



“Up up, princess!”

Oh damn you, it's midnight!

I shot up in my bed. One of the guards was beating at the door again.

“Get ready!” he shouted. “Get dressed!” Jules Poiret’s voice. He beat on other doors and then came back to mine. “White Night, immediately!”

The plaster floor stung my feet as if I stepped on ice, and I pulled myself towards the lone chest-of-drawers.

There wasn’t much for me to choose from so I wore what was left of the Snowflower #4. The sad old thing was falling apart and made me feel like a vagrant wearing it, with the jacket fabric all offcolored— good snow isn’t beige yellow— or the grungy silk leggings scuffed and ripped at the knees as if God found an old joke funny. It did keep me warm enough, more than the double denim would.

Normally I would have had the better part of an hour to prepare myself for the day, but this was different. That was clear from all the commotion outside the door. All the windows were still dark. There were distant thumps in no regular pattern from far beyond the walls, and whenever enough men in the hallways had shuffled away so that I could catch a moment of raw silence, even that had been left broken by equally distant popping. My mouth tasted like dust and old pennies. All I had to wash that out was a single bottle of cool water.

I pulled on my boots and rushed to the door at the perfect time to see a rising orange fireball between the thin gaps of the window. Those doomed fools were running out of ammo.

Jules must have heard me, as he opened the door for me, tugged a cigarette out of his mouth, and stepped back. “Downstairs.”

I nodded and rushed to meet with the rest of my family. The hallway reeked of his Gauloises and nervous sweat.

As we walked, he said, “You took your precious little time, Séville.”

I mumbled an apology and quickened my step as if that would impress him enough.

The guards ferried us down into the main atrium of the Grand Salon, slowing only to let my father’s wheelchair descend at its own pace, and we watched the frenzy on the floor below.

Beyond and below us, all the men and women filed on. Guns slung over shoulders, specialists readying boxes of drones, all that chaos, all of it focused towards the outdoors. The whole house smelled of boot leather and gun oil and something burnt drifting in from outside. All the windows were dark, until the night lit up again and more *thumps* pulsed through the walls. The

commotion kicked up a stagnant musk that I committed to memory as two-century-old stillborn air being disturbed. Really tickled the nose.

One young man I was unfamiliar with shouted, “Get the snow gear, break left flank, break—” before he was too far to hear.

“Marchand!” shouted Jules. “Jones!”

Both men walked in at that exact moment from an adjacent hallway and I could tell from the sags on their face they were disoriented. Marchand swaggered in clad in a white longcoat to contrast his eyepatch, while Jones kept his attention on ordering the men around him to take positions around the chateau. Under normal circumstances, as normal as they could be in this place, they’d look like cosplayers from some historical event you only saw in black and white photos.

My father Ludovic rolled over to me once I reached the bottom of the stairs, and I set my hand on his armrest.

And he said, “Stay by me, Rory,” in that croaking weak voice he’d been suffering with.

“I’m fine, Papa.”

“You’re still bruised too much.” He kept brushing his hand over my arm looking for wounds that were no longer there.

“Please get off of me. I’m fine. You worry too much.”

He coughed trying to chuckle, “No one here’s worrying enough! How can you be so calm with this attack?”

His hair had grown even whiter. Half his body sagged in the chair, and every time the room filled with guards, his face curled into what I could only call a child’s apologetic frown. There’s no pain more miserable than bearing witness to a life in decline.

Once Jones had finished semaphoring them, he turned to us.

“Listen, right! Sévilles, got a demand for you. Need your photos taken before we ship you to Les Sables-d’Olonne.”

Ludovic said, “Why?”

Jones said, “There are rumors circulating that you’ve been captured by the approaching insurgency, or that you are all dead.”

My mother Isabelle stepped forward, hands collapsed over her chest, and said, “Why are they saying such things? Are they finally paying attention to what you’ve been doing to my daughter?”

Jones hadn’t listened fully. As Isabelle spoke to him, Marchand tugged at his shoulder and whispered something and ran out through the grand chateau doors. He then responded with, “We’ll sort it out later. Poiret’ll take you to the Doll Room. You can settle in there, until we’ve secured the estate.” He nodded and Jules motioned for us to follow.

We went deeper into the belly of the house, past the point where the parquet gave way to flagstone and the wainscoting stopped pretending. He led us to the old empty Doll Room. In past months, I’d been in this room thrice before. An old Chinese pun about the number four flashed through my mind.

We entered into the space and filed towards the alcove, with Isabelle pushing Ludovic towards the center, and the wheels’ squeaking stabbed my ears. The other guards winced at the noise. Ludovic though, I saw under his heavy cough he was laughing at how miserable it made everyone.

We all stumbled. The house rumbled, and a fine dust sifted down from the vaulting. Jules' eyes flicked towards the ceiling as if trying to materialize a window, and then he stepped out. "We'll return shortly. You all will be out of here soon, God willing." The doors clicked shut. Heavy olivewood. Very kitsch.

We stood in that room for several minutes. The explosions and gunfire outside made for our deathly ASMR. The cold crept up from the flagstone in that patient way stone has of pulling the warmth out of you, degree by degree.

That was me in the corner: Marie Aurore. Theirs for sixteen years. Half the age of my youngest sibling. Always the little snowflower in everyone's eyes. I'd grown so wearily used to the family smothering me with their love and worry. Any given day, they'd make one believe that God Himself trembles in despair should my eyes ever flash with pain or the vaguest discomfort. All the world and all its peoples, weighed against the slightest downward curve of my brow. Such is my life.

My parents stood up front, forward and ready. As had become our little tradition, I set my hand on my father's armrest. I looked down at him and he looked up at me.

After an abyssally deep sigh, he said, "Rory, are you okay, Rory?"

I tried to smile and nod. "I'm sorry, Papa."

He pulled me closer, so close his stubbled beard scratched my face. "Oh don't apologize, thing. You shouldn't even be here. It's my fault." He'd perked up once we were alone, but still sagged and still spoke in that croak. For a minute there, I lost myself and turned away.

"You're so calm. You've made me so damn proud. When we get out of here, I promise you I'll give you the stars, Rory, the stars!"

My siblings stood behind me. Bigger sister Amélie, big brother Auguste, and little big sister Adelaide. They all stood like warheads ready to fire, all for me.

Yet then I felt fingers adjusting my collar. I did not move until finished.

God knows why I turned— such was a typical ticklish formality in my life thus far— but I took astonishment that it was Addie instead of Amélie. She had that girlish grin, hands closed and drawn close to her chest like she'd had just set the perfect finishing touches on me. Here we shared each other's stares and smiles like a warm embrace like she was the happiest woman in the world.

Auguste shook my shoulder. We looked at each other, sharing a wink.

Knock knock!

We all started.

The door creaked open.

Some youthful-faced man with wiry black hair and a white-tinted beard peeked in, a man I knew as Hugo Maurier. "Good morn—um! Heh, good... Midnight?"

We shared a chuckle. "Ah, do you folks need anything? Any water?"

Isabelle spoke, "We're quite all right at the moment. Thank you, sir."

Hugo smiled, nodded, and backed out, and the door gently locked.

Addie and Auguste let out breaths that struck the air like nuclear bombs.

My heart fluttered. This was all what I had expected. Why had I been so convinced of any other outcome?

Ludovic coughed and said, "They've got the most clownish folk running this operation, don't they?"

I said nothing, though a moment of pity crossed my heart. Hugo never meant offense or harm. Few men like him did. In my hour at Gethsemane, I'd come to understand that I was not the main character of some grand novel. Whatever I felt was not inherently shared by all around me. Our trials would be paid back a hundredfold. As to Absalom, so upon Ludovic.

Amélie then scoffed and said, "I just want to get Rory out of here." She kept her arm around me.

Knock knock knock!

Again, we all started, even though this time we had heard the footsteps approach.

The door opened, slow and controlled. A severe-faced man stepped in, clad in a pale green military uniform— Patrice, a man with crags for a face, square jawed, somehow handsome despite it.

And he said surprisingly softly, "All apologies. We were facing some technical difficulties with the transport vehicle all morning. It's just pulled up."

"So we can go then? And get out of this horrid place?" went Isabelle so pleadingly.

"Again, apologies, madame. The fighting in town has not quite ceased. We prefer you wait in here where it is safe and secure until we can proceed."

Quickly he stepped back out.

The breaths this time were sharper, and Ludovic shook his head and said, "Fairly disorganized fellows, aren't they?"

Auguste snickered. "They are. They are."

As soon as Ludovic's grip loosened to grasp his son, sister Amélie pulled me tighter and rubbed my head until my hair was shaggy and unkempt. We rocked together, and I enjoyed her hand across my cheek. It reminded me of how she'd always hold me whenever I was sad. She'd always say something like 'Holding another releases oxytocin. It makes you feel better.'

And I did feel better. I felt a little closer to heaven.

The footsteps returned.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Ludovic said, "Fucking Hell, they won't leave us alone, will they. Oh come in, dearies!"

And they did come in. One by one, they filed in. The men stepped aside, and Jules and Jones approached.

Jones walked close enough to Ludovic that they could smell each others' breath.

Amélie's hand felt tighter against my face, and she pulled me back further. I felt her breath catch. I think she knew what this was.

Jones produced a letter from a coat pocket. Like the bad kid with his homework, he unfolded it carefully, looking back between it and us.

"Louis-Ludovic Séville. In view of the fact that your allies continue their assault on the People's Republic, and for the vicious crimes committed by your regime against the people of France, the working people of the world, and of children passed into your hands by your managers and your wife, the Vendée Soviet has elected to execute you." He tossed the paper aside and said, "Your life is finished."

Ludovic: "What...?" He pushed himself up and closer to me. "What?!"

Jones pulled out his Makarov pistol, set the barrel as close to Ludovic's forehead as possible, and fired. The full volley followed.

That's when the screaming started. I jumped in my place, too startled to react, till I backed against the alcove and slid down. Once the gunfire ceased, my ears burned from the ringing. I tried to fix my rucked shirt— my bare skin against the cold plaster. I instinctively pulled down to protect my decency. But a heavy fatigue took my arms so completely I couldn't lift them. At that same moment, I felt as if I had suddenly sat in a puddle and tried to move myself to a drier spot, but the puddle remained.

It was only then that I looked down and saw blood, and I thought, *Oh, I've been shot*, and then I thought, *Oh God, I've been shot so many times!*

Then it started to come in. Not pain exactly, not yet, but the knowledge of damage, like when you fall hard on ice and for a few seconds you're just taking inventory. My ribs felt like someone took an aluminum baseball bat to my chest. My left hip felt wrong, heavy, like something was sitting on it. My shoulder was hot. The air distracted me. Metallic sulfur, Satan laughing as he spread his wings for us. The smoke had nowhere to go in that sealed stone womb and it hung in the air like a funeral veil. I couldn't see the faces of the men anymore.

There was a horrid prolonged metallic shriek followed by a *thunk* besides me, and in my wet gasping, I turned and saw Ludovic's wheelchair rolling slowly from the alcove wall. I looked up at the man.

His face sagged over his shoulder, his eyes glazed over. His nose was a geyser of blood. Right between the eyes, a wound I could have fit my thumb into.

Through the ringing, I heard the screeching and wailing of the others. Isabelle had knelt, hands shaking, Addie was slumped in the corner, and her face looked so dreadfully wrong, like a death's head. I blinked and it got worse. She had little left of her jaw. The rest of her body had been eviscerated with bullets.

Auguste, he was bent over, making inhuman deathly sounds, struggling to breathe and shout at the same time.

Then the burning started, in my ribs first and then spreading outward to everywhere else. The stone floor was pulling the warmth out of me, or maybe that was the blood leaving. I gasped and panted, and kept drowning in my throat. Blood bubbled up until I coughed and spat it out onto my chest, and what was left trickled out of my mouth, down my chin, dripping onto my shirt. I wiped my mouth with my wrist, and looked at the red smear that remained on my sleeve.

The room smelled like a slaughterhouse baptized in fireworks.

I heard words but couldn't hear them. Not for several moments.

"Survived"

"How many"

"No jeweled corsets, we made sure of it"

"How the fuck did they survive"

"You all shot the damn Witch is why"

And far more distantly someone shouting.

Finally, my hearing cleared enough for me to hear one of the men say, "What happened?"

My own breathing had become sickly and gurgly and I felt far too much adrenaline to hear every word. I looked around again. Ludovic and Addie weren't moving.

That I was still looking meant they hadn't killed me. And they'd botched the rest.

I slumped back further. It all came back to me: the rapid banging and muzzle flashes from a dozen pistols.

And yet I made peace with it all too quickly. Imagine the catharsis of that sight from their view.

France's last royal family, now we were a whimpering sloppy puddle of blood, gore, and adrenaline helpless before a squad of reloading executioners. I'd have loved to give them a quippy line to rest with, something like, 'Savor the moment, darlings! You're the protagonists of your new history tonight' and then I'd die in a dramatic little faint.

Instead I gasped, raspy, and spat again. God almighty, it sucked so hard.

"Don't bother with— no, finish them individually."

One of the men turned and grabbed a rifle fitted with a bayonet.

Jules stepped towards Addie. He pulled back his pistol and opened fire again, and again and again, until he needed to reload. And he did, and he kept firing. When he had no bullets left, he kicked her corpse.

"Lucky bastard," I heard one of the men shout, or at least I thought he shouted. I could scarcely hear anything over the sharp ringing.

What I did hear clearly was cheering and jeering, and saw the men spitting and meme posing over what was left of Addie.

And one ferocious shout of, "Total pigger death!" and another of "The witch is dead!"

Then I watched as a couple of other men walked over.

Jules waved his gun around. My eyes watched the barrel catch the light through the smoke. It kept coming back over me and then away. I couldn't stop watching it like it was the finger of Death himself.

And as I lay dying, I chuckled.

This is how a doll dies.

I spat out another mouthful of blood and let my head go limp, and shut my eyes.

Yet I flinched at the next bang and kept watching.

Isabelle had been silenced.

Amélie was cowering beside me, she had clutched a pillow and it was sopping wet with blood.

The man with the rifle came upon her and slashed her side, the blade flashed in the light, then I felt my own stomach suddenly erupt in sharp pain. I tried to gasp and wince.

"These two are still up," he said. He slapped my cheek and I gasped again. "You still alive?" He leaned in closer to me, and I could see him examining my eyes. "Is she?"

He then pulled back and frantically wiped his hand on his clothes and said, "Fucking hell, it really does burn."

Jones fired a shot at Auguste's head. Whatever frantic panicked motion the man had taken to had ceased, and everyone else flinched and looked over at my brother's body convulsing.

And I heard that horrible, “No...! God help us! God help us!” between broken sobs. Hearing Amélie in such terror and panic sent a shock of guilt through me. And I kept thinking ‘Let her go at least. Let her go. Just let her go. She’s never been anyone’s enemy.’

They silenced her with a shot.

But behind that echoing gunshot, I kept hearing that distant voice. Now louder, now more frantic. What was it saying?

“Hold on! Halt! Hold on! Stop it!”

By this point I was delirious enough that I could barely recognize the voice until I saw the face. Marchand!

He screamed past that register when one’s voice breaks into pure barking noise.

“Hold your fire! Hold your fire! Cease fire!”

The men around him said, I don’t know, my ears had become numb.

And he said, “Jones, I didn’t give the order to execute! I said to wait for my command!” He stomped through the room straight towards me. “Dammit!” He turned. “We were under STRICT orders to separate the Grand Princess from the rest.”

Jones tried to speak, but Marchand continued: “These orders come directly from Comrade Ferron and Sauveterre. These were not your call to make. I explicitly said to wait for my order. We had the situation outside the premises under control!”

One of the soldiers stooped by me, and I felt him pressing against my neck and wrist.

Jones stammered at first, “Lucien, we had no choice,” and then shouted in his own harsh register, “the White Brigades had the grounds under siege! We can’t allow them a living banner.”

“Dammit!! I said to *wait. For. My. Orders!*” He pressed Jones against the wall and said, “Marie Aurore was *our* asset!”

And the room fell silent.

Jones’ full Brummie accent came through: “What?” He paused. “What?! What are you, you’re saying Marie *fucking* Aurore is the agent?”

I coughed, but it was sludgy and fell out of my mouth heavy and sloppy.

“Why doesn’t anyone tell me any bloody thing?”

“We were under strict orders to have as few possible—”

The man before me turned quickly. “Sir! Commander! The girl’s still alive. She’s probably got that, ah, that, what is it— d-do I have permission to finish her off?”

“Wha— N-no! No, if she’s alive, medevac her immediately! Don’t let her pass out. We need her lifted to the ER immediately.”

The man’s grip was harsh, or at least I thought it was. Every sensation felt fuzzy and sizzling, but yet clear in pulses. “She’s suffered far too many wounds, sir. At least a dozen. She’s not going to survive the transpo—”

And then a woman pushed through, sending the soldier off onto his side.

“MOVE, you lousy tramp.” She had a large rag, I felt it hot and heavy against my chest.

“Oh she hasn’t taken anything to the chest, thank you, Lord Jesus Christ.” She then shouted over to Marchand, “Go get the medical drone, then! Unless you want her to bleed out. We have agonal breathing and blown pupils— well, don’t just stand there! Get the emergency team in here!”

The world started fading to black at the edges. I could still see that woman’s face. The same face that wept for me before. But then it all faded out before I could remember again.

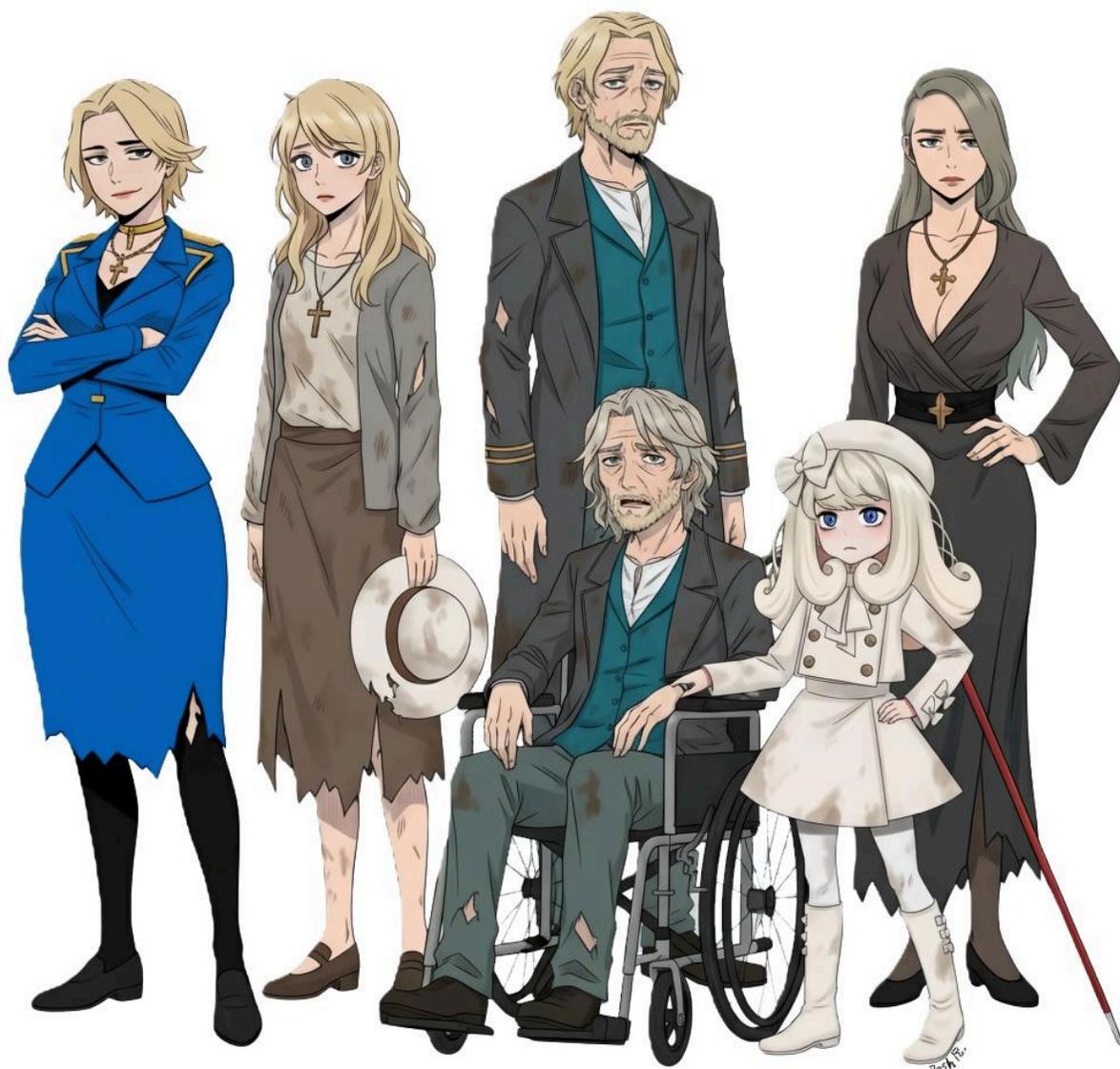
In the dark side of my mind, I tried to make sense of it, all that had led to this point.

From left to right



BABYLON TODAY

THE SÉVILLE ROYAL FAMILY (DEPOSED)



Marie Adelaide
Marie Amélie
Louis Auguste
Louis Ludovic
Marie Aurore

Marie Isabelle