*You*," she whispered, stunned.

Louvois stared.

Athénaïs shut her eyes tight in terror, the years of denial dissolving... *He was her client too! Dare I accuse him? They wouldn't believe me—and then he would destroy me.*

But the monster Louvois, he smiled pleasantly, of course.

“Come madame, you may confide in us.”

“Confide in *you*?”

“Of course, madame,” he said with the greatest courtesy. “But you must tell us the truth.”

That was enough. She rose up in fury and spat, “I am a Rochecouart de Mortemart, and my family is older than even the Bourbons. I do not answer to you, a commoner, who dared to try to marry into my family!” She turned to Louis and sank into a deep curtsey, her head bowed. “I answer only to His Majesty.” She lifted her pleading blue eyes. “Louis, please make him leave. I cannot discuss this with him here. He has made it clear for years that he opposes me and my family’s interests; not to mention the abominations he is responsible for in Poitou.”

La Reynie almost had to admire her—this poor woman, with her heaving white bosom, beautiful blue eyes damp with tears, playing with the King’s heart. You cunning little bitch.

His Majesty paused to consider. “Very well,” he said finally. “But if Monsieur Louvois leaves, I must insist that Messieurs Colbert and La Reynie remain.”

She looked at Colbert, then at La Reynie, and bit her lip. “If I must.”

Louvois bowed a reluctant exit, leaving Athénaïs with her estranged lover, a distant friend, and her prosecutor.

Colbert noted Athénaïs reaching for her now empty glass. “Madame,” he said gently. “The day is warm. Perhaps you would care for some mineral water?” Not waiting for an answer, he went to the buffet to pour her a glass.

He placed it in her shaking hand. “Merci.” She took a swallow, but it did not suffice, so she again fished around in her bag to find her snuff. She found her rosary instead. Ave Maria, gratia plena... She kept the prayer going in her head while she tried not to panic.

“Madame,” said Colbert sitting down next to her, “We realize this is difficult, but you now have the opportunity to clear the air.”

She avoided his gaze. “Of course,” she whispered.

“Your Majesty,” said La Reynie, “May I continue?”

Louis looked at the trembling Athénaïs. “Please keep it brief.”

“Madame, when did you meet Lesage? You remember him,

of course.”

“Lesage?” She frowned. “Oh, him. That stupid little man. La Voisin was enamored of him, praised him to the skies, but he was a fool. Please, please understand, you know there were other women besides me taken in by these charlatans.”

“Did you meet him at La Voisin’s house?”

“Yes, many years ago.”

La Reynie positioned himself so that she could not avoid his gaze. “Madame, what was your relationship with La Voisin?”

Athénaïs fingered her rosary, one bead at a time. “I saw her a few times. Mlle Claude went to her often, but I think most of those visits were for herself.” She glared at Louis. “The mademoiselle got what she wanted from La Voisin. I did not.”

La Reynie decided to ignore that. “La Voisin denied that you were her client. Why?”

Athénaïs shook her head. “I wondered what she would say about me under torture. I never understood why, but she liked me. She said so once.”

La Reynie moved in closer, his eyes locked to hers. “Did you ever purchase poison?”

“What? Oh mon Dieu, no!”

“Or have a black mass celebrated?”

“Oh, no, you don’t think that I?” She gasped. “She never told you that, so how—?”

“Did you know the Abbé Guibourg?”

She stared at him for a long moment, then tears. “Please don’t judge me. You don’t know what happened.”

“Answer him.” His Majesty was now towering over her, and there was no escape.

Athénaïs froze, lost. “He tried to rape me,” she whispered.

The King’s mouth shut into a slit. He stared at her a moment, then poured her another brandy plus one for himself. “How did this happen?” His voice cut into her like a knife. “I want the entire story.”

“I was at La Voisin’s house—”

“When? This is important, can you remember when?”

“Not exactly. I think about 1676, when you, well...”

“Yes, yes. It was when we parted, and you went to La Voisin. What happened?”

“This was the last time I went there. She had served me a drink.” Athénaïs stared into the distance. “I think I must have had too much, it affected me strangely.” She looked up, fighting to maintain her composure. “It was in the evening, I remember. There was an odd smell about the place. She apologized and said the cook had burned the roast.”

La Reynie almost gagged, recalling the oven in the garden. He poured himself a brandy.

Athénaïs fingered her rosary as she talked. “Guibourg came in and she introduced us, saying he had the power to solve all my difficulties. She said he was a great magician. I found him repulsive.” She shuddered. “Ugly bastard, hideous. I remember he had but one eye that worked and it rolled around, constantly staring at me. They kept talking about a special ceremony that they guaranteed would help me, at least it would if I participated. Soon I gathered that the ceremony was something very dark, horrible, involving the mass. He kept smiling at me, leering, insisting I would be perfect.”

She started shaking. Louis went to pour her another glass, but she waved him away. “No, no more. I have had enough. La Voisin’s daughter came in and told her that another client had arrived, so she left. To the garden, I think, where she had her office. I was alone with him. He looked at me with one eye rolling about and a disgusting grin on his face. Mon Dieu, he was hideous. But he had a soothing voice, smooth, very polite. It was his voice that compelled me to stay. He talked to me softly about how the spirits would help me only if they were summoned properly, and he spoke so persuasively.”

She paused a long moment. “But I knew in my heart that this had gone too far. They wanted too much, it was blasphemy. And he terrified me. He kept getting closer and closer, I could smell his stench... I finally told him I wasn’t interested in his ceremony and I got up to go. He followed me to the door. At the moment I tried to open the door, he—he grabbed me. He had me by the waist, and he put—he put his hand on my breasts. He tried to kiss me.” Her mouth twisted in disgust. “I screamed and tried to get away. But then La Voisin rushed in. She pushed him away and railed at him that he was a fool for trying that, how dare he? She apologized to me profusely. Guibourg backed away, and he

smiled and acted like nothing had happened. I fled, and I swore to never return.”

“Who else knows about this?” The King’s fists were clenched. She stared at the floor. “Mlle Claude,” she finally whispered. “She tried to persuade me to go back, but by that time it was clear to me where her loyalties lay. She had the powders, and she had the baby.” She bit her lip, afraid to say more or she would lose control.

Louis stared at her breasts, his mouth working. “You let him touch you.” He looked as if someone had spat on his Mona Lisa. He turned away from her and went back to his desk. “There will be no more questions, madame. We are done.”

Athénaïs reluctantly rose. “But you don’t understand—” She saw him pick up his quill pen to get back to work. “Your Majesty?” He ignored her. She curtsied, head bowed, then she was out the door, her heels clicking on the parquet floor.

La Reynie raised his hand to stop her, to call after her a thousand questions, but she was gone. He looked over at Colbert and saw his friend’s cool facade crumpled into grief.

Colbert turned to His Majesty and bowed. “If there is nothing else, Sire.” The King nodded, and Colbert walked out, leaning heavily on his cane.

The King was left with his Lieutenant-General of Police and a tense silence. “Monsieur,” he finally said, “one last thing, and this is between us. No more questions for Guibourg about Mme de Montespan. And tell him that if he makes one more comment about her, he is a dead man. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sire. Is that all?” His Majesty nodded, La Reynie bowed, and turned to leave. Then he remembered the three black leather caskets of evidence—damning evidence. He grabbed his and left.

* * *

Too agitated to talk to anyone, Athénaïs donned cape and hat and headed to the gardens that she and Louis had designed together, now being remodeled to his new taste. The afternoon sun was slipping behind grey clouds, and it smelled like rain. Versailles’ gardens were now populated only by cold Greek statues and Athénaïs, walking alone.

She wandered far from the château, walked and walked, until exhausted she hailed a passing carriage and took off to the ménagerie, its high walls and turrets enclosing captive exotica all squawking and roaring and strutting. Athénaïs sat down not far from where she and Lauzun and La Grande Mademoiselle had sat so long ago.

Listen to the birds! Snatched from their homes for the beauty of their feathers, imprisoned forever, chirping, calling, gripping the bars of their prison with their talons. Athénaïs had a sudden urge to swing open the cage door, let them take flight and fly with them, to escape far, far away. But where could she go? Versailles is home, the center of the civilized world. She reached for her handkerchief, but her fingers found her rosary. Louise. Chère Louise, so content in her shabby brown habit, safe behind the walls of a cloister.

That's it—I could build my own convent. Well, not exactly... perhaps a pretty little community of sisters where I could be the patron. Why not? They would be beholden to *me*.

But her determination collapsed into grief, and she found her tears mingling with drops of rain falling on her dress. She looked up at the dark clouds and knew it was time to go.

Reluctantly, she hurried back to the palace with its courtiers and servants and polite manners and backstabbing and intrigue; no friends, none at all, only family. She entered the château from the far end of one of the two huge wings built to house the thousands of courtiers. The vast corridor seemed to go on forever.

A loud slap—a cry—a man's rumbling voice. Who is that? It sounds like Louvois—and Sylvie? She turned this way and that, but all she could see were endless rows of doors. Where are they? Athénaïs rushed from one door to the next on both sides of the hall, listening.

"You betrayed me!" came Louvois' shout.

There—across the hall. Athénaïs found the door and knocked, loud.

"Who is there?" Louvois shouted. "I gave orders—"

Athénaïs stiffened her back with rage. "This is Athénaïs Rochouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan, and I have come for Mlle Sylvie!"

Silence—then the door opened. Louvois glared at Athénaïs,

his face red and his fists clenched, trying to block her view of Sylvie crumpled on the floor behind him.

"Mademoiselle!" Athénaïs swept into the room and helped Sylvie to her feet. Tears stung her eyes at the sight of Sylvie's own tears of shame and her bloody mouth. Athénaïs pulled out her lace handkerchief and gently wiped her face. "Ma pauvre petite," she whispered. "My poor little bird. Come, let us fly away."

"But—" Sylvie blinked. "But where?"

"You will have a new employer, mademoiselle." Athénaïs ushered Sylvie past the fuming Louvois to the door.

"A new employer, madame? But, the duchesse—"

"You have no right to interfere!" Louvois reached to grab Sylvie, but Athénaïs rushed her out the door.

Then Athénaïs turned on Louvois. "Cochon!" she spat and slammed the door in his face.

"Come along, ma petite," she said as they hurried down the hall. "You deserve a position more suited to your talents. Would you like to work at the Gobelins manufactory?"

"Oh, merci, madame!"

"But ah, the irony. The Gobelins is a veritable hotbed of Huguenots and I hear many have fled. I am sure you are needed there, and I will speak with Monsieur Colbert about it. By the way, thank you for taking the perfume bottle. What did you do with it?"

"I threw it into the pond." Sylvie smiled. "I made sure it was sealed for the sake of the poor fish. And where is Cato?"

"Headed to the border in a fast coach, God be praised. You were very persuasive."

"Sylvie!" They could hear Louvois' cries from the distant hall. "Sylvie, no!"

They kept on going. Out.

* * *

By now the sun was sinking into the dark clouds above Versailles, long shadows enveloping the château. The gilded gates clanged shut behind La Reynie's coach. He leaned back on the seat, exhausted, the familiar clip-clop of the horses a counterpoint to his thoughts. He opened his valise crammed full of papers. Where is that chart? I must have left it on His Majesty's

desk. So many questions and now no way to find out. It is like the Galerie, mirrors reflecting into window panes reflecting back into mirrors, twisting, distorting faces, still more faces. We'll probably never know who the real enemies are. And the English milord—Buckingham? I never got the chance to find out. But at least I have my own copies of the evidence. Perhaps someday they might be valuable.

He found himself squinting at the papers, the light dimming. He opened the coach window to let in some light and saw raindrops splashing in the dust. He took a deep breath of clean air, then exhaled, releasing the stench of Versailles. *Grâce à Dieu, I'm going home.*

EPILOGUE

July, 1709

Louis leaned heavily on his cane, sweat beading on his forehead, watching the flames grow in the fireplace. The servants looked quizzically at him, then at each other—why would His Majesty have a fire on a hot July day? The mantel clock chimed 10:00 and the door swung open, admitting a procession of black-robed ministers led by a valet carrying a black leather casket, its lid sealed with red wax.

“Put it there.” Louis motioned to a footstool near the fire. “Gentlemen, I have summoned you to be witnesses to the end of a very sordid affair. There is no longer any need to keep these documents.”

The ministers shuffled their feet expectantly, staring at the casket. This was finally the end of the Poisons Affair.

Louis slit the wax seal with his dagger and raised the creaking lid. Reams of papers, thousands of words trapped for years, overflowed onto the carpet. He picked one up. He knew that precise penmanship—La Reynie, dead last week. Thank God. Now Louis could destroy these painful memories, the only evidence of the most terrifying and embarrassing time of his life, and he had been alive a long time.

With the ministers curiously eyeing the papers, he settled into an armchair and picked out a document at random. There she was—Athénaïs. Mon Dieu. He hadn’t allowed her name to be spoken at court in years, even by their children. A few years after the Poisons Affair the Queen died. Sad, but convenient. He promptly married Mme de Maintenon, and warfare erupted between her and Athénaïs. His new wife carped at him until he kicked Athénaïs out of Versailles. Their son, the Duc du Maine, even threw her furniture out the window to make sure she never came back. Disgust rose in his gorge. Stupid, foolish woman. Posterity will damn us both if I don’t get rid of these papers. Look at the name next to hers—Lesage, that liar. How many lives did he destroy to save his skin? He threw the paper into the fire.

Another one: here is Colbert's name next to the words "plot to kill him." Ah, well. Colbert is long gone by natural causes. Was there a plot? Why not? The man made enemies. Odd, no one plotted to kill Louvois. His brilliant Minister of War, young, fat, vigorous, and hated, died suddenly at age fifty. Poison? No one really cared. It had been amusing, watching Colbert and Louvois have at each other in the civilized surroundings of his study. Burn it.

"Fouquet!" His Majesty startled his audience. "Gentlemen, here is what started it all. Fouquet went to prison and we were besieged by all those plots and aspirations to avenge him. I should have had him executed. My mercy allowed the conspiracies to multiply."

More documents tossed into the fire, suspect after suspect, witches, sorcerers, charlatans, lords and ladies of high degree dragged down into the muck. Most were dead now, either by the hand of the law or old age, or simply banished. Many fingers pointed to the King's mistresses. A familiar name paused his hand—the Comtesse de Soissons. Fleeing justice, she had dashed from one corner of Europe to another, winding up in Spain at the court of Louis' niece who had been forced to marry a madman of a king. Soon after, his niece was dead of poison, and the comtesse fled yet again.

The fire crackled, greedily consuming the evidence of Louis' peccadilloes. More transcripts, files, letters; and there, near the bottom of the casket, Guibourg. His name rose up like a nearly forgotten nightmare, page after page of his calumnies, lies, obscene filth. Thank God no one is left who remembers what he said. It ends here. It has to.

At the dark bottom of the casket, he found one last document: a large sheet of paper, a diagram with names at the top and arrows trailing down. "What is this?" he muttered. Then he recognized the names and turned to shield it from his audience. Here were La Voisin, Guibourg, Sainte-Croix, yes, and the English—but there was her name again, among that filth. And the arrows pointed to her fool of a relative, finally acquitted. With relief he tossed it into the fire.

The casket was now empty. Louis watched the flames for a moment, then suddenly realized he had forgotten something. He reached into his waistcoat and found a letter but paused. He had

witnesses. "Leave me please, gentlemen." His ministers bowed and left. Now he could be alone.

He pulled out the letter, its torn wax seal glinting in the light. He glanced at it. He knew every word, had read it many times over the years, not wanting to believe the contents.

He tossed the first page into the fire. It took a while to catch, for the flames were low. The date began to scorch: "1686... In the event of my death." It was addressed to His Majesty personally. The flames licked at the first sentence. "It is to my eternal shame and disgrace that I must confess to you, Your Most Christian Majesty, my complicity in the..." but the ink faded in a crease, the paper folded and refolded many times.

Another page. "...at your court. There were spies everywhere from many countries, spying on you, your mistresses, even on each other. There were plots to kill Colbert, invade Mme de Montespan's household, and through her control you. There were factions for Fouquet, for each mistress and for each aspiring one, some deadly, all ridiculous, for eventually your eyes were turned to virtue. God's grace has now granted me the ability to be reconciled to my wife after my many sins. I have never told her..." The page blackened and shriveled. "And l'Auteur, the author of those evils..."

The next page he barely glanced at, for he had it memorized, chunks of words, morsels of indigestion to awaken him at night in a sweat. "...La Voisin introduced me to Abbé Guibourg, the most evil man I have ever met. I was a fool, a vain stupid fool who refused to believe in God, let alone virtue, for I was a man of pleasure willing to indulge in anything as long as it satisfied my lust. Guibourg invited me to..."

Louis bent down and touched the top of the page to a solitary flame. It ignited and licked its way to the second paragraph. "The first Black Mass was most titillating, performed on the stomach of a naked prostitute. I went with Mlle des Oeilletts, another whore, even though her employer had been Mme de Montespan. She knew how to satisfy a man, which she did as part of the ceremony. The rite was performed for the benefit of somebody's plot, I can't remember who or what. Some weeks later we attended the second ceremony, and I swear it was my last. I remember I was very drunk. The naked woman appeared again,

but this time, at the consecration, an infant was brought in. I beg you, Sire, to understand my reaction. The child was obviously premature, but alive and gasping for air. Guibourg held it over the chalice and neatly sliced its throat..."

That single flame grew, scorching the secret. "Mlle des Oeillets was furious. She read the pact Guibourg had made with the devil and found that the ceremony, which was supposed to have aided her seduction of you, was instead intended for Mme de Montespan. Who knows who crafted that, undoubtedly one of the factions lurking in her household. An argument ensued between her and Guibourg and I fled into the night. I have never returned to Paris, let alone indulge in such horrors again. Sleep eludes me, for in my dreams I see l'Auteur, the author of these nightmares, his face hidden behind a lady's black fan, pursuing me. May God have mercy on my soul..."

Fed by the letter, the flames grew, and danced, and shadows—macabre, leering faces—beckoned the King. He drew closer to see, but the letter shriveled into ash, leaving only a trace of the signature—Buckingham.

"Son of a dog's whore." Louis jabbed at the ashes with the tip of his cane, obliterating the rest of the fragments. He got up slowly, his back and knees aching. He turned round, carefully composed his face to a pleasant hauteur, and strode out to greet his court.

And behind him, the shadows waited.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing this book has been a very long journey, and I want to thank those who supported and guided me along the way. First, Sherrie Adkins, medicine woman and shaman extraordinaire, helped me tell the story of my characters, real people who reached across the centuries to be heard. And my first reader and editor Johanna Keenan, there from the beginning years ago, always encouraging. I am lucky to have a family of history buffs: my daughter Elizabeth Berton-Reilly was my source on healing herbs, while her husband John Berton-Reilly helped me with 17th century armaments.

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Finally, I must acknowledge the scholars who inspired me. Years ago, I read Frances Mossiker's *The Affair of the Poisons* and that started me on my journey—I had to find out what *really* happened. Did the King's mistress have a black mass celebrated over her naked body? Many history books later, I found Mme de Montespan's memoirs, considered apocryphal because they are in English with no way to prove their provenance. But they read very like her, and if someone had faked them, they would have focused on the poison scandal that she barely mentioned. The memoirs are cut off practically in mid-sentence, and the story goes that when she died, her (legitimate) son destroyed the page on her desk and missed the others. And of course, Mme de Sévigné: her breathless letters followed every twist and turn of events at Versailles, a treasure for historians. Just like the stream of stories recently coming from the West Wing of the White House, several other courtiers knew they were watching

history. Their letters and memoirs joined with the contents of La Reynie's black casket of evidence to illuminate a 400-year-old mystery.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Judy Willmore has had a varied career—first journalist, then private investigator; then a big switch: back to college for a psychology degree. She is now a practicing psychotherapist and astrologer in Albuquerque, New Mexico and working on the sequel to *The Menagerie*.

