

## **Prologue - Prelude of Providence**

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a gentleman returned from war and blessed with the fortune of noble recognition must soon find himself the subject of all manner of social scrutiny. So it was with the Duc de Derbois, a man whose reputation far preceded his personage. A staunch bonapartist in a post-napoleon world. His name was whispered among the parlors of Tours and Orléans with admiration by the men and speculation by the women, for at the tender age of twenty-nine, he had already carved for himself a position of great distinction, not only upon the battlefield but also in the halls of courtly favor.

Yet, the Duke himself was not inclined to bask in such laurels. If anything, he seemed indifferent to the murmurings of society, his thoughts ever turned inward to past glories and present sorrows. Since the loss of his wife, Élise, he had made little attempt to engage with the pleasantries expected of a man in his station. Instead, he resided at Château de Meslay, a grand and venerable estate, where he could concern himself with his compositions, his correspondence, and his occasional ventures into the countryside, all in the hopes that solitude might serve as some balm to his restless mind.

It was upon such a foundation that fate saw fit to usher him into the most unexpected of circumstances. For even a gentleman determined to remain apart from society cannot wholly escape its grasp, and the Duke's resolve was soon to be tested.

It began, as these matters often do, with an invitation—a wedding to be held at the grand estate of Monsieur

Beaumont, who had found himself betrothed to a beautiful and intelligent woman from Blois. The Duke should be invited was, of course, inevitable. That he should attend, however, was far less certain. It was only the insistence of his dear friend, Beaumont himself, that ultimately won the day. A refusal, Séverin knew, would only encourage further speculation and unwanted inquiries into his habits, and if there was one thing he detested more than social affairs, it was the scrutiny that followed their avoidance.

France itself was in a strange and restless mood—adrift in the wake of Napoleon’s abdication and caught between the memory of empire and the uncertain footing of Bourbon rule. For many, the return of the monarchy brought as much confusion as it did stability. In such times, even a modest wedding could serve as a welcome distraction. It was something tangible, celebratory, and rooted in the familiar rites of life, offering guests a brief reprieve from the unspoken tension humming beneath the surface of the nation.

Thus it was that, on the appointed day, the Duc de Derbois rode toward the Beaumont estate in a carriage that felt more akin to a prison than a conveyance of nobility. The countryside of the Loire Valley stretched before him in a rolling array of green and gold, touched with the last warmth of early spring. It was, he admitted, a fine day for a wedding—if one were inclined to enjoy such occasions.

Bethania Lenoir had no such reservations about the event. For a young lady of seventeen, a last minute invitation to the wedding of her cousin was an affair of some excitement. The household had been abuzz with preparations for weeks, and though she did not care for the frills of lace or the particulars of flower arrangements, she

found herself pleasantly anticipating the evening's festivities. Weddings were, after all, the rare occasions upon which one could observe all manner of character laid bare. The joyful, the envious, the nervous, and the indifferent—each played their part in the intricate dance of matrimony and society.

Her mother, Madame Lenoir, was equally engaged in the event, though her interest lay more in the people who would be in attendance rather than the occasion itself. "It is a certainty," she had declared only the evening before, "that the Duc de Derbois will be present. And one can only imagine what sort of impression he shall leave. I hear he is quite the somber figure, ever brooding over some dark memory."

Bethania had little patience for such speculation. "Perhaps he simply does not care for the company of gossiping tongues," she had replied, earning a glance of mild reproach from her mother.

"Bethania, you must learn to speak with greater delicacy. A gentleman of his standing is not one to be dismissed so lightly."

"And yet, if he is so wholly indifferent to society, what good shall it do to study his every movement?"

"It is not for our sake, my dear, but for yours. You are nearly of an age to consider such matters seriously."

Bethania merely laughed at the notion. Marriage was not something she feared, nor was it something she pursued. If it should come to pass, it would do so on her own terms, and not upon the altar of mere convenience. "Let the Duke

do as he pleases," she had concluded. "I shall think of him only as much as he thinks of me, which is to say, not at all."

## Chapter 1 - Day of White

The arrival of the Duc de Derbois at the Beaumont estate was met with the quiet reverence befitting a man of his station. Though no grand announcement heralded his entrance, a ripple passed through the gathered guests as his carriage came to a halt before the grand façade of the house. Servants moved with practiced efficiency, opening the door to reveal a tall and solemn figure clad in dark attire, his presence at once commanding yet unapproachable.

Monsieur Beaumont himself was quick to greet him, stepping forward with the familiarity of old friendship. “At last, you have arrived, Séverin,” he declared with a warmth that contrasted the Duke’s measured reserve. “I was beginning to think you had abandoned the occasion altogether.”

“Had I possessed any such inclination, your persistence would have rendered it impossible,” the Duke replied, his tone weary yet without malice. But warmly following up with, “Congratulations Beaumont- there is no other day like your very own day of white.”

He accepted Beaumont’s offered hand, though his eyes remained fixed upon the great hall, where clusters of guests milled about, their voices a delicate hum beneath the soaring ceiling.

Beaumont chuckled, motioning him inside. “Come, then. You shall endure this evening in good company.”

Endure. The word suited the Duke’s disposition well, for he felt precisely that—a man bracing himself against the tide of society. He entered the hall with measured steps,

nodding politely at the many glances thrown his way but engaging little beyond necessity.

And then, quite suddenly, his attention was caught.

A young woman passed before him, her movement neither hurried nor languid but possessed of an effortless grace that drew his gaze unbidden. Bethania Lenoir. He did not yet know her name, but in that instant, he was acutely aware of her presence. He clutched his necklace, as he observed the dark blue of her gown, the loose curl of dark hair that framed her face, the lightness with which she walked—it was all absorbed in an instant, settled into the recesses of his mind before he had the sense to look away. Each step of hers, piercing him, like musket fire—growing fainter as she made her way into the ceremony room.

She did not notice him. Or if she did, she made no indication of it. She walked past, engaged in some quiet thought, her hands lightly clasped before her. And though the Duke did not move, something within him did.

Beaumont, unaware of this moment, was already leading him through the hall, offering introductions he barely registered. It was with some effort that he forced himself to return to the present, to exchange pleasantries with familiar names and unfamiliar faces. Yet, something had unsettled him, some unspoken shift he had not anticipated.

The ceremony began soon after, and with it came a solemn weight upon his chest. The soft notes of the organ, the rustle of fine garments as guests took their places, the hushed reverence as the bride entered—all conspired to evoke memories he had long sought to silence.

Élise.

The name rose in his mind unbidden, as though carried upon the very air. He had once stood in such a place, his heart full of something now lost to him. The joy of a new beginning, the whispered vows, the certainty that time would be kind. How naive he had been.

The ceremony unfolded in warmth and celebration, but the Duke remained at its edges, a silent observer rather than a willing participant. He lingered through the subsequent hours of feasting and revelry, exchanging words where necessary, but making every effort to avoid the one presence that had so inexplicably disturbed him.

Bethania.

He caught sight of her at intervals, speaking with her family, laughing lightly at some jest, moving with an ease that only deepened his discomfort. He could not place the reason, nor did he try. He only knew that she was an element unforeseen, and he had no wish to linger within her orbit.

It was a sudden impulse, then, that gripped him as the evening stretched on. He would leave. There was no need to stay beyond what courtesy required. He had made his appearance, exchanged pleasantries, fulfilled his obligation. He could return to Meslay, to the quiet and solitude he understood. Standing in the ceremony room now- alone. Decorations removed- two empty chairs at the center. White tapestry scattered all throughout the room. A setting sun fading away through the large windows. This scene, a perfect reflection of his heart. He could not bear to stay a second longer.

He turned, intent on departing, when a sound arrested him.

Music.

Not merely the strains of another dance, nor the lively tune of an evening's revelry, but a song—one he knew. One that should not have reached his ears in such a place, at such a moment.

His breath stilled, his steps halted. And it was then that he saw her.

Bethania stood alone at the base of the grand spiral staircase, her figure caught in the candlelight, her face turned slightly downward as if lost in thought. Almost ethereal, she perfectly embodied the idea of the mythical Sylph- the Sylph at the Staircase.

Something in her posture, in the stillness of that moment, beckoned him forward before he could think to resist. His feet moved of their own accord, drawn by something unnamed, something unseen. Before he knew it, he was approaching her, his presence unnoticed.

The music is still filling the moment. This precise song, on the best day of Severin's past life, once led his bride down the aisle to him -is now leading him down this hallway towards Bethania.



## **Chapter 2 - Sylph at the Staircase**

The Duc de Derbois had faced battle with unshaken resolve, had stood before cannon fire and musket lines with steady hands, yet now, as he approached the young woman at the base of the staircase, he felt a sensation most foreign to him: fear.

It was absurd. He knew it was absurd. And yet, the nervous energy threading through his limbs, the unfamiliar quickening of his pulse, all conspired to unnerve him in a way no battlefield ever had. The irony did not escape him.

Bethania Lenoir was, without question, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Not merely in the symmetry of her features or the grace with which she carried herself, but in something far more elusive. Her eyes, at once green and brown, shifting like those of a feline in the candlelight, unsettled him. There was a quiet confidence in them, a curiosity laced with something playful—an intelligence that did not yield easily. Her dark hair fell in loose waves, framing a complexion so pale it seemed to glow beneath the warm flickers of the chandelier above.

He halted a pace before her, composing himself as best he could. “Mademoiselle.”

She turned her gaze to him, and for a moment, it was as though the air itself had changed. He did not know what he had expected—surprise, indifference, or perhaps a polite deference—but what he found was something else entirely. Amusement. Subtle, restrained, but unmistakable.

She inclined her head. “Monsieur.”

A pause. He had prepared for conversation, for the appropriate exchange of pleasantries, but the words abandoned him in the presence of her steady gaze. He cleared his throat, realizing the absurdity of his silence.

“I do not believe we have been introduced,” he said, carefully measured. “Might I ask your name?”

“Bethania.”

Just that. No title, no surname. Simply Bethania. As if the very name itself was enough to be known. And perhaps it was, for to his own astonishment, he found himself thinking it was the most beautiful name he had ever heard.

“Bethania,” he echoed softly, as if testing its weight upon his tongue.

She smiled, a delicate thing, but one that suggested she had noticed the effect of her name upon him.

He was quick to recover, keen to regain his footing. “You have remarkable eyes,” he found himself saying before he had thought better of it.

She lifted a brow, a flicker of something teasing in her expression. “Do I?”

“You must know it.”

She tilted her head slightly, studying him, and then, to his great surprise, she said, “As do you, Your Grace.”

He had not anticipated such a reply. Compliments, he had learned, were often given but rarely returned with such

directness. He blinked once, unable to mask his mild astonishment. "You think so?"

She nodded. "A rare shade of hazel. Perhaps a touch colder than my own, but striking nonetheless."

For a man accustomed to measured exchanges, the honesty of her words caught him wholly unprepared. He found himself on the unfamiliar side of conversation, without the careful detachment he so often wielded.

Another pause, and then Bethania shifted, lifting the hem of her gown slightly. "Would you assist me?"

He had fought in countless battles, had held the fate of men in his hands, but nothing had quite prepared him for the sight of Bethania Lenoir placing a delicate hand upon his shoulder as she steadied herself. Without thinking, he extended his arm, feeling the faint pressure of her touch.

She slipped one shoe from her foot, then the other, lowering herself a full four inches as she settled barefoot upon the marble floor. The action was done without hesitation, without apology.

He stared. "You mean to—?" "Oh you are much taller now"- She interrupts with childish laughter.

"My feet ache, Your Grace." She sighed, stretching her toes against the cool stone. "I see no reason to prolong the discomfort."

There was something undeniably scandalous about it, however small the act. But more than that, there was an audacity in her casual dismissal of propriety that both shocked and intrigued him.

He could not help himself. He laughed.

Bethania glanced at him, a knowing glint in her eye. “Ah. He does have the capacity.”

He pressed his lips together, shaking his head slightly. “You are unlike anyone I have ever met, Mademoiselle.”

“So I am told.”

He found himself watching her more closely, attempting to piece together what it was about her that unsettled him so. There was no simpering shyness, no false pretense of meekness. She was composed, but not cold. Soft-spoken, but not timid. He could not decide if she meant to challenge or disarm him.

“May I ask your age?” He hesitated before adding, “I hope the question is not an unseemly one.”

She smiled, as though enjoying the game. “Why don’t you guess?”

He studied her, taking in the maturity of her posture, the sharpness of her mind, the grace of her words. “I would estimate... twenty-four?”

Her lips quirked at the edges. And then she delivered the single blow.

“Seventeen.”

A silence passed between them, stretching longer than he intended. He had not thought himself a man easily startled, but this revelation set his thoughts reeling.

Seventeen.

He had prepared himself for twenty, at the very least. Perhaps twenty-one. But seventeen? It was absurd. He had stood before her mere moments ago, convinced she was unlike any woman he had met, and now to find her scarcely beyond girlhood—

She tilted her head slightly. “You seem troubled, Your Grace.”

“I—” He exhaled, composing himself. “I must admit, you carry yourself with a poise far beyond your years.”

She laughed lightly. “That is generous of you.”

He shook his head, still processing. “I have little doubt you shall leave many men utterly baffled.”

She studied him for a moment, then said, with the faintest tilt of her lips, “And you, Your Grace? Are you baffled?”

He swallowed. “Beyond measure.” As he smiled cautiously.

There was a moment of quiet, and he realized, with a slow sense of reluctance, that it was time to take his leave. The conversation had stretched long, perhaps longer than it ought to have, and though he had no desire to depart, he knew propriety demanded it.

He extended his hand in farewell. “Mademoiselle Lenoir, it has been a most unexpected pleasure.”

She placed her hand in his, but instead of the brief, polite shake he had anticipated, she held . Her soft hand oriented with her palm facing the ground and his hand grasping her fingers. She held- Not firmly, not demandingly, but with

the lightest of touches, as though she were reluctant to let go.

A moment passed. A strange, fragile moment.

He did not know what to do.

At last, he inclined his head, though his voice came softer than before. “You must know, Bethania—you are the most beautiful woman in all this place.”

She said nothing, only looked at him as he stepped away.

### **Chapter 3 - Fear of Love**

The Duke had spent his life mastering control. On the battlefield, in the courts of the Emperor, in the solemn halls of his estate. And yet, as he walked away from Bethania Lenoir, his composure unraveled thread by thread. His fingers still felt the warmth of her touch, the light pressure of her hand lingering like an unspoken promise. His thoughts, normally sharp and decisive, now tumbled into chaos.

He found himself retreating to a quiet corner of the estate, where a small group of gentlemen conversed over their wine. Marcel was among them, a fellow war veteran, and upon seeing Séverin approach, he grinned.

“Well,” Marcel mused, swirling his glass, “you look as if you have seen a ghost.”

One of the other men chuckled. “Or perhaps, you’ve fallen in love.”

The Duke gave them a measured glance. “I assume you are referring to my conversation just now.”

“Oh, we are certainly referring to that,” Marcel said.

“Séverin, I have known you for years, and never have I seen you look as—how shall I say it—rattled”

Another gentleman smirked. “And the way Mademoiselle Lenoir held your hand? Remarkable.”

Séverin stiffened. He had known, of course, that the moment had stretched beyond the bounds of propriety, but hearing it acknowledged by others made it somehow more real.

“She is a curious young woman,” he admitted, though the words felt woefully insufficient.

“Curious?” Marcel scoffed. “She is utterly enchanting, and you, my friend, are thoroughly besotted.”

The Duke shot him a look of warning, but Marcel only laughed, raising his glass in a knowing salute.

Before Séverin could formulate a reply, the commotion of the evening shifted. Outside, Beaumont and his bride Rachelle prepared to make their exit. Guests moved to line the stone pathway, holding candles and small bouquets of flowers to shower upon the departing couple. The warm glow of candlelight flickered against the night, a final blessing upon the newlyweds before they disappeared into the next chapter of their lives.

Séverin hesitated at the threshold, unsure if he ought to join. And then, again, he saw her.

Bethania stood at the edge of the gathering, struggling to light her candle against the soft breeze. The small flame sputtered, flickering out each time she shielded it with her hand. A rare moment of frustration crossed her delicate features.

Before he could think better of it, he stepped toward her.

“Allow me,” he murmured, producing his own candle and tilting its steady flame toward hers. She glanced up at him, a smile tugging at her lips as her candle finally came to life.

“Merci, Your Grace.”



He hesitated for only a moment before speaking again.  
“May I stand beside you?”

She blinked, a touch surprised, but nodded. “I would like that.”

They stood in comfortable silence as the ceremony unfolded. The bride and groom emerged to a shower of petals, their happiness a tangible thing in the night air. Yet, as the celebration swirled around them, Séverin found himself grounded in the quiet presence of the young woman at his side.

Bethania turned slightly, looking up at him. “Will you write to me?”

The question struck him with the force of cannon fire. So simple. So impossible to ignore.

His heart lurched.

“Yes,” he said, his voice steady, though his thoughts were anything but. “If you wish it, I will.”

She nodded, satisfied. “I do.”

They walked a few paces together, talking softly. She spoke of her family, of growing up among three sisters, of the way her father always smelled of ink and parchment from his hours in the study. He found himself sharing more than he intended—memories of Meslay in his childhood, of his siblings, of the bittersweet weight of carrying a name so recently elevated by war rather than by generations of nobility.

He could have spoken to her for hours.

And that terrified him.

The realization came like a cold blade against his chest. This moment—this night—would never come again. He knew it as surely as he had known the certainty of battle. There was something dangerous in this connection, something he could not allow himself to nurture. It was too soon. Or perhaps, it was too late.

A strange, unwelcome fear crept into his heart. A fear not of war, nor duty, nor failure. But a fear of her. Of what she might mean.

He inhaled sharply, forcing himself to break the moment before it unraveled further. “Mademoiselle, I regret that I must take my leave.”

Bethania’s expression flickered with something unreadable—disappointment, perhaps, or quiet understanding. “So soon?”

“There are matters that require my attention,” he lied. It was a weak excuse, but it was all he had.

She held his gaze, her feline-like eyes searching his for a reason she would not ask him to explain. And then, gracious as ever, she nodded. “Then I wish you safe travels.”

He should have bowed. He should have simply taken her hand and offered a polite farewell. But instead, without thought, without reason, he stepped forward and embraced her.

It was not the embrace of a lover, nor one of mere acquaintance. It was something in between, something

undefined yet wholly meaningful. She did not resist him. She did not stiffen in surprise. She only let him hold her, just for a moment.

Then, as swiftly as he had done it, he stepped back, inclining his head. "Goodnight, Bethania."

She smiled, though her eyes betrayed the sadness she would not put to words. "Goodnight, Séverin."

And with that, he left her.

The carriage ride home was silent, save for the steady clatter of hooves upon the road. He did not speak to the driver, nor did he attempt to read the letters awaiting him on the seat beside him. His thoughts were consumed by one thing alone.

Bethania Lenoir.

He had spent years existing in a world dulled by grief, painted in muted shades of regret and duty. And now, in a single evening, something had shifted. The air felt different. The world had changed.

May 7th. He would never forget this day.

## Chapter 4 - Aubade Aphone

Séverin dreamed of war. He dreamed of glory.

The air was thick with the scent of gunpowder, the rhythmic beat of drums reverberating through the valley as French forces advanced through the Spanish mist. It was **Fuentes de Oñoro, 1811**—his battle, his moment. His name had been immortalized on the lips of men that day. The clash of steel, the cries of soldiers, the banners whipping in the wind—he relived it now, but not with fear. There was no dread in this dream. It was as if he were watching himself, a younger man, commanding his troops with the assurance of one who knew he was meant for war.

The enemy had faltered that day. He had seen their weakness, had driven them back with calculated precision, had secured victory for France. And as the dream unfolded, he felt it—**pride**.

Then, suddenly, the vision shifted.

The battlefield was gone. **Snow. Endless snow.**

He was in Russia again. The wind howled like a dying beast, its claws raking through the ranks of the once-great Grande Armée. Frostbitten men stumbled around him, their eyes hollow, their bodies barely more than frozen husks. The retreat from Moscow. **This nightmare again.**

Séverin turned, searching, knowing exactly what horror he would find. **Élise**. She was there, but not as he had left her. Not in their warm home. Not in the embrace of life. No, she was dying in his arms, her once-bright eyes dimming like the last embers of a fading fire.

He tried to speak, but his throat clenched. He tried to move, but the weight of her was slipping away, her fingers cold against his cheek. He could do nothing. He could not save her. He had not saved her.

He gasped, and then—

### **Dawn.**

Séverin awoke with a sharp inhale, his chest rising and falling as though he had truly been running through the snow just moments before. His hands gripped the sheets, damp with sweat, his breath uneven. The room was bathed in the gentle hues of morning, the golden light peeking through the heavy curtains of his chamber.

For years, his mornings had felt **hollow**—silent aubades, songs without melody, without meaning. His dreams would take him to war, to regret, to grief. And when he woke, there would be **nothing** waiting for him but silence.

But today... today was different.

A name surfaced in his mind, like the first crack of warmth after winter.

### **Bethania.**

His heart steadied. His mind, still weary from the storm of his dreams, found itself clinging to **her**. To the way she had looked at him. To the way she had spoken his name. To the way her hand had lingered in his own.

He exhaled, long and slow, as if trying to grasp something intangible, something unseen. It was **unbelievable**, this

shift within him. He had never been one to believe in fate, and yet... what was this, if not providence?

He rose from his bed, stepping to the window, pushing aside the heavy curtain. The estate grounds stretched before him, kissed by the golden light of early morning. **It did not feel like just another day.**

For the first time in years, he did not wake with the weight of regret. He did not feel like a man merely existing.

Instead, he felt **the possibility of something more.**

His steps took him through the quiet halls of Château de Meslay, his mind still caught between past and present. The kitchen was empty when he entered, as he preferred it. He poured himself a cup of coffee, took a plate of bread and preserves, and settled at the long wooden table, staring at the papers neatly stacked at the edge.

Letters. Business affairs. Unread reports.

But none of that mattered.

Instead, he reached for fresh parchment.

He had made her a promise.

He dipped his pen in ink, hesitating for only a moment before pressing the nib to the page. His fingers were steady, but his heart was **not.**

**Mademoiselle Lenoir,**

The words came more easily than he expected.

## Chapter 5 - Miss Beth

The morning sun filtered through the lace curtains of the Lenoir household, casting a golden glow over the breakfast table. The scent of fresh bread and sweet preserves lingered in the air as the soft murmur of conversation stirred the calm of the day.

Bethania sat quietly, her thoughts far from the table, her mind wandering back to **the wedding**. Back to the way the Duke's eyes had lingered upon her, the gentle pressure of his hand, the quiet exchange of words that had felt heavier than any conversation of her young life. The memory was still sharp, still unsettling, and yet... still warm.

Her mother, Madame Lenoir, observed her daughter closely, her eyes sharp with curiosity, though softened with maternal affection. She set her tea cup down with delicate precision. "You were much admired at the Beaumont wedding, Bethania," she said, though the remark was clearly not casual. "Particularly by a certain Duke."

Bethania's gaze remained fixed on her plate, though the corner of her lips quirked with restrained amusement. "Was I?" Madame Lenoir gave her a knowing look. "Do not play coy, my dear. I saw how he looked at you. How he lingered by your side."

From across the table, **Faustina**—older by just a year, and ever the sharp-tongued sister—snorted lightly. "And what of it? Dukes are known to linger where they please, are they not? It costs them nothing."

The air seemed to cool at her words. The youngest sisters, **Abeline and Hadeline**, exchanged wary glances but said

nothing. They were too young to interfere, though curiosity shone in their eyes. Bethania lifted her gaze slowly. Calm. Composed. “It cost him an evening, at least. And that, I think, is something.”

Faustina’s brow lifted, her lips curving in a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “Oh, I’m sure he has evenings to spare. Men like him—men of wealth and war—are well-practiced in saying only what women wish to hear.”

There was a pause, and then Madame Lenoir interjected with careful grace. “Still, his attention was... notable. Few men of his station look upon young women with such favor.”

Faustina’s gaze sharpened. “And what of it, Mother? That is no foundation for hope. A conversation does not make a courtship.”

Bethania looked across the table, meeting her sister’s glare without hesitation. “And neither does it forbid one.”

The tension between the sisters was palpable, though neither raised her voice. Faustina, for all her sharpness, was not heartless. Only protective. Fiercely so. She had been the same with Maria and Natalia before they married and left the household. And now, it seemed, she had turned her vigilance upon Bethania.

“I only mean to say,” Faustina said softly, though there was iron beneath her words, “that men of his age and experience are not drawn to young women for the reasons you believe. And certainly not a man like the Duke.”

Bethania tilted her head slightly, her expression serene but firm. “And what reasons do you believe, sister?”



There was a beat of silence, filled only by the quiet clatter of Abeline's spoon against her teacup. Faustina's mouth opened, then closed. Whatever her answer might have been, it remained unspoken. Perhaps it was too sharp, too cruel for morning discourse.

Bethania did not press. She knew better than to court unnecessary conflict, though neither would she shrink beneath her sister's disapproval. She valued Faustina's love, but she would not let it shape her path.

Hadeline, much young and eager, broke the tension with innocent curiosity. "Did he hold your hand Bethy?"

Madame Lenoir smiled, though her eyes glimmered with understanding. "I- He did." Bethania nervously responded with a small laugh. "Perhaps it was merely politeness."

Abeline grinned. "Or perhaps it was not."

Bethania's gaze fell to her hands resting upon the table. She could still feel the faint warmth of his touch, the lingering sense of his fingers entwined with hers. She could still hear his words. *You are the most beautiful woman in all this place, Bethania.*

She was not a child to be swept away by flattery. She was not a girl who dreamed of grand titles and easy courtships. But neither was she one to shrink from possibilities, or from the unknown.

"Whatever it was," she said softly, "it is not for others to decide. Least of all now."

Madame Lenoir nodded with approval, but Faustina's gaze remained cool, guarded. Protective to the end.

Later, when the table was cleared and the morning bustle began, Bethania found herself seated by the window, gazing out upon the gardens. She thought not of caution, nor of propriety, but only of his eyes. The quiet depth of them. The fear within them. The hope, too.

And she wondered—just for a moment—if he was thinking of her as well.

## Chapter 6 - Ball at Blois

The weeks that followed the wedding were a tapestry of words and hopes. Letters passed between Séverin and Bethania with an ease that surprised them both. Each letter unfolded like a delicate bloom, revealing corners of thought and belief that had long remained hidden from the world.

Bethania wrote of her daily life—of her obligations at home, of her care for her younger sisters Abeline and Hadeline while her father was away on his merchant journeys. She spoke of her mother's quiet strength, the struggles of managing a household, the balance of duty and longing. Yet, it was her thoughts beyond the daily that stirred Séverin most. She wrote of faith, of morality, of her belief in God and the quiet certainty that life, even in its hardships, held meaning. No doubt getting her faith from her mother's devotion to God. Emphasizing her mother's unique gift of visions, dreams, and the like. She wrote of philosophy and poetry, of how she longed to one day travel beyond the small borders of her world, though she would never abandon her duties lightly.

Bethania wrote of her love of music and piano- her escapism she confided in the white and black keys often. And with great reliability, Severin, himself his own composer and appreciator of the musical arts. A common interest, perhaps the romance could foster around, he pondered.

She was thoughtful, kind, but never naive. She understood loss, even if her life had not been marked by the same battles as his. She understood pain, though hers was quieter. Her words did not pity him for the loss of Élise, nor did they offer empty comfort. Instead, she offered

understanding. Patience. A gentleness that Séverin had not known he needed.

And he, in turn, wrote of his own past. Of battles fought, of lessons learned in the harshest of ways. He wrote of the silence that had crept into his life since Élise's death, and how strange it felt to wake each day and know that there was still life to be lived. He did not speak of hope. Not yet. But he found himself drawn to Bethania's essence, to the quiet strength that shone through her every word.

It was after several such exchanges that he wrote his boldest letter yet.

*Mademoiselle Lenoir,*

*I shall soon be visiting the town of Blois, for it is there a local ball is to be held. If it is agreeable to you, I would be most honored to see you there. Your presence would bring light to an occasion that, without you, holds little meaning.*

*I hope this letter finds you well, and I await your reply with great anticipation.*

*Yours in sincerity, S. de Derbois*

The reply was quick and gracious. Bethania would be attending. And so, with a rare sense of excitement, Séverin made his journey to Blois, bringing with him his trusted friend, **Cristian**—a man of logic and honest counsel.

As their carriage approached the town, Séverin felt a sense of anticipation that unsettled him. It was not battle that

awaited him, not duty nor politics. Yet, his heart beat with the sharpness of an impending charge.

He glanced out the window as the streets of Blois passed by in a blur of stone and shadow. "It feels," he said, half to himself, "as though I ride towards something far greater than a simple ball."

Cristian chuckled lightly. "You ride towards a lady, my friend. And that, I have learned, is a far more dangerous venture."

Séverin did not reply. He was too caught in his own thoughts, in the image of Bethania that had haunted his dreams for weeks.

The ball was already in motion when they arrived. The grand hall of Blois was awash in candlelight, in the soft shuffle of slippers against polished floors, in laughter and conversation. Music threaded through the air, a melody that Séverin barely noticed. His eyes scanned the room. Again. And again.

But she was not there.

He waited, holding himself still, telling himself she was merely delayed. That she would arrive in time. But with each passing hour, each introduction, each conversation, the truth grew harder to ignore. She was not coming.

Confusion simmered into frustration. Hurt. Had he misread their correspondence? Had he misunderstood her intentions? He thought of the last letter, of her promise to attend, of her delicate words that seemed so honest.

He withdrew to the shadowed corner of the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his posture rigid.

Cristian joined him with a low hum of concern. "You've been watching the door for an hour, Séverin."

"I know."

"Perhaps something detained her. A family matter. A simple misfortune."

"Or perhaps," Séverin said darkly, "she simply changed her mind."

Cristian said nothing for a moment, studying his friend. "Or perhaps you are overthinking this. Do not let shadows fill the void of knowledge."

But Séverin's mood had soured. He could not shake the weight of disappointment, nor the sharp, gnawing confusion that consumed him.

It was just as the final dance began, as the last guests began to speak of departing, that a young messenger approached. He held out an envelope, sealed and marked with urgency.

"For you, Your Grace."

Séverin's pulse quickened as he took it, breaking the seal with hands that were far from steady. The letter was short, the handwriting unfamiliar, though the words struck deep.

*Your Grace,*

*Please accept my deepest regrets that my daughter, Bethania, could not attend the ball this evening. Circumstances have arisen that*

*made her attendance impossible. I trust you will understand, though I cannot say more at present.*

*—Madame Lenoir.*

The words were cryptic. They stirred more questions than answers. Séverin read them twice, three times, searching for hidden meaning. His mind turned swiftly, possibilities blooming in every dark corner.

“It is an invitation,” he said softly.

Cristian frowned. “An invitation?”

Séverin nodded, folding the letter carefully. “To seek the truth. Tomorrow.”

He left the ball in a state of quiet unrest, his thoughts spiraling. His nerves—so steady in war—were a storm of confusion and anticipation. What had prevented her? Why was her mother so vague? Why did her absence feel like a wound?

He did not sleep that night.

And when dawn broke over Blois, Séverin de Derbois knew what he must do.

He would go to her. And he would find out why.

## Chapter 7 - An Invitation?

The journey from Blois to Cellettes was a quiet one, though the beauty of the landscape did little to soothe Séverin's growing unease. Open fields stretched beyond the horizon, their green pastures interrupted by sprays of wildflowers. Trees crowned with delicate pink blossoms lined the roads as though nature itself had dressed for his arrival. It was a peaceful ride, but for Séverin, every mile carried the weight of uncertainty.

Cristian had not joined him. Duty to his wife, Tabitha, had called him home, though he had offered counsel before parting.

"You risk much, Séverin," Cristian had said. "You risk your pride, and perhaps even more."

"I risk only clarity," Séverin had replied, though the words felt hollow now. Alone in the carriage, the silence pressed upon him, and his thoughts swirled with doubt.

He thought of Bethania, of her words in their letters, of her warmth and kindness. And yet, her absence at the ball lingered in his mind like an open wound. He carried with him gifts—flowers and a basket of candies, remembering her fondness for the sweet confections. A silk shirt, soft and simple, for moments of comfort. These he had purchased as symbols of his thoughtfulness, of his intention. But now, as Cellettes approached, he wondered if they would be received as he hoped—or at all.

It was nearly five in the evening when the grand home appeared in the distance, its elegance framed by the waning golden light. The long drive was lined with flowering trees, their blossoms casting a soft glow. The



beauty of the place struck him, though it did little to calm his nerves.

As the carriage halted, Séverin saw a figure at the door. But it was not Bethania. It was **Madame Lenoir**.

She gestured warmly, beckoning him forward. And though every instinct warned him to remain seated, Séverin stepped from the carriage, holding the bouquet of flowers while leaving the candies behind.

“Your Grace,” Madame Lenoir greeted, her tone pleasant, her smile practiced. “Welcome to Cellettes. You must be weary from your journey.”

Her ease was unsettling. Why was Bethania not here to greet him? Why was the air so heavy, so cold?

He followed Madame Lenoir inside, his steps echoing against the polished floor. The house was beautiful, grand, though there was an unease within it. A large staircase wound upward, and beyond it, he could glimpse the expanse of the grand porch. In the main hall- a piano stays dormant- no doubt the piano Bethania herself adorns on the daily. The home was silent but for the low murmur of women’s voices—hushed, watchful.

Madame Lenoir led him into the next room. And there, at last, he saw her.

Bethania.

But not as he had hoped.

She stood at a distance, arms crossed over her chest, her expression guarded. She did not come to greet him. She did not smile. She did not speak.

Around her, four women lingered, their eyes sharp, watchful. **Faustina**, of course, stood closest, her gaze unreadable. The younger sisters, **Abeline and Hadeline**, flanked her, while a neighbor, **Angelica**, lingered at the side, her presence silent but weighted.

The air was thick with judgment.

And Séverin, who had faced enemy lines and cannon fire, felt himself among enemies once again.

Madame Lenoir, oblivious or pretending to be, took the flowers from his hand with cheerful delight. "Such beautiful blossoms. Bethania will be pleased, I am sure. I shall have them arranged in a vase at once."

Bethania said nothing.

No one said anything.

It was a slow torture, a silent battle where glances were as sharp as blades. No greeting. No warmth. Only cold eyes and quiet whispers. He caught the faintest murmur—barely audible, but clear enough.

Séverin asks sheepishly, "What can I do for you", "What troubles you?". But Bethania doesn't say anything to make her feelings obviously known. As if she is a hostage to some unknown force. As he attempts to make small talk to get words out of Bethania, he still feels the piercing eyes of the other sisters- like drawn muskets.

"I cannot believe you are here".

He pretended not to notice, the hair standing up on the back of his neck. . He did not know which of the sisters had spoken.

He could bear it no longer.

"I must take some air," he said shortly, and without waiting for permission, he strode towards the porch, the need for escape pressing in on him.

The evening was cool, the garden bathed in summer light. Flowers bloomed in perfect symmetry, delicate and soft. The same bouquet he had brought now seemed foolish in comparison. He stood at the edge of the porch, his hands braced on the railing, drawing deep breaths of the perfumed air.

And then, footsteps behind him. He turned, and she was there.

Bethania.

They were alone. Finally.

She did not approach, but her gaze met his with a mixture of apology and defiance.

"I am sorry for the circumstances," she said, her voice soft but distant. "And for not attending the ball. There was a... matter with my father."

Her words were vague. Purposefully so.

Séverin frowned. "A matter?"

“I did not expect you to come to my home, Your Grace.”

He stepped closer, his frustration mounting. “You did not expect me to care?”

She paused, her gaze faltering. But she did not clarify.

His voice was low, but firm. “Bethania, I came because I worried. Because I wished to see you.”

A pause. Her arms crossed tighter. “I am not jumping into a marriage, Séverin.”

The words struck like a blow. Unexpected, sharp. He blinked, stunned. “I—what?”

“I... I needed you to know.”

Her voice wavered slightly, though her posture remained firm.

He exhaled slowly, grappling for the right words. “I came to know you better, Bethania. Nothing more. I am... sorry if my intentions were misunderstood.”

Some tension eased from her shoulders, though her gaze remained distant. “Forgive me. For the confusion. And for... for what Faustina said.”

He inclined his head.

A pause. An understanding. Something unspoken passing between them.

“I should leave,” he said quietly. “It is clear I am not welcome.”

Bethania's face flickered, but she said nothing. She only watched him, sadness shadowing her eyes.

But he was a man of self-respect, and he could bear no more.

Before he departed, he turned to her. "I brought you something."

She followed him to the door, standing in the fading light. He retrieved the basket from the carriage, offering it with quiet gravity.

"A gift," he said. "For moments when you seek comfort. And... this." He withdrew the soft silk shirt, holding it gently. "For when you wish to feel at ease."

Bethania's lips parted in surprise, her fingers brushing over the gifts with a tenderness that caught him off guard. She looked up, her gaze shadowed with something unsaid.

"I..." she began, but the words died on her tongue.

Instead, he stepped forward, his hand brushing lightly against her jaw. His voice was barely a whisper. "Write to me."

She nodded, her eyes shining with something she could not say.

And then, as before, he embraced her. A quiet, uncertain goodbye.

He thanked her, formally, for receiving him. And then he left, mounting the carriage without another word. The long

ride back to Blois stretched before him, heavy with regret and confusion.

The beauty of Cellettes lingered in his mind. But not as much as the sadness in Bethania's eyes.

## Chapter 8 - Hunting Season

The days that followed were marked by a restless rhythm. Each morning, Séverin de Derbois rose early, seeking stillness through meditation and prayer. Yet no prayer could dispel the lingering shadow of confusion. The afternoons were given to business—discussions with partners, matters of estate, tedious affairs that failed to distract his mind. And when those obligations were met, he turned to the familiar solace of fencing, the clash of blades granting him a clarity that words could not.

But it was the late afternoons he most anticipated. In the company of **Marcel** and **Cristian**, he hunted through the forests surrounding Meslay. The sharp air of autumn cut through his thoughts, the steady pursuit of game a welcome relief from the weight of waiting.

It was on one such hunt that he finally spoke of his visit to Cellettes.

Cristian listened closely, his brow furrowed as Séverin recounted the cold reception, the piercing eyes, and Bethania's guarded words.

"I have faced many trials," Séverin said, his voice low, "but nothing quite like the frost of that room. I felt like an intruder. A man unwelcome."

Cristian was silent for a moment- scanning the forestry.

"Silence" he whispers

A buck walks unassumingly in the distance. Marcel silently gestures he has the shot.

CLICK. BANG.

“Damn” Marcel exclaims .

CLICK. BANG.

THUD.

Cristian gestures proudly as he hitches his musket over his shoulder. Finishing his earlier statement:

“Severin, perhaps it was not the place but the people who were cold.”

Marcel, ever blunt, chuckled lightly. “Always stealing my thunder Cristian.”

“You never were a great shot”, as Cristian puts his hand on Marcel’s shoulder.

Séverin sighed, though his gaze remained sharp upon the dead buck ahead. “And now I wonder if the battle is truly with Bethania... or with her sister.”

Marcel, “Well this Faustina girl sounds equally sassy as intriguing. I’m sure she has her reasons, Severin.”

The thought lingered with him even after the hunt ended. It was not a game of deer or fowl that occupied his mind. It was a hunt of a far more dangerous kind.

And it was confirmed the very next day when, at last, letters arrived.

One bore the familiar handwriting of Bethania, soft and delicate, the parchment worn at the edges. The second was unfamiliar but bore a similar style, as if penned by a hand



that shared the same education, the same refinement. A letter from **Madame Lenoir** perhaps?

He opened the second first, curiosity driving him.

And found himself stunned.

It was from **Faustina**.

The words were not gracious. Nor kind. Each paragraph was an arrow, shot with precision at his character, his morals, his intentions.

*Your Grace,*

*I write not from a place of discourtesy but from one of duty. You may find my words harsh, but I ask you consider them nonetheless. My sister is young, vulnerable, and impressionable. She is unprepared for the weight of your world, for the shadow of your past, for the consequences that may arise from associating with a man such as yourself.*

*You are older, wiser perhaps, but that does not make you immune to folly. I have witnessed men such as you—charmed by what they do not understand, only to leave ruin in their wake. I ask you, Your Grace, are you prepared for the responsibility you so clearly court? Or do you seek to claim affection as easily as one claims victory on a battlefield?*

*I speak not out of malice but out of love for my sister. I hope you understand. I trust you will do what is honorable.*

There were more words—sharp, accusatory, searing—but Séverin could read no further without feeling the sting of pride. His hands tensed, his jaw clenched. The audacity. The cruelty.

And yet... beneath the anger, there was something else. Something that stayed his hand.

### **Fear.**

Faustina's words were not born of malice, but of protection. Of love. However misguided, however sharp, it was clear she saw herself as a guardian, as a shield against the world's harshness.

He set the letter aside, letting his anger cool. He poured himself a glass of wine, walking the length of his study, letting the frustration bleed from his limbs. Only when calm returned did he sit, taking pen to parchment.

*Mademoiselle Faustina,*

*I have received your letter and thank you for your candor. It is no easy thing to speak one's mind when it carries the risk of offense. I do not take your words lightly, nor do I dismiss them. I understand your duty as a sister and the love that compels it.*

*You question my character, and though your doubts wound me, they are not without reason. My past is not without shadow. My*

*grief is not without weight. But I assure you, my intentions toward Bethania are neither careless nor dishonorable. I seek only to know her better, to understand her world, and to offer her nothing that is not sincere.*

*You have my word that I mean no harm to her, and if at any point I should, even unintentionally, I would bear the consequence of that fault with the weight it deserves.*

*I hope we may find understanding between us in time.*

*With respect, S. de Derbois*

He set the letter aside, content it would speak for him better than anger ever could.

Only then did he turn to Bethania's letter.

Her words were softer, though shaded with sorrow. More apologetic than in person, more vulnerable than he had yet known her to be.

*Your Grace,*

*I am sorry. For the confusion. For the coldness. For the silence. There are matters within my family that weigh heavily upon me, matters I did not wish to burden you with, though perhaps I should have. My absence at the ball was not by choice. It was... necessity. I can say no more, though I wish I could.*

*Please know that your thoughtfulness is not lost on me. Your kindness, your presence, have been a comfort in these difficult days. I do not wish you to feel unwelcome. I do not wish you to doubt me.*

*Forgive me, if you can.*

*—Bethania.*

He read it twice. Three times. Relief bloomed, but trepidation grew alongside it. She was honest, and yet... she hid something still. And that something lingered like a shadow.

His thoughts turned to Faustina. To her words. To her quiet threat.

He understood now. The battle was not just for Bethania's heart—but for the trust of those who surrounded her. For the acceptance of those who guarded her.

And so, the hunt continued.

## Chapter 9 – A Walled Heart

Days stretched into weeks, each passing sunrise bringing an emptiness Séverin had not anticipated. The vibrant warmth of late spring faded slowly into early summer, but the thaw he sought in Bethania's letters never arrived. Silence was his only companion now—a silence that felt deafening after the tentative promise of their parting.

At first, Séverin wrote to her daily. His letters were earnest, each carefully penned word an expression of hope, curiosity, and a lingering tenderness. He recounted small details of his life, asked after her family, and gently inquired if she had found use for the gifts he had left with her. Yet, as days passed without reply, his words became cautious, uncertain—his pride wounded by the unanswered correspondence.

He wrestled daily with doubt. Was he foolish, his heart too eager? Was Bethania's initial warmth at their first meetings merely politeness, nothing more? These questions haunted him, gnawed at his confidence, and magnified his insecurities.

“She owes you nothing, Séverin,” Cristian had reminded him gently during a late-night conversation. “Perhaps her silence is answer enough.”

The words stung but echoed loudly within his mind. Perhaps his friend was right. Perhaps Bethania's silence meant something more than mere distraction.

It was during those long, uncertain days that his mind constructed explanations he feared most—rejection, disinterest, even ridicule. In his loneliness, the silence became louder, speaking doubts louder than any written

word ever could. His fears of unequal affection consumed him, breaking down his carefully constructed composure.

Finally, as the fourth week came to a close, he could bear it no longer. Driven by wounded pride, fear, and confusion, Séverin took his pen in a trembling hand and wrote one final letter. Unlike his earlier correspondence, this was brief, firm, and composed with painful detachment.

Mademoiselle Lenoir,

Forgive my presumption. I clearly misunderstood your feelings toward our acquaintance. Your silence has spoken clearly, and I shall trouble you no further. I wish you only happiness and peace. Perhaps your youth should of been my biggest indicator.

With sincere regards,  
Séverin, Duc de Derbois

The moment the letter left his hands, a deep unease filled him. His heart whispered regret, yet his pride held him firm. It was done. He had severed the fragile bond between them, believing himself unworthy of a love that appeared one-sided.

What Séverin did not—could not—know was the turmoil unfolding behind the quiet walls of Cellettes.

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Bethania sat quietly in her room, pale fingers pressed against her temples, as a heavy sigh escaped her lips. The day had been consumed by endless discussions with lawyers, the tedious process of preparing documents for

her parents' divorce draining her spirit completely. Her mother's fragile state, weakened by stress, added an extra burden upon Bethania's already weary shoulders. There had been no rest, no moment to herself, no peace at all.

She glanced at her writing desk, letters from Séverin scattered neatly. Letters she had opened hastily in stolen moments, reading his kind words, his gentle inquiries, his tender affections—each one a balm that briefly soothed her weary soul. Yet every attempt she made to reply had been disrupted by another family crisis, another legal battle, another tearful plea from her younger sisters. Life had overwhelmed her; it was not disinterest that silenced her, but rather exhaustion.

Tonight, finally, she had found a moment of calm and reached once again for pen and paper, determined to finally explain her silence. Yet before her pen could meet parchment, there was a soft knock at the door.

Faustina stepped inside quietly, expression hesitant.

"Another letter arrived," Faustina said cautiously, extending the letter toward Bethania. "It's from him—Severin."

Bethania felt a flicker of hope ignite within her chest as she took it eagerly. Perhaps his words would bring comfort, patience—an understanding she desperately needed.

Yet, when her eyes scanned over Séverin's brief, dismissive message, her heart sank into icy despair. Each curt line was a dagger, piercing sharply into her already fragile resolve. Her eyes filled with tears of hurt and disbelief. Had he truly given up on her so easily? Was his affection so shallow that silence alone could break it?

Faustina, observing her sister's distress, spoke softly, sympathetically. "Bethania, perhaps you should—"

"No," Bethania interrupted gently but firmly, wiping her tears quickly. "He has made his feelings clear."

Faustina opened her mouth to object but fell silent. Bethania turned away, her heart retreating behind a wall, built hastily from hurt and wounded pride. She would not chase after a man whose faith in her faltered so quickly.

Yet, as she set Séverin's final letter aside, her gaze lingered upon the silk shirt he had gifted her, resting gently on the edge of her bed. It mocked her—soft, comforting, beautiful, yet now utterly meaningless. Bitterness mingled with sorrow; she pressed her hand against it, feeling the fabric's gentle texture. In that moment, she longed deeply for his warmth, for the tenderness she had seen so clearly at their last meeting.

Bethania lowered her eyes, emotions warring fiercely inside her chest. Pride urged her silence, while another, softer voice pleaded with her to fight—to reach out, to explain, to heal the rift his hasty assumptions had created.

Yet exhaustion and wounded pride prevailed.

For now, she would hold her silence, nursing quietly a heart wounded by misunderstanding, stubborn pride, and circumstances beyond either of their control.

A heart now walled away from the man who had unknowingly captured it.



## Chapter 10 – A Mother’s Plea

The days after Séverin’s hasty, regretful letter were heavy with silence. His heart carried the bitter ache of self-inflicted loss, a constant reminder of the mistakes born from pride and insecurity. Each sunrise brought a fresh wave of regret, each sunset deepened his longing. He went about his daily routine mechanically, fencing and reading, yet his thoughts never strayed far from Bethania.

Then, as though sensing the turmoil within him, Providence intervened. A letter arrived bearing the elegant script of Madame Lenoir. The paper trembled slightly in his fingers as he broke the wax seal and began to read:

Your Grace,

Forgive me if I overstep in writing directly to you, but a mother’s heart compels me. I am aware of the unfortunate misunderstanding between you and Bethania, and I must speak plainly to help you understand the truth of her silence.

These past weeks have been fraught with difficulty, as we navigate painful legal matters regarding my separation from Bethania’s father. My daughter’s seeming distance is not a reflection of her feelings toward you; rather, it is the weight of familial burdens that has consumed her entirely. She has been my rock, my comfort, my strength—often at her own expense.

But more importantly, Severin, I feel compelled to share with you a powerful vision

that came to me recently—a dream that I believe holds divine significance. In it, Bethania received a bouquet of radiant white flowers, extraordinary blooms that required neither water nor sustenance. They were heavenly, everlasting flowers. In my dream, someone mistakenly watered them, and we feared they would perish. Yet, instead, they flourished even more beautifully, untouched by earthly harm.

I shared this vision with all my daughters, including Maria and Natalia, who no longer reside here. Without hesitation, each of them—Bethania included—believed these everlasting blooms represented you, Severin. A symbol of a bond divinely blessed and resilient.

Please reconsider your actions, Your Grace. Bethania's silence was never a rejection. She has cared deeply all along, and perhaps fears now that she has lost your regard. If you still hold affection for her, I urge you to let patience, understanding, and humility guide your next steps.

Yours with sincerity,  
Madame Lenoir

Séverin's breath caught sharply as he read the words, their meaning piercing through the veil of misunderstanding he had created. The truth struck him with brutal clarity: he had mistaken her burdened silence for indifference. His

heart burned with shame for doubting her, for succumbing to his insecurities and hastily cutting ties.

But amidst his regret, hope stirred powerfully within him. Madame Lenoir's dream, shared with conviction, was a revelation. He felt humbled, yet profoundly encouraged, by the idea that Bethania herself believed the vision was about them.

As if to further emphasize the weight of his mistake, a second letter awaited him—this one bearing the graceful handwriting of Maria, Bethania's elder sister, whom he had never met.

Your Grace,

I hope you will forgive this intrusion from someone you have not met, but I write as Bethania's elder sister. Our mother has told me of the misunderstanding between you and Bethania. Please understand that Bethania is fiercely loyal and deeply sensitive—her silence comes only from devotion to family and not from a lack of affection for you.

I know Bethania's heart, Your Grace. She is honest and kind, though guarded after all that has happened with our father. I ask you not to judge her silence harshly. She is more vulnerable than she appears, and your withdrawal wounded her deeply. If you truly care for her, do not abandon her now when she needs your understanding most.

With warm regards,  
Maria

Séverin's heart twisted with guilt. How blind he had been—how foolishly prideful. Yet now, armed with understanding, he resolved to correct his mistake. He could not undo the harm already inflicted, but he would strive to prove himself worthy of Bethania's trust again.

His response was swift, humble, and sincere:

Mademoiselle Lenoir,

Please accept my heartfelt apology for my previous letter. I was unjust, hasty, and gravely mistaken. Madame Lenoir and Maria have helped me see the truth, and I understand now that I misinterpreted your silence. It was never my intention to cause you pain.

I ask only for the chance to earn your forgiveness. Know that my thoughts remain with you and your family during this difficult time.

Yours with sincere humility,  
Séverin, Duc de Derbois

Bethania's reply came sooner than he anticipated, yet as he read her words, his hope was tempered with caution:

Your Grace,

I received your letter and appreciate the sentiment behind your words. However, the wounds inflicted by your assumptions remain fresh. I have been burdened with family obligations that demanded my attention above all else, but you chose not to trust me.

Please understand, while I bear you no ill will,  
it is difficult for me to simply forget what has  
happened. Your support and kind intentions  
have always been appreciated, but my trust is  
not so easily regained.

Take care, Your Grace.

Respectfully,  
Bethania Lenoir

Her reply was distant, guarded—a careful balance of civility and quiet rebuke. It was clear the damage he'd done would not easily be mended. Yet, beneath her restrained words, Séverin sensed the faintest glimmer of warmth; an ember still burning deep beneath layers of hurt and caution.

Her response filled him with resolve. He had wounded her, and now he must atone for his impatience and mistrust. From now on, each action would be deliberate and thoughtful. His training took on a renewed intensity. Every strike of his sword, every measured breath, became a promise to her—a demonstration of his earnest resolve to earn her trust again.

The week that followed was one of restlessness and resolve. Séverin de Derbois found his thoughts consumed by one singular notion—Bethania. Her words lingered, soft but uncertain, each line of her last letter a thread that pulled him deeper into longing. The obstacles that surrounded them were many, yet he could not deny the providential nature of their bond. It felt too significant, too fated, to abandon.

So he resolved to try again. To give fate another opportunity.

There was a fencing tournament approaching in Blois, and though Séverin had not competed in years, he entered his name. It was not pride that compelled him, nor desire for victory. It was hope. Hope that the spectacle of the tournament might draw her out, that it might grant him another moment, another chance.

In quiet hours, he would kneel in his chapel, seeking not victory or glory, but wisdom, humility, and the strength to overcome his flaws. His prayers were fervent pleas for perseverance and patience, for a heart capable of deep, enduring love.

Not merely for triumph in the tournament—but for triumph in repairing what he had carelessly damaged.

## Chapter 11 – Preparing for Battle

The day of the tournament approached, and with it, the slow and steady burn of anticipation. Séverin de Derbois had trained relentlessly. Each movement of his blade was sharp, precise, honed through repetition until the weapon felt no heavier than breath. Confidence coursed through him—not the arrogance of assumed victory, but the certainty of preparation. He was ready. He would win.

Yet victory in sport was not the summit he longed for.

No, what he wanted most—what he needed—was for Bethania to see him win. To witness him strong, unwavering, and capable. He needed her to know that he could be her protector, her provider—a man of substance and resolve.

But fate had other plans, as it often did.

Determined to regain her trust, Séverin decided to write Bethania directly, mentioning the upcoming tournament as a hopeful opportunity to rebuild their fragile connection. Late one evening, by the glow of flickering candles, he carefully penned his words:

Mademoiselle Lenoir,

I hope this letter finds you and your family well, and that some of the burdens you've borne recently have begun to ease. I wanted you to know that there is a fencing tournament soon in Blois, and I have decided to participate.

I share this not out of vanity or pride, but because your presence would be a profound source of encouragement to me. I understand fully if you are unable to attend, yet I cherish the thought of perhaps earning back your esteem.

Yours sincerely,  
Séverin

Bethania's response arrived promptly, carefully sealed and still guarded, but touched with an undeniable warmth:

Your Grace,

Thank you for your kind letter. It brings me genuine happiness to hear that you have chosen to compete again. I have little doubt that you shall prove victorious, as your determination and talent have always been apparent.

At this time, I cannot promise to attend the tournament itself, though my thoughts will certainly be with you. If fortune favors you, perhaps I could prepare a cake to celebrate your triumph. May I ask what kind you would prefer?

Take care, Your Grace.  
Respectfully,  
Bethania Lenoir

Séverin found her letter hopeful yet reserved. Her careful words reminded him of the lingering hurt he had caused.



Yet her encouragement—the subtle warmth hidden within—filled him with resolve. Quickly, he wrote back:

Mademoiselle Lenoir,

Your letter has brought me great comfort. Knowing your thoughts will be with me is enough to strengthen my resolve tenfold. As for the cake—I confess a particular fondness for chocolate. It would mean a great deal to me to taste such a creation from your hands.

With sincere gratitude,  
Séverin

The next day, another letter arrived—this one from Madame Lenoir. Séverin broke the seal, reading carefully:

Your Grace,

I trust you are well as you prepare for the coming tournament. It would honor our family greatly to host you at Cellettes during your stay in Blois. I shall accept no alternative. You will be our guest, and our hospitality will be at your full disposal.

—Madame Lenoir.

Séverin read the letter twice, heart torn between excitement and trepidation. To stay at the Lenoir estate, so near to Bethania, was both a precious opportunity and a daunting prospect. Yet he could not refuse—would not refuse—this chance to bridge the chasm that still lay between him and Bethania.

And so he sent his acceptance, signing his name with a steadiness he did not fully feel.

The days before his arrival were spent in careful preparation. He was a man of romantic sentiment; it was perhaps a fault, but one he embraced.

He crafted each gesture with precision:

A poem, painstakingly composed to reflect his admiration, his longing, his hope for Bethania.

A private concert arranged before the tournament, in the hope she might accept the invitation, allowing music to speak the words he struggled to say.

A gift for Faustina—ornate Russian earrings, kept from his eastern campaigns, offered as a gesture of reconciliation, in the hope of healing their strained relations.

And, of course, the candies Bethania adored—a basket filled generously as a humble yet meaningful gift.

Every detail, every gesture, was deliberate. The tournament loomed, but Séverin knew the truest battle lay not in the ring, but within the walls of the Lenoir estate.

He would arrive late, hoping the cloak of evening might ease the awkwardness of his return.

## Chapter 12 - Night of Discord

The journey to the Lenoir estate was shadowed in trepidation. Storm clouds loomed above, and the carriage swayed violently over uneven roads. The late autumn wind howled through the trees, and every jolt of the wheels felt like a weight against Séverin's body. The ride was slow, relentless, and as the night grew deeper, so too did his exhaustion.

He arrived later than expected—long after ten o'clock. Darkness hung over Cellettes like a foreboding veil. No lanterns were lit at the front, no warm welcome awaited him. Only the sound of horses' hooves, muffled by wet earth, and the quiet murmur of his own uncertain breath.

He stepped from the carriage, gripping his bag tightly, his eyes scanning the silent house. His heart beat faster than he wished to admit. And then, the door opened.

Bethania stood there.

No smile. No warmth. No greeting.

Only a quiet, restrained, "I will show you to your room."

Séverin's heart stilled. He waited, hoping for a smile, for some glimpse of the girl who had written him such tender letters. But there was nothing. Just those words and the cold shadow of the house behind her.

Swallowing his confusion, he stepped forward. He reached out, gently embracing her, hoping to bridge whatever distance lay between them. But she was stiff, her body cold against his. Was it exhaustion? Or something deeper? He could not tell.

“This way,” she said softly, leading him through the dimly lit hall.

He tried to speak, but the words caught in his throat. Instead, he walked in silence, his mind racing with questions he dared not ask. The house was colder than he remembered. The shadows stretched long across the walls. A darkness that seemed to seep into his very bones.

They reached his room, and she stepped aside.

“Madame Lenoir had to see the physician,” Bethania said, her voice tight. “But she will be home shortly.”

And with that, she left. No goodnight. No conversation. No comfort.

Séverin stood there, stunned, as the door closed quietly behind her.

He unpacked slowly, his hands steady but his mind in chaos. Why was he here? Why had he come? Had he misunderstood her? Had he misjudged her letters? His stomach twisted with doubt, but he forced it aside. Perhaps she was tired. Perhaps the lateness of the hour had cooled her mood.

But the silence of the house gnawed at him. He could not shake the feeling that something was deeply wrong.

He stepped downstairs, seeking nothing but a glass of water to calm his mind. The house was still. Empty. The kind of quiet that felt haunted. He poured a glass, drinking it slowly, when he noticed movement in the shadows.

Faustina.

She sat at the far end of the room, her posture rigid, her gaze sharp. Watching him. Waiting.

He hesitated, then reached into his coat and withdrew the small box. The earrings. Russian, delicate, a token of peace.

“I brought you something,” he said, stepping forward. “A gift. A gesture to show that I hope for better understanding between us.”

Faustina stared, her expression unreadable. After a pause, she accepted the gift, her fingers brushing over the ornate silver. For a moment, there was silence, and then—

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice was low. Measured. Almost sincere.

Almost.

“I meant no harm,” Séverin added, his words cautious. “I hope, in time—”

But she cut him off.

“I should apologize,” Faustina said quietly. And for a moment, Séverin felt hope spark within him. Until she added, “But I wonder, Your Grace, if you understand how little welcome you truly have here. Did you think it was Bethania who asked you to stay? Or was it my mother, desperate to maintain some pretense of civility?”

Her words were a blade, and he felt their sharpness at once.

“Bethania invited me with her letters. Her words were not of obligation but of care.”

Faustina tilted her head, her lips curling into something cruel. “Words are easy, Your Grace. But actions speak clearer, do they not?”

He stiffened, his exhaustion unraveling his restraint. “I came here with the deepest respect for your family. I do not deserve this treatment.”

“Perhaps you do,” she said coolly. “Perhaps it is you who misread what was given. Bethania does not desire this. It is her mother’s doing.”

He opened his mouth, but no defense came. Bethania was nowhere to be seen, her absence as loud as the accusations in Faustina’s voice. He felt small, cornered, like a soldier cut off from his line, abandoned on foreign ground.

The conversation spiraled, devolving with every word, until Séverin could bear it no longer.

“I will leave,” he said, his voice tight. “It is clear I am not welcome.”

He turned on his heel, striding up the stairs with heavy steps. He gathered his belongings quickly, his mind a storm of anger and shame. Bethania appeared in the hall, watching him from a distance. She said nothing. She did nothing.

That silence was the greatest wound of all.

He passed her without a word, his heart pounding as he reached the door. But as he stepped outside, a voice called to him.

“Your Grace.”

He turned to find **Madame Lenoir**, her face pale, her body weary from travel and pain. She approached him slowly, her hand pressed against her lower back.

“I heard the argument,” she said quietly. “Faustina’s words were cruel. Too cruel.”

He sighed, his pride still burning. “I should not be here. This was a mistake.”

But she reached out, her voice soft with maternal care. “No, Séverin. Stay. If not for them, then for me. Do not let this moment define your presence here.”

He hesitated, torn, but at last, he nodded. Out of pity, perhaps. Out of exhaustion. Or perhaps because some part of him still hoped.

But the shame remained. Shame at staying where he was not wanted. Shame at hoping where hope seemed futile.

He set his things down, his body heavy with weariness. But before he could retreat to his room, Bethania appeared on the staircase.

And her words struck deeper than any blade.

“You should not have argued with Faustina,” she said. “You upset her.”

He stared, disbelief choking him. “I upset her?”

Her eyes were cold, distant. “She is my sister. She only wishes to protect me.”

He could say nothing. What words would suffice? What truth would change this moment?

Instead, he reached into his coat and withdrew the parchment, tied with a soft ribbon. His poem. His heart. Written in ink, but born of something far deeper.

“I wrote this for you,” he said quietly. “It is yours.”

She took it, surprised. And though her eyes flickered, she said nothing.

He hesitated, then offered one final word. “Goodnight.”

And with that, he left her there, standing in the shadow of the staircase.

He retreated to his room. Full of a combination of shame, anger, and sadness.

Below the floorboard he could hear a weary Madam Lenoir berating Fasutina with a passion. His only defender this night, the only ally it seems. But not the Lenoir he prayed for or desired approval from above all material or immaterial things.

Not even war had prepared him for this night.



## **Chapter 13 - Equanimity**

Séverin did not sleep well.

The weight of the night pressed upon him long after the candles had been extinguished. Shadows lingered in the corners of his mind, and even the embrace of exhaustion could not bring him peace. His thoughts were restless, circling the words that had cut him deepest. Bethania's coldness. Faustina's cruelty. His own decision to remain in a place where he did not feel welcome.

But dawn came regardless.

He rose before the first light crept through the windows, his steps silent against the floorboards. If he could not find rest, then he would find strength. He pulled on his coat and stepped outside, breathing in the sharp morning air. The estate was quiet, the world not yet awake. He stretched, moved through his exercises, feeling the tightness of his body yield to discipline. Sweat gathered at his brow, but it brought clarity. Purpose.

He would focus on his tournament. On the discipline of blade and body. Not on Bethania. Not on the hurt. Not on the confusion. She had wounded him last night, more deeply than he had thought possible. And he could not trust her, not now. Not yet.

She was no longer his focus.

When he returned to the estate, the house was still mostly asleep, shadows curling beneath doorways. But he paused as he stepped into the hall.

Bethania was there.

She stood by the small table near the window, a tray in her hands. Coffee. Biscuits. Her posture was hesitant, though her eyes were steady. She stepped forward, placing the tray down.

“For you,” she said softly.

He paused, watching her carefully. He could not read her. He could not tell what game this was, what angle she played. Was it pity? A gesture of apology? Or something else entirely?

“Thank you,” he replied, his tone measured, though distant. He kept his distance, taking the cup but offering nothing more.

She lingered for a moment, as though wanting to say more, but instead turned and walked away. Her silence was as heavy as the night had been.

The day passed slowly. He did not see Faustina, though he was grateful for that absence. His conversations with Madame Lenoir were cordial but brief. She asked after his preparations, after his health, and he responded with care but little depth. He did not seek company. He did not seek comfort.

Bethania, for her part, busied herself with her younger sisters. Her hands worked diligently, her face composed. And yet, Séverin could not help but notice her. She lingered near him. Not speaking, not intruding, but trailing him like a shadow. Wherever he went, there she was—silent, watchful.

It confused him. And so, he ignored it.

Afternoon light spilled through the windows when he settled into the drawing room, a book of philosophy in his hands. Reading was always a refuge. Here, in the thoughts of great men, he found understanding. And, perhaps, some measure of equanimity.

But his refuge was short-lived. Bethania could be heard playing the piano lightly in the other room. But this interruption of sorts comes in comfort. Unable to focus on his reading- Severin just listens and listens intently. To every note, every melody.

The music stops.

Bethania entered quietly, stepping into the room as though she did not wish to disturb him. Yet disturb him she did, for she crossed the room and sat beside him—close, closer than propriety would dictate.

She did not ask permission.

She simply plopped down, her gaze turning to him.

“What are you reading?”

He glanced at her, eyes sharp but calm. There was humor in her voice, but uncertainty, too. He could not help but answer, though his words came with a shadow of bitterness.

“The philosophy of how to maintain equanimity despite the circumstances,” he said lightly, though the jest held an edge.

Her lips twitched, though her eyes did not lose their depth. Those eyes. Brown and green, shifting like the earth

beneath moonlight. He hated her for them. Yet he loved her more for them.

He tried not to look at her. Tried not to indulge in her presence. But it was impossible. Every glance felt like a blessing. Every moment an honor. No matter how she hurt him, he could not find hate in his heart. Only love. Only understanding.

And perhaps that was his flaw.

He closed the book and stood, intending to leave, to put distance between himself and the confusion she stirred in him. But her hand caught his.

Soft. Hesitant.

He turned, his breath catching, his eyes finding hers. And she said, quietly, “I loved the poem. It was beautiful, Severin”

He paused, uncertain. Did she? Or was this another cruelty masked as kindness? Was it pity? Or did she mean it? He wanted to believe her, but doubt crept like ice through his veins.

“I loved the music. You play beautifully, Bethania” he responds with.

She gives a loose smile, though her expression was difficult to read.

Was it sincerity? Was it guilt?

Standing now, he lifted his hand, the back of his finger brushing lightly against her cheek. The softness of her skin

was a temptation he could not resist. He traced the line gently, holding the moment longer than he should.

“You are the most beautiful woman in all this place,” he said, his voice lower, heavier than before. He had spoken those words once before, beneath the spiral staircase. But now, they felt different. Now, they were a confession. A surrender.

Her eyes did not waver, but neither did they offer him solace.

And so he withdrew his hand, stepping back into the silence that always seemed to hang between them. He wanted to speak more, but fear held him. Fear of hope. Fear of hurt.

“Good day, Bethania,” he said, his voice measured.

And then he left her there, sitting alone, with only his words and the ghosts of what could be.

## Chapter 14 - Empty Concert Seat

Later that day, Severin found brief reprieve in the company of Bethania's younger sisters. **Hadaline** and **Abeline** were a spark of life in the heavy air of the estate. Their laughter echoed through the hallways, and for a time, Severin allowed himself to bask in their lightness, their innocence. They played with ribbons and whispered secrets as young girls do, their carefree joy a balm to his weary soul.

And Severin, ever the prepared guest, had not forgotten them.

First, he presented a delicate, ornate **music box** to Nadaline. The box was a treasure, inlaid with fine detailing and crowned with a small mirror on the inside. When opened, it played a hauntingly beautiful Russian melody, a song carried across seas and wars. Hadaline gasped, her eyes wide with wonder as the music spilled into the air.

"It is yours," Severin said softly, and she rushed forward, embracing him in a brief but genuine hug, her gratitude spoken more by her joy than her words.

For **Abeline**, a girl of older years and sharper skepticism, Severin offered a more worldly gift—a **beautiful Egyptian headscarf**, its silk rich with color, a relic from his years in Napoleon's Egyptian campaigns. She hesitated at first, her suspicion born from age and caution. But as her fingers traced the fabric, as she learned its origin, her eyes softened. A wide smile broke across her face, warm and radiant, not unlike Bethania's.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice earnest. And Severin’s heart stirred, for in her smile, he saw something of Bethania. A shadow of the woman he longed for.

Time passed, and yet the unspoken weight of his heart remained. The poem he had given Bethania still lingered unanswered. There was no mention of the concert. No acceptance. No rejection. Only silence.

And perhaps that was answer enough.

He would not press her again. He would not burden her with his desires. If she did not wish to come, then that was her choice. It was his mistake, he realized, to hope so deeply. To expect more than she was willing to give. He had pressed too much. He had wanted too much.

Perhaps this was his punishment.

And so, while Bethania walked in the flower gardens with her sisters, whispering beneath the golden sky, Severin made his arrangements in quiet resolve. If nothing else, he would enjoy the concert alone. The violinist performing was renowned, his melodies a gift to all who heard him. If Bethania would not join him, then so be it.

He dressed in his finest attire, careful with each fold, each button, ensuring he looked as composed as he wished to feel. But even as he stood in the foyer, his heart was uncertain. He moved to leave, his steps steady, but was halted by the sudden presence of **Madame Lenoir**.

She stepped forward, her expression neutral but her eyes sharp.

“You are going to the concert?” she asked.

“I am,” Severin replied, bowing his head slightly. “I did invite Bethania, but she has not accepted my offer.”

For a moment, silence fell. A pause that seemed to stretch across the room.

“I see,” Madame Lenoir said, though her tone was clipped. Frustration lingered beneath her words, palpable, though she said nothing more.

Severin felt a pang of guilt, but he was already late. He bowed his head again. “My apologies, Madame. I must take my leave.”

She said nothing. Only watched him go.

The carriage ride was quiet, save for the steady rhythm of hooves on the road. Darkness cloaked the trees, the sky tinged with the last light of day. And Severin, alone with his thoughts, questioned himself with every mile.

*Should I have asked her again? Should I have pressed her more? Should I have fought for her in ways I had not dared before?*

But the questions had no answers. Only regret.

And when he sat beneath the grand lights of the concert hall, his seat felt heavy. The music was beautiful, each note from the violinist’s bow a testament to skill and passion. The melodies soared and swept through the hall, filling the space with a beauty that was almost unbearable.

But beside him, the seat remained empty.



And he could not look at it without feeling the ache of absence.

*If only she were here, he thought. If only she wished to be by my side.*

The night passed, the music ended, the applause faded. But Severin felt nothing of it. Only the sharpness of regret, the weight of words unsaid, of moments lost.

He returned to the Lenoir estate later that night, the hour late, the sky a deep and somber blue. The lights of the house were dim, shadows falling long across the gravel drive.

As he stepped from the carriage, he swallowed against the lump that formed in his throat. Heavy, aching.

He had dreamed of sharing beauty with Bethania. Of smiles and warmth and laughter beneath candlelight. Instead, he had shared the night with an empty seat.

And somehow, it felt more final than anything else before.

## **Chapter 15 – Fire and Flames**

As Severin entered the estate, he made his way quietly to his room—but before he could take another step, Madam Lenoir's sharp voice stopped him. She demanded an audience, her tone cutting through him like a blade. She confronted him immediately about Bethania's absence from the concert, clearly irritated by his apparent lack of persistence.

He offered the same explanation, attempting to justify himself—that he had invited her and had simply received no answer. But Madam Lenoir pressed harder, her tone probing deeper. She questioned Severin's pride, his intentions, and even his character. His heartbeat quickened, feeling as though he were under siege once more, his words becoming defensive, cautious yet frustrated.

After some tense minutes, Severin managed to explain himself, maintaining as much composure as possible under Madam Lenoir's intense scrutiny. Eventually, he apologized softly, acknowledging he perhaps should have made greater efforts. Her relentless pursuit for Bethania's happiness was evident, and Severin found himself caught between admiration and resentment of this maternal protectiveness.

Determined to settle this once and for all, Severin decided he must speak directly with Bethania. Catching sight of her, he approached—but before he could utter a word, he was interrupted by the joyous embrace of Hadeline. Her small arms wrapped around his legs, and he felt momentarily soothed. Hadeline, innocent and pure, was perhaps his only ally in this house.

Taking some time alone afterward to compose himself, Severin prepared mentally. He planned to speak plainly, honestly, and directly with Bethania, hoping that clarity might finally resolve this painful ambiguity. Despite everything, the thought of talking with her still ignited a spark in him—a paradoxical blend of anxiety and longing. He wondered again if this desire was providential or simply foolish.

He found Bethania downstairs, quietly completing her chores. She moved gracefully, but a certain melancholy clung to her features. Summoning courage, Severin gently asked if he might speak with her privately. She nodded, quietly agreeing to meet him shortly.

He sat waiting in his room, his heart heavy and anxious. The door opened quietly—Bethania appeared, saying nothing, forcing Severin to start.

He spoke softly about the concert, expressing regret at her absence.

Bethania immediately fired back, irritation in her voice. "Perhaps I might have wanted to go, had you actually bothered to ask me directly."

Severin stared, confused. "Did you not read my poem? You gave me no answer, Bethania."

She scoffed lightly, clearly annoyed, avoiding the question. Her words evasive, her intentions unclear, she skirted any responsibility. Severin's frustration grew; he felt himself losing control of the conversation.

Then, Bethania turned sharply, anger clear in her voice. "And another thing, Severin—why didn't you tell me that

Maria wrote to you? My own sister, writing behind my back, and you didn't even think to mention it? How many other letters did you exchange with my mother that I know nothing about? Am I some pawn you all can manipulate at your leisure?"

Severin was stunned. He hadn't expected this accusation. "Bethania, your family wrote to me, not the other way around. Maria wrote to show support, nothing more—I didn't ask for it. And your mother—"

Bethania cut him off fiercely, eyes blazing. "Exactly. My mother! Maria and Natalia! You all discuss my future behind closed doors, pressuring me from every side. I feel trapped—forced. Did it never occur to you that I have my own mind, my own desires? Or am I simply a prize to be won, to fulfill your pride?"

Severin, hot-headed now and wounded by the unfairness of the attack, retorted sharply, "How can I apologize for something that isn't even my fault? I never wanted to control you, Bethania! You are twisting my intentions."

Bethania's hand shot out, holding a folded letter—*his* letter. The one where he'd abandoned her.

"And what about this?" she said coldly, her fingers shaking slightly as she thrusts it towards him. "Do you remember these words, Severin? You abandoned me with ink and paper. You withdrew before I could even explain myself. How am I to trust you now, when you run at the first sign of hardship?" You hurt me. You judged me, Severin, before you even asked me the truth."

Severin's throat tightened, regret rising hot in his chest. "Bethania... I—" He swallowed, struggling for words. "I was

wrong. I wrote that letter in fear, in weakness. I thought I'd lost you already. I have tried to apologize—"

Bethania's eyes narrowed, anger crystallizing into disdain. "You called me a child, but you're behaving like a child, Severin. Never taking responsibility."

Stung deeply, Severin's voice darkened. "A child? A child?!" —His tone grew cutting, harshly sarcastic. "Well perhaps those white roses are from another man you speak to—one you've hidden from us all!"

Bethania's face drained of color. She stepped back, as though struck physically by his words. Severin immediately regretted them—but it was too late.

Without another word, eyes glistening with pain, Bethania turned swiftly and stormed out, the door slamming behind her with a finality that echoed painfully through the room.

Severin stood frozen, his heart shattering under the weight of regret. The fire he had unleashed had burned them both—perhaps beyond repair.

Severin sat in silence. The words they had exchanged still ringing in his mind, hot and sharp as flames. The conversation was meant to repair, not destroy. Yet destruction had been its only fruit.

He stood, his body heavy, his spirit heavier still. And with trembling hands, he took ink and parchment from the desk.

*Bethania,*

*Forgive me. For the harshness of my words.  
For pressing you when I should have  
understood. I let my emotions overtake my  
reason, and in doing so, I have hurt you. That  
was never my wish.*

*If you can forgive me, I will carry that  
forgiveness with gratitude. If you cannot, I  
will carry that regret.*

*Yours in apology, S. de Derbois*

Later that night, he folded the note and slipped it beneath her door. There was nothing more to be said. And he went to bed with a heart heavy in defeat, his only companion the regret that wrapped around him like a suffocating shadow.

## Chapter 16 - Aubade Audace

The dream was a battlefield.

Smoke choked the air, and cannon fire roared like a cruel symphony. The ground beneath Séverin's boots was soaked with mud and blood, the cries of wounded men rising like ghosts into the gray skies. The **Battle of Borodino**. Russia. The place where he had proven his mettle, where he had fought with nothing left to lose.

Elise was already gone by then. The weight of her death, still fresh, pressed against his chest like a second skin. There had been no fear in him that day, only a blind determination to destroy, to win, to survive if for no other reason than to spite death itself. He had fought possessed, driven by sorrow and rage, his blade cutting down enemies like scythe through wheat. Cannon fire thundered above, drums of war beating alongside his heart.

And the Russians had retreated.

It had been the last true victory of his military career, though none had known it at the time. Victory was fleeting, as fragile as hope. The retreat from Moscow loomed on the horizon, though they had not seen it yet.

He heard the sound of victory trumpets echoing from the distance, and in that blaring call, Séverin awoke.

The room was dark, the estate still cloaked in sleep. It was far too early for the dawn, yet the dream would not let him rest. Sweat clung to his brow, and his chest heaved with breath he did not remember taking. The taste of battle lingered on his tongue, bitter and familiar.

But it was not the victory that haunted him. It was the retreat that would follow. The retreat he had been forced to make. And as he lay there, staring into the blackness, one thought pressed into his mind.

*Bethania.*

He thought of her face, of her distance, of her coldness. Of the words Madame Lenoir had spoken the night before, sharp and accusing, questioning his strength. Questioning his pride.

And then, his thoughts turned to his coming tournament. Victory there seemed simpler. Cleaner.

But love was not simple. Love was not clean.

And this time, he would not retreat.

He rose, his decision made. He dressed in haste, pulled on his boots, and stepped quietly from the estate. Outside, the world was cloaked in mist, the sky a dark gray streaked with the first hints of morning. He saddled his horse, the leather creaking beneath his hands, and rode out alone.

There was a fire in his veins. A recklessness that felt almost divine. If love was a battle, then he would fight it like a madman. He would not give up. He would not retreat.

He rode swiftly into the town market, the early dawn chilling the air. Stalls were just beginning to open, sleepy merchants arranging goods under flickering lanterns. Severin dismounted, stepping between carts of bread and cloth, pottery and wine.

He moved with purpose.



For **Abeline**, a small hand-carved jewelry box, its surface painted in dark greens and blues, its clasp shaped like a tiny fox. Something clever and sharp, to match her wit.

For Hadaline, he purchased a small silver brooch shaped like a dove. Something delicate. Innocent. He paused, imagining her bright smile. A token to match her innocent affection. The warmth of her laughter. The bond he felt growing between them, unexpected and fierce.

He realized, as he stood there, that he loved these sisters. A piece of his heart was stolen away by them.

But it was Bethania who lingered in his thoughts. Troubling thoughts. Now it seems he is at risk for not only losing Bethania, but this new acquired devotion to her family.

And finally, for the home, a bundle of pastries, rich and sweet. Enough food to feed all of these fair ladies for days.

At a nearby florist, he searched the baskets of blooms, his hands brushing over petals, his gaze sharp. He thought of her care, her love for flowers, the delicate artistry she practiced in her arrangements. He thought of her beauty—sharp, bright, as difficult to possess as sunlight.

And he found them.

**White roses.** His own way of attempting to fulfill this prophecy, this vision of the white roses Madam Lenoir acclaimed.

He gathered them carefully, cradling them as though they were precious, as though they could speak the words he

could not say. Words of hope. Of persistence. Of determination.

He would not give up.

Not this time. Not again.

If she wished him gone, she would have to tell him to his face. Until then, he would fight. Fight for her, for the love he knew was there, even if it lay hidden beneath fear and pride. This was his new campaign. His own battle to wage.

He would not retreat.

## Chapter 17 - Playing House

Laughter filled the morning air, bright and unrestrained. It echoed through the old stone walls of the Lenoir estate, chasing away the lingering shadows of the night.

**Hadeline** sat at the kitchen table, her small hands clutching one of the many pastries Severin had brought back from his early morning ride. Her cheeks were dusted with sugar, her smile wide and genuine as she took another delighted bite.

“Delicious,” she giggled, the sound like silver bells.

The sight warmed Severin’s heart more than he wished to admit. Here, in this simple joy, was a moment of peace. A fleeting but treasured reprieve.

Bethania was not yet awake. Her absence was heavy, but Severin tried to let it pass without bitterness. The day was still young.

**Madame Lenoir** entered quietly, her gaze sharp but softer than the night before. She watched Hadeline fondly before turning her eyes to Severin. Her expression was guarded, yet there was something secretive beneath it. Something unspoken. As though a conversation had already passed in the hush of dawn.

*Had she spoken to Bethania?*

*Had Bethania read his letter?*

Madame Lenoir said nothing of it, though Severin saw the edge of reassurance in her eyes. A quiet encouragement. An understanding that said: wait. Be patient.

In the corner of the room sat an elder figure. The **grandmother of the Lenoirs**, her face lined with age, her hair silver as moonlight. She rocked gently in her chair, her voice soft and steady as she spoke to Hadeline in slow, meandering monologues. Tales of old days, of simpler times. The sort of stories that poured from memory like tea from a well-loved pot.

Severin approached gently, introducing himself with a quiet bow. She looked up at him, her eyes distant but kind. She did not respond in any meaningful way, only offered a small nod, her thoughts still lost in whatever memories played behind her eyes.

She reminded Severin of his own grandmother. Of mornings spent listening to old tales, to wisdom spoken in riddles and half-remembered songs. His heart ached with the familiarity of it.

Madame Lenoir soon gathered herself, preparing for errands that would take her to **Blois**. She moved slower than usual, her hand pressing briefly to her back, her face drawn with quiet pain. Severin felt the sting of guilt rise sharply in his chest. All this tension, all these quarrels—it could not have been good for her health.

He bowed his head to her as she gathered the girls.

“I shall return by evening,” she said softly. Her eyes met his, steady. As though asking him to keep peace in her absence. Perhaps even to make it.

“I pray you find good rest,” Severin replied. It was all he could offer.

The elder Lenoir woman was gathered along with them, Hadeline clinging to her side, still nibbling on pastries. The girls were laughing, playing at being little ladies. It was a simple, sweet image. One Severin found oddly comforting.

As they left, **Faustina** entered the kitchen. She moved with a purpose, gathering a few of the remaining pastries, her eyes avoiding his at first. But then she paused, a hand resting on the doorframe. Her gaze met his briefly, something softer in it than he expected.

And Severin noticed. She wore the **earrings** he had given her.

It was a small gesture, but meaningful.

“Good day, Your Grace,” she said, and though her voice was cool, it was not cruel. There was a warmth, hesitant but real.

He inclined his head. “And to you, Mademoiselle.”

She said no more, only offered a brief smile and disappeared through the front door. Severin watched her go, lingering on the strange hope that perhaps a battle had been won after all.

And then, the house was empty.

Silent.

He paced the halls, his footsteps echoing in the absence. He felt like a ghost in another man's home, haunting the walls of a life he could not quite claim. The flowers he had purchased that morning sat quietly in the kitchen, bright and hopeful—**yellow roses**, her favorite. He arranged

them carefully in a vase, setting them where Bethania could not miss them.

It was a gesture. A hope. A quiet prayer.

He could not stay inside. Not with the quiet pressing against his skin. And so he stepped out into the cool air, drawing his sword and setting himself to practice. His tournament was but a day away, and he must prepare.

Each movement was deliberate. Every strike, every parry, every pivot of his feet. The motions were familiar, comforting. Here, he could focus. Here, he could control what felt so uncontrollable within the house.

He practiced until sweat gathered beneath his collar, until his arms ached, until his heart pounded with something other than confusion.

And when at last he lowered his blade, he saw it.

Movement.

Through the windows of the Lenoir estate. A shadow of soft hair and pale skin.

Bethania.

She stood near the window, her figure outlined in sunlight, half-veiled by the lace curtains. Her eyes met his. Briefly. Then glanced down, as though pretending she hadn't looked at all.

But she had seen him. And perhaps she had seen the *everlasting flowers*.

He did not let his gaze linger. He turned back to his blade, letting her think he had not noticed. Letting her wonder. Letting her choose.

Because for all his determination, he knew this battle was hers to end or continue. His hands were open. His heart was open.

But would she meet him in the fight?

That remained unseen.

## Chapter 18 - The Path of Jacob

“They are beautiful,” Bethania said, her voice soft, almost hesitant.

Severin hadn’t even had the chance to close the front door. He turned, caught off guard by her presence, by her simplicity. She wore only her housewear, yet in his eyes, she was as striking as ever. Her dark hair fell like silk, loose down her back, her hands wrapped around the grand bouquet of **white roses**. The sight of her stilled him, drew his breath tight, still laced with the edge of exhaustion from his fencing practice.

But she did not linger.

She stepped back, eyes avoiding his, retreating as if she could sidestep the conversation that pressed heavy between them.

Before she could vanish, he found his voice.

“May I speak with you?”

A pause. Then, her quiet reply, “I will meet you upstairs.”

The words tasted like mercy and dread both.

He waited by the window in his room, the morning light pouring through the glass, casting long shadows across the floor. He stood still, trying not to hope but unable to stop himself. He prayed she would yield, that she would accept his invitation for a romantic night in Blois. A final attempt. But more than hope, he prepared for the end. The final conversation.



Perhaps this would be their last moment.

He did not notice her entering. He stayed facing the window, eyes tracing the horizon beyond the estate.

“Severin.” Her voice behind him, light and careful.

He turned slowly.

And there she was.

She lay across his bed, her figure stretched in lazy elegance, legs crossed, one hand tucked beneath her chin. A queen on her throne. Her throne. The sunlight kissed her pale skin, her dark hair spilling like ink across the sheets. Her eyes, shadowed and sharp, watched him like a hunter studying its prey.

He was a soldier, a veteran of a decade of war. Yet never had he been caught. Never taken prisoner. And now, standing here, he was captured. Caged by the beauty of a woman who said nothing and everything in a single glance.

She was the **sylph** of his darkest dreams, and he could do nothing but stand and burn beneath her gaze.

He could have looked at her for hours. He could have died for her. He could have been, like **Jacob**, a man who labored seven years and seven years again for the woman he loved. And still, he would have thought it a small price.

This moment—this image of her—would be burned into his soul for the rest of his life. A scar. A blessing.

And then she spoke.

“No.”

Just that. The guillotine drop of finality.

“I will not go with you tonight.”

Her voice was steady. Certain. But her eyes—oh, her eyes—they did not match her words.

He felt the blow, sharp and cold, but did not let it show. He stood tall. Silent. Refusing to beg.

But the pain marked him nonetheless. He could imagine himself kneeling, asking for mercy, asking for her love. But there was no honor in that. No dignity.

And so, he swallowed the words he longed to say. The love he longed to confess.

Instead, he said, simply, “Then I must go.”

She said nothing, but he saw the faintest shadow cross her gaze.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” he added. “Please thank your mother as well.”

It was **winter again in Russia**. And this was his defeat.

He saw the shift in her posture, the falter of her strength. She tried to hide it, but the slip was there. Regret. Pity. Perhaps something softer, but it came too late.

He packed his things quietly. Each fold of fabric, each clasp of a bag, echoed in his mind like the march of retreating soldiers. He thought of Moscow, of the long white roads, of the men who died beneath the weight of winter and silence.

And now, this house was his Moscow. And he had lost.

When he stepped into the hall, Bethania was there. As if summoned by the finality of his steps. She followed him, her face unreadable, her steps hesitant. Almost as though she might stop him.

But she said nothing.

Until the door loomed near. Until escape was certain.

“Where will you go?” she asked, her voice too light, too casual. But her eyes betrayed her.

He turned slightly, meeting her gaze. There was no anger in him. Only sadness. Only a depthless well of defeat.

“I will go where I must,” he said. “There are always roads for the beaten.”

And she kept asking. More questions than she had in three days combined. Questions that stung and cut, for they came too late. He answered each, though his heart bled with every word.

And then they stood there, outside the door, lingering in the shadow of what would never be.

She did not look at him. Not fully. She kept her eyes low, her power slipping from her as if water through her fingers. The queen on her throne now shy, uncertain.

He could not leave her like this. Not without one final touch. One final moment.

He reached forward, his fingers brushing her cheek lightly, tenderly. Her eyes lifted, wide, shimmering with what might have been unshed tears.

And then, without words, he took her into his arms. One last time.

She did not stop him. She did not pull away. She let him hold her, let him breathe her in, as if this were their farewell.

And it was.

No goodbye was said.

There was nothing left to say.

And so, Severin turned and walked from the house, leaving her standing there, shadowed in the doorway. A ghost already fading.

## Chapter 19 - An Angry Mother

The road to Blois stretched long beneath the hooves of Severin's horse, the landscape blurring past in shades of green and gray. His mind, however, was nowhere on the road. It was still back at the Lenoir estate, within the walls that had held his heart captive for days.

Bethania.

The loss of her hit him in waves, crashing hard against the armor of his composure. He fought to focus on his tournament, on the precision and discipline required to win. But it felt pointless. Empty. Like marching into battle for a war already lost.

And then, worse than her absence, came another thought. The face of **Hadeline**. Her small arms reaching for him in innocent joy. Her laughter, her trust. He had wanted to be more than just a guest in that home. More than a stranger. He had wanted to be *theirs*. A missing brother, a friend, a man who belonged.

He broke. The pain overwhelmed him. Tears he hadn't shed in years found him now, hot and unyielding. They burned his face, his pride. He wept for the girl who would never know how deeply she was loved, and for the family he wished could be his.

He rode on. Faster, as though fleeing the pain, but it rode with him, relentless.

By the time he reached Blois, his body was exhausted, his heart hollow. He stopped at a quiet inn, seeking nourishment, something to strengthen him for the next

day's tournament. But food was tasteless. Drink was sour. Victory itself felt like a meaningless reward.

And then, a voice.

**“Severin!”**

His head snapped up. And there, stepping down from a carriage, was **Madame Lenoir**.

His heart dropped.

“Where are you going?” she demanded, sharp and unforgiving.

He stood, weak and caught off guard. Words faltered on his tongue. “I... I am returning to Blois. To prepare for my tournament.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And why have you left the estate so suddenly?”

He hesitated. There was no use hiding it. Not from her.

“Because of your daughter,” he said softly. “She does not wish me there.”

The words were simple, but they weighed heavy with truth.

But Madame Lenoir did not yield. “Nonsense,” she snapped. “You are my guest. And you shall remain so for as long as you wish.”

He shook his head, tired. “Madame, I cannot impose. It is not right.”

But she stepped closer, her posture rigid. “I will hear none of it. You will return. Tonight. You will dine with us. You will stay.”

And in that moment, Severin knew he had no strength to fight her. Not today. Not after everything. If he could not go back for Bethania, then he would go back for **Hadeline**. For her innocent smile. For the simple joy of seeing her happy.

And then, as if fate wished to make the decision for him, **Hadeline’s head** popped from the window of the Lenoir carriage. Her curls bounced, her eyes bright and unaware of the storm raging around her.

“Severin, where are you going?” she called in her sweet, sheepish voice.

The words struck him like a blade. He could not bear to tell her the truth—that he had been fleeing, that he had wanted to leave them all behind.

And so, he smiled. A weak, trembling smile that barely held its shape.

“I am buying my little darling a new gift,” he said, his voice soft and warm.

Hadeline beamed, satisfied, and ducked back into the carriage. Severin turned back to Madame Lenoir, his expression surrendering.

“Very well,” he said. “I will return tonight.”

Madame Lenoir nodded, but there was no triumph in her face. Only determination. Only resolve.

And so, Severin stood there, feeling caught in a war with no victory. A battle between mother and daughter. Between hope and despair.

He had fought campaigns that stretched over years. Battles that turned kingdoms. Yet never had a week felt so long. So brutal.

And still, there were three nights left in Blois. An eternity. A lifetime.

Would Bethania speak again? Would she soften? Or was he fighting a losing war, a war where victory meant nothing because the prize had already been lost?

He did not know.

But hope for her felt as impossible idea- as holding the moon in his hands. Beautiful. Bright. Yet forever beyond reach.



## Chapter 20 - Ms. Beth

The evening lay heavy over the Lenoir estate, its shadows long and still. Severin stepped quietly inside, his footsteps soft upon the stone floor. He did not desire welcome, nor attention. He was a ghost here. A stranger lingering in a place where he did not belong. A soldier, following orders for a battle he had no desire to win.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of **Bethania**. She paused as their eyes met, a moment brief but heavy, and then turned back to her duties without a word. That was enough. More than enough. He did not expect more.

He thought to himself—if he must stay, then he would be useful. Nothing more. He would not impose. He would not press. He loved this family, and for their sake, he would be cooperative, helpful, a shadow at the edge of their lives until he was gone.

After unpacking his few belongings, his mind felt surprisingly calm. The burden of expectation had lifted. Bethania was not his to win. Perhaps she never had been. He had fought, and he had failed. There was a strange comfort in accepting defeat.

But even a defeated man could be useful.

He made his way to the kitchen, too early for dinner, but the hunger from his long day gnawed at him. **Madame Lenoir** greeted him, her face polite but strained. She offered him a plate of food, simple and warm.

He accepted with gratitude and sat at the table, his posture easy, relaxed. **Hadeline** greeted him with a grin, though she was quick to fall into playful chatter with **Abeline**,

their giggles lightening the air. Across the table sat the elder **Grandmother Lenoir**, her hands resting quietly in her lap, her eyes lost to thoughts and memories far older than anyone else in the room.

And then, a voice that struck him still.

“Can I make you some tea, Severin?”

Bethania. Soft, tired. But kind.

He blinked, surprised by her offer. He had not expected even this.

“Yes,” he said simply. “Thank you.”

She nodded and turned back to her work. He watched her then. Truly watched her. Barefoot upon the cold stone floor, her dress simple and worn. She held little Hadeline on her hip, her other hand placing giblets of chicken into a simmering pot. Her motions were steady, practiced. She worked with quiet strength, her weariness showing in the slump of her shoulders, but not in her spirit.

She was young, yet her duties were many. He knew this already, from their letters. But seeing it in person was something else. Something deeper. Something painful.

He thought of himself. At seventeen, bearing the weight of the **Meslay estate** beneath the shadow of his father’s thunderous commands. Endless days beneath the summer sun, running from task to task, doing as he was told, learning the discipline that would one day forge him into a soldier. It had made him strong. It had made him harsh.

But it had cost him something too. Something he did not realize until now.

He pitied Bethania. She deserved something more than constant labor. And yet she loved her family. It was obvious in every motion, in every tired but steadfast glance. She was dutiful, god-fearing, loyal to a fault. A woman of noble character, even if her hands were worn from work.

And in that moment, Severin admired her deeply. Perhaps more than he ever had.

He wondered then if his tactics had been wrong. If his strategies of love had been misguided. Perhaps it was too late. Perhaps not. Battles were always easiest to analyze after the loss. Yet sometimes, even defeat held lessons.

The tea arrived, warm and fragrant. He accepted it with a nod of thanks. But he could not stop himself from speaking.

“Let me help you, Bethania,” he said softly. “You’ve done enough for today.”

She looked at him, surprise flickering in her gaze. Tiredness sat heavy beneath her eyes, but she shook her head.

“No,” she said simply, a hint of strength in her tone. “This is my duty.”

He paused, hesitant. Then stood, walking to the water basin. “At least let me wash the dishes. You should rest.”

She moved to stand beside him. Quiet but firm. “I can manage. This is my place.”

He turned to face her, caught off guard. "You should not bear it all alone."

But she shook her head again. "I am not alone."

Thrice he asked. Thrice she denied. And with that, he conceded. He returned to his place at the table, sipping his tea in silence, his eyes tracing her every movement. Watching as she pressed on, as she endured.

If he loved her in the morning- he loved her more tonight.

He wished he could unburden her. Could take some of her weight and carry it as his own. To protect her. To be her safety. To be her strength. But perhaps that had been his greatest failing. Not in his words or his actions, but in failing to be a place where she could rest. Where she could trust.

She looked at him across the room, just for a moment. Her eyes were unreadable, but they lingered longer than they should have. And it struck him, hard and sharp. That perhaps all his mistakes lay not in trying too hard, but in never finding the right way to tell her what she truly meant to him.

Perhaps he had failed to show her that with him, she could be safe.

And now, it felt too late to change it.

## Chapter 21 - A New Friend

The night stretched long, its weight pressing over the Lenoir estate like a heavy shroud. Severin lingered in the drawing room, exchanging quiet words with **Madame Lenoir**, their conversation simple and soft. He bid **Hadeline** goodnight, her embrace gentle, her smile a brief comfort. But the hour felt slow, drawn out by the exhaustion in his bones and the ache in his heart.

Still, the night was not over.

The door opened abruptly. **Faustina** entered, her step sharp, her eyes bright. And beside her, another woman—**Angelica**. Severin recognized her, though only vaguely. She had been one of the women who watched him sharply during his first tense visit to the estate, her eyes studying him with quiet intensity.

Angelica was not family by blood, but close enough to be one of the sisters. A neighbor, but more. She belonged to this house in ways Severin never could.

The two women laughed lightly, gossiping about boys, their words quick and careless. Severin sat near the hearth, book in hand, though his mind was too scattered to read. He listened quietly, a shadow at the edge of their conversation.

They noticed him but said nothing, at first.

And then, Angelica turned, her voice soft but bold.  
“Severin, may I ask you something?”

He looked up, surprised. “Of course.”

She hesitated, then asked, “What advice would you give a woman about men?”

The question was light, playful even, but he felt the sharpness of **Faustina’s** gaze before he could answer. Watching. Measuring.

Still, he rose from his seat, setting the book aside. His voice was steady but kind, thoughtful. He offered his perspective with care, his words formed from years of experience, of loss, of love sought and lost again. He spoke of honesty, of strength, of the quiet power of understanding one's worth.

When he finished, there was a pause. A moment of contemplation.

And then, both women nodded in agreement. Perhaps surprised. Perhaps not.

The conversation drifted, light and easy, and for the first time in many nights, Severin felt the quiet relief of simplicity. He listened. He spoke. And for a brief time, it felt normal. Human.

But the moment ended when Angelica excused herself, leaving Severin alone with **Faustina**.

The silence between them was thick, heavy with things unsaid. Severin did not press it. He stood ready to retreat, ready to let the quiet take them.

But Faustina spoke first.

“I owe you an apology,” she said, her voice low, her eyes focused not on him, but on the flicker of the fire. “For the other night. For my words.”

Severin studied her for a long moment, then nodded gently. "You are forgiven."

She glanced at him then, sharp but softened. "You did not deserve my cruelty. I have been... unkind."

He said nothing, sensing there was more. And there was.

Her voice faltered, but she pressed on. "I was seeing someone. Not long ago. A man who loved fencing. It was... a small connection. Something that mattered to me."

Severin listened, patient. Letting her find her words.

She breathed in deeply, her eyes distant. "He left me. For another. They are to be married. Soon."

Her voice did not break, but Severin could hear the pain beneath it. The anger. The grief. She was only nineteen. So young. Too young for such betrayal.

Severin's heart ached for her.

"I am sorry," he said softly. And he meant it. "No one should be forgotten so easily."

Faustina's lips pressed together, but there was gratitude in her eyes. A softness that had not been there before.

And Severin wondered, bitterly, if this would be his own fate. To speak of Bethania years from now, long after the fire had gone cold. To be haunted by the memory of her, a ghost he could never escape.

He feared it. He feared it deeply.

They spoke for a long time, longer than he would have imagined. The conversation drifted from pain to simple things, small joys, old memories. Somewhere in that hour, something shifted. Something softened. The enemy became a friend. The stranger became known.

And in that hour, Severin realized he had spoken more deeply with Faustina than he had with Bethania in weeks. A sobering, painful truth.

But also a comfort. A small, unexpected gift.

Faustina seemed to feel it too. She lingered as their conversation slowed, hesitant to let it end. And then, almost laughing, she said, "You know, I was supposed to go to that wedding. Not Bethania."

The words hung in the air, strange and sharp. An alternate life. An impossible thought.

Severin smiled faintly. "Strange how fate twists things."

And it was strange. Strange, and almost comical, to think how different things might have been.

But there was comfort in this, too. In finding an unexpected friend. In knowing that even in a week of sorrow, light could still break through.

And though the path was uncertain, and his heart still heavy, Severin felt, for the first time in days, the weight lift just slightly. Enough to let him breathe.

Enough to let him hope, if only a little.



## Chapter 22 - Tournament Day

The morning dawned crisp and cool. Severin awoke early, the weight of the day already pressing upon him. Today was not just a tournament. It was a reckoning.

He began his morning ritual, his meditation. Yet his prayers did not seek victory. No, they were softer, deeper. Prayers for **Bethania**. For her happiness. For her peace. He asked for blessings upon the **Lenoir family**, whose home he had come to love, though it would only ever be a temporary shelter. He prayed for Hadeline, for Abeline, even for Faustina. And when the final words passed his lips, Severin felt something shift within him. Not peace. But resolve.

Downstairs, dressed in his fencing uniform, he was prepared to leave quietly. Yet, as if fate intervened, Bethania appeared. Simple, serene, holding a cup of coffee in her delicate hands.

“Good morning,” she said softly, offering him the cup. “And good luck.”

He blinked, taken aback by her kindness. Her mystery confounded him even now, but he accepted the gesture with quiet grace.

“Thank you,” he replied, his voice warm, his gratitude genuine.

A flicker of strength lit within him. Perhaps her words were nothing, but today, they would be everything.

As he made to leave, **Madame Lenoir** stopped him.

“What would you like for dinner tonight?” she asked, her tone bright but purposeful.

Bethania lingered nearby, pretending not to listen. Yet Severin caught the sparkle in her eye, or perhaps it was only a reflection of the sunlight.

Honored by the question, he smiled gently. “A cake. Any cake. But something sweet.”

Madame Lenoir nodded, a secret understanding shared between them.

And just as he stepped outside, **Hadeline** rushed to him. Her eyes were bright, full of joy.

He paused and smiled. Kneeling, he raised his **épée** and, with all the dignity of a true knight, tapped her shoulders in turn.

“Arise, Lady Hadeline,” he said with mock solemnity. “Knight of the Lenoir Estate.”

Her laughter rang out, pure and bright, a melody he carried with him as he mounted his horse. If he could not win for Bethania, then he would win for **Hadeline**.

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Upon arriving in **Blois**, the air was thick with tension. Twelve competitors stood ready, eyes sharp, nerves taut. Many were younger, stronger, but Severin had something they did not—wisdom earned from blood, fire, and war.

The first opponent was young, unseasoned. Severin dispatched him quickly, his reach and precision

undeniable. Still, he offered advice post-match, a token of sportsmanship. The boy's name was **Maurice**, and Severin saw in him the reflection of his younger self.

The second match tested him. A fierce exchange, blade meeting blade, parry for parry. Sweat dampened his brow, but his patience held. And when the moment came, Severin struck true, a lunge to the heart. A poetic blow for a man whose own heart felt hollow. Empty.

The **semifinals** loomed.

**Adamar.**

Tall. Dark-haired. Cold eyes. The better, younger version of Severin himself. The match was brutal, neither yielding. Round after round, the score held steady at zero. Until sudden death.

There, Severin fainted, his movement unexpected. A lunge turned into a parry, and with swift precision, a tap to Adamar's head ended the bout. Victory, but narrow. Hard-fought.

And then, the **finals**.

**Godfrey.**

A man Severin knew. An aristocrat. A veteran. A bourbon. Once they had crossed blades on the battlefield, their disagreements sharp and fierce. Godfrey, with his cruel methods. Severin had never trusted him, never admired him. He thought what a cruelty would it be for Bethania to fall in love with such a man. That despairing thought he put away as soon as it arrived. His blade versus mine-simple as that.

To lose today would be to lose to darkness.

And Severin could not allow that.

They fought as demons. Steel clashing, sparks flying. Severin struck first but found himself down **2-1** by the final round. His breath was ragged, his body heavy. But his soul? His soul still burned.

Summoning strength from some ancient place, Severin found the opening. A jab to the breastplate, a tie. Sudden death.

Godfrey lunged, his blade aimed for Severin's heart. But with a last, desperate twist, Severin, his necklace popping out of his armor, slipped aside. The blade grazed his shoulder, but Severin was inside the guard. And with one upward strike, his blade found its mark—Godfrey's throat.

Victory.

The weight fell from his shoulders. Relief. Exhaustion. Triumph.

And yet, gracious in victory, Severin offered his hand—Godfrey rejecting his offer.

Not the cleanest fight. But a fight won through grit and wisdom.

But in his heart, he wondered if only his wisdom of love could be so keen.

They placed the silver medal around his neck- it clanged lightly with his cross necklace.

The inscription gleaming beneath the midday sun.

**"Au Vaillant Vainqueur du Tournoi  
d'Escrime, Premier Prix, Maître Severin  
de Derbois, Académie de Blois, l'An de  
Grâce 1814."**

A fine trophy. But not one for him.

No. This would be Hadeline's. A knight deserved her prize.

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The journey back to the **Lenoir estate** felt lighter, hope threading beneath the exhaustion. He imagined her face. Her joy. The laugh that would ring through the halls when he presented her with the medal.

But before he arrived, Severin stopped.

The bakery stood quiet beneath the sun, its windows glinting like old memories. He dismounted, stepping inside. He gathered what he needed—eggs, flour, chocolate. The recipe of his grandmother, the sweetness of **chocolate brioche**. If only for one more day, he would leave them with something sweet.

A simple offering.

A goodbye, perhaps, though it would not be spoken.

For this was his family, if only for a little while longer. And Severin, if nothing else, would make the most of every hour left.

## **Chapter 23 - Patience is a Virtue**

The sun was still high as Severin returned to the Lenoir estate, wearied from battle but victorious. The moment he

stepped inside, he was met with warmth—a home alive with laughter, chatter, and the delicious aroma of cake filling the air.

In the kitchen, **Bethania** and **Madame Lenoir** were deep in conversation, heads bent over a cake that was nearing perfection. The delicate sweetness of baking sugar clung to the air. In the adjoining room, **Faustina**, **Angelica**, and **Abeline** chatted, their words flowing freely like water over stones. Even **Grandmother Lenoir** was present, seated quietly, a part of the home's fabric.

Severin stood in the doorway, absorbing it all—the light, the sounds, the scent. For a moment, he could almost believe this was his home, his family. But only for a moment.

A pause rippled through the room as his arrival was noticed. And then, like an arrow of light, **Hadeline** skittered toward him, her face bright with joy. He knelt, lowering himself to meet her excitement.

He told her, in a whisper woven with grandeur, of his triumphs on the field. Of how his blade struck true, how his will held fast. He painted pictures of parries and lunges, of close calls and final victories. The little girl's eyes widened in awe. She reached for the medal, her small fingers brushing it reverently.

And without hesitation, Severin removed it from his neck and placed it gently over hers.

She gasped in delight, holding the medal close, as if it were a treasure beyond compare.

Bethania watched from the kitchen, her gaze lingering. Soft. Observing. Wondering.

Hadeline darted away, rushing to Bethania to show off her prize. Severin saw the look that passed between them—brief but weighted. Bethania’s eyes met his, though neither said a word.

Madame Lenoir approached, breaking the moment. Her smile was warm, proud.

“Congratulations, Severin,” she said, her eyes lingering on the medal now adorning Hadeline. “You fought well, I am sure.”

“I did,” he said softly, nodding in thanks. “And I thank you for the cake—though it seems I must wait a while longer to taste it.”

Madame Lenoir’s smile deepened. “Bethania made it herself. She is quite adept in the arts of baking.”

Severin turned, eyes widening slightly. A talent he did not know. Another secret this woman held. Another piece of her that felt just out of reach.

Bethania stepped closer, brushing her hands on her apron. “And what is in your basket, monsieur?”

He lifted it slightly, as if offering a glimpse. “I thought I might bake something in celebration as well. My grandmother’s chocolate brioche. A small gift.”

Madame Lenoir chuckled lightly. “A man who can bake? A rarity if I say so myself.” She glanced pointedly at Bethania,

and Severin sensed her meaning—a nudge, a suggestion. Another subtle pressure in a home already heavy with it.

He forced a smile, deflecting the comment. He did not wish Bethania to feel cornered, as if love were a matter of simple persuasion. He turned instead to his task, preparing his ingredients, partitioning flour and sugar, eggs and cream.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Bethania watching him. Quietly. Curiously.

When he began crushing walnuts for the filling, she stepped forward, her voice soft but certain. “May I help you?”

He paused, surprised. What did she want from him? Why offer her time, her hands, when her heart felt so distant?

But he did not refuse. “Of course,” he said, stepping aside.

And so they worked together. In silence mostly, their movements smooth and practiced. The air between them was heavy with unspoken words. He wondered if she helped out of kindness, out of duty, or some feeling she would not name.

When the dough was set aside to rise, the rhythm of their quiet work was broken by a knock at the door. Severin stepped back as **Lady Greta** entered, her posture graceful despite her age, her eyes sharp and observant.

A friend of the family, her bond with the Lenoirs was clear. Bethania greeted her with warmth, embracing her like an old friend. Severin offered a polite bow.



And soon the room filled with the soft, fluid sounds of **German**. Greta spoke comfortably with Madame and Grandmother Lenoir. But when Bethania joined the conversation, her German smooth and natural, Severin stilled.

Another secret. Another layer.

She spoke with ease, her voice light, her laughter soft. It was an intimacy Severin was excluded from, and the distance of it cut deeply.

He focused on his dough, smoothing the chocolate filling across its surface, but his ears could not help but listen. He caught no words, but he wondered. Were they speaking of him? Of Bethania's heart? He would never know. And it burned at him, this not-knowing.

Lady Greta's sharp eyes turned toward him once, her smile kind but knowing. In broken French, she congratulated him on his victory. Severin bowed his head slightly, offering thanks.

The dough was ready for baking. He turned to Bethania. "How much longer for the cake?" he asked, the words casual, but his thoughts racing.

Bethania's eyes glinted, her lips curving slightly. "Of all your qualities, you do not possess patience, do you?"

It was a light comment, but it struck him with an unexpected weight. Patience. Was that her lesson for him? Her explanation for her distance? Or simply a jest?

He gave no reaction, only a small, thin smile.

Perhaps patience was the virtue he lacked most.

But how long could a man wait for a woman who gave him so little certainty? How long before waiting turned to folly? Before love turned to sorrow?

He did not know. But he suspected the answer would come soon enough.

## Chapter 24 - Breaking Bread

The unveiling of the cake was almost ceremonial. Bethania and Madame Lenoir stood side by side, lifting the cloth that veiled their creation. Severin found himself stunned into silence.

It was beautiful. Delicate. Intricate. Layers of chocolate, his favorite, sculpted with elegant swirls and ribbons. The kind of artistry that looked too fine to eat. Severin stood still, admiring not just the cake but the care it represented.

### Did she remember?

Or was it only coincidence?

But the thought warmed him regardless, and he did not dwell too long. Beside it, his own humble **brioche** sat ready, its golden crust shining, but paling in comparison to Bethania's creation. A defeat he accepted gladly.

When all was set, the guests gathered. **Faustina** and **Angelica** were the first to approach, sampling Severin's offering. Their compliments were kind, though light. Bethania had already disappeared somewhere within the house, her absence lingering in the air as heavily as her presence did.

Severin felt it keenly. The way he always did.

Angelica spoke first, a soft compliment about the texture. Faustina, though harder to read, nodded in agreement. The conversation drifted, catching on Severin's victory, but the praise was loose and brief, more observation than celebration.

It was Severin who broke the silence between them, his gaze falling upon Faustina. “The earrings suit you,” he said gently, nodding toward the Russian trinkets he had gifted her.

Faustina looked surprised, though not displeased. “Thank you,” she said, her voice quieter than before. Her fingers brushed against the jewelry briefly, but her eyes lingered longer on Severin.

Angelica watched the exchange with interest but said nothing, as though witnessing something not meant for words.

The conversation soon shifted to lighter matters, brief and pleasant, but Severin’s heart was elsewhere, following the ghost of Bethania wherever she had vanished. She would not return for the rest of the night.

And in her absence, Severin felt the evening lose its color.

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Later, as the house quieted and the dishes were cleared, Madame Lenoir offered a gentle reminder.

“Church tomorrow,” she said, her voice light but purposeful. “We leave early. Best to be ready.”

Severin nodded but hesitated. **Huguenot services.** In a region where such faith was a minority, it wasn’t just an act of worship—it was a statement. To attend alongside the Lenoir family would not go unnoticed in this tight-knit town. In this world, word traveled quickly.

Still, to refuse would be to offend. To retreat would be to surrender.

And so he yielded, offering a quiet assent.

“Of course. I will be ready.”

It would be his last day in Blois. A thought that should have comforted him but instead felt hollow.

---

That night, the house settled into sleep. But Severin lay awake, staring at the ceiling, tracing thoughts in the dark.

Tomorrow, it would end. This week of uncertainty. This slow torture. Tomorrow, he would leave this place, leave this family, leave this woman who had stolen his thoughts.

Perhaps tomorrow would bring relief. Or perhaps a deeper kind of sorrow.

A knock at his door pulled him from his thoughts.

“Come,” he said softly.

The door opened, and **Madame Lenoir** stepped inside, her figure delicate against the dim candlelight. She did not hesitate, did not ask if she disturbed him. She simply came and sat by his side.

“I hope I do not intrude,” she said gently.

Severin shook his head. “Never.”

For a long moment, she said nothing, her hands folded neatly, her gaze lowered. And then, with a weight that pressed into the space between them, she spoke.

“Bethania is... difficult to understand, I know.”

Severin’s chest tightened, though he did not reply.

Madame Lenoir looked at him then, her eyes soft but earnest. “But I tell you, Severin, there is more beneath the surface. More than she allows you to see. Do not give up. Please. I beg you.”

He could not breathe. The words struck him as both a comfort and a curse. **To hope was to suffer. But to let go was to lose.**

“It is not that simple,” he said quietly, his voice rough. “I cannot hold onto something that will not stay.”

But Madame Lenoir shook her head, her hands reaching, resting lightly upon his arm.

“You do not understand her yet. But you will. There is a battle within her—one she does not yet know how to win. But I see how she looks at you, Severin. Do not let her fear take her from you.”

Severin swallowed, his heart warring with itself. He wanted to believe her. And yet, to believe would be to fall again into hope. Into pain.

Still, he could not refuse her. Not after all this.

“I will try,” he said softly, though whether he meant to try for Bethania or simply to endure, he did not know.

She offered him a final look, tender and full of gratitude.  
Then she stood and left, her presence lingering in the quiet.

And Severin lay back, staring again at the ceiling, thoughts  
tangled like roots beneath his skin.

That night, he did not pray for victory. He did not pray for  
love.

He prayed for nothing specific. Afraid to ask for what could  
not be given.

He simply prayed. For anything. For peace. For guidance.  
For whatever the dawn would bring.

## Chapter 25 - Capricious Chapel

Sunday morning arrived with an unspoken heaviness. The Lenoir estate stirred earlier than on any previous day, the quiet hum of preparation filling the air. Severin was one of the last to rise, his mind already shadowed by the day's weight. He dressed in his usual dark formal attire, the fabric heavy against his skin, a sharp contrast to the lightness of his younger self. The man who had once ridden into battle now braced for a quieter, more personal confrontation.

Downstairs, he found **Madame Lenoir** kneeling to fasten **Hadeline's** shoes, her hands gentle, her face kind. **Abeline** stood nearby, dressed finely, her young face already marked with an air of dutiful restraint. **Faustina** stood by, her elegance severe, her posture rigid. Severin greeted them each with quiet civility, exchanging pleasantries as he seated himself.

He sipped tea, entertaining Hadeline with small talk, writing briefly in his journal, though his thoughts wandered. His hand stilled as **Bethania** entered the room.

She wasn't dressed finely. In truth, it seemed she had given little thought to her appearance. It startled him. The woman who once captivated an entire wedding, who stood like a star against the evening light, now stepped through the morning haze with an indifference that chilled him. Her face was muted, dulled. She barely acknowledged him.

Was it defiance? Was it exhaustion? Or had she simply stopped caring? Severin could not tell.

Madame Lenoir broke the silence.



“Severin, you must take your carriage alongside ours. There are far too many of us for one.”

He agreed readily, his thoughts already clouded by Bethania’s silence.

Hadeline, bright as ever, ran to him, her joy like a small torch in the dim morning. “Can I ride with you, Severin?” she asked, her voice high and sweet.

Before Severin could answer, Bethania’s voice rang out, soft but certain.

“I will go with him.”

He paused, searching her face, but found nothing there but distance. He agreed, though his heart beat with a thousand questions.

---

The carriage ride was bearable only because of Hadeline’s laughter. She was a ray of sunlight, her happiness radiant. Severin stole glances at Bethania, his words carefully chosen, his conversation light but uncertain. She responded politely, distantly. A few exchanges, nothing more.

It was not enough. It never was.

---

The **Huguenot chapel** stood with solemn authority, its walls tall and shadowed. The pews were packed, the community gathered in reverent unity. Madame Lenoir insisted on the front row. Severin obliged, though every

step forward felt heavier than the last. He followed Bethania, shadowing her every move, a silent figure trailing her light.

He felt like a **bodyguard**, not a companion. An observer. Protector of something fragile, yet untouchable.

He caught the gazes of those behind him, eyes that lingered, eyes that whispered questions. He could feel the weight of gossip hanging thick in the air. His presence with the Lenoirs would not go unnoticed. Already, a family behind him greeted him by name—a family from **Vendôme**, their faces ghost-like from a past he thought buried by war.

He offered brief pleasantries but nothing more. There was no room for conversation here. No room for anything but the storm brewing within him.

The service began. The hymns were sung. The prayers were spoken. And Severin stood beside Bethania, watching, listening, wondering.

Throughout the sermon, Severin noticed her reactions. The subtle disapproval that crossed her face at certain words, at the rigid, unwavering lines drawn by the preacher. She did not bow her head when others did. She did not murmur amen. She was bold, even here. Unafraid. A silent protest against the authority that surrounded her.

He admired her, even as her distance tore at him.

And then she looked at him. Not once, but many times. Her gaze steady, unyielding. Studying him. Judging him. Seeking something he did not know if he could give.

Their eyes would meet, and Severin would break first, glancing away, retreating. But Bethania lingered. She lingered until he was forced to look again.

### **What was she thinking?**

He could not say. He could only wonder.

---

As the service ended, Bethania wasted no time. She gathered her siblings and left, her steps sharp, her back straight. Severin followed, not speaking, not questioning. He did as she did, as if tethered to her purpose. A shadow, loyal and silent.

He saw faces he knew, faces from his childhood, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Whatever mood lingered over Bethania, it had consumed him as well. He would not smile. He would not linger. He walked as she walked.

As if husband and wife. Aligned. Determined. Unified.

In this moment, Severin felt a strange, terrible connection. Not one born of love or romance but of **shared defiance**. As though they both bore a burden the others could not understand.

---

The carriage ride back to the estate was mostly silent. Severin counted the hours until his departure, counting them like beads on a rosary. The two of them openly dissected the various messages from each pastor- what they agreed with, what they didn't. Matching each others'

perspective of religion itself- but Severin knew this of her already. Her palpable relatability- her beautiful mind. Yet he wondered if there would be a chance for one final honest conversation, one last attempt to understand her. How she looked at him in that chapel lingered in his thoughts-

## Chapter 26 - Mirror Girl

The sun bathed the Lenoir estate in golden light, the weather fair, the air still. Yet an eerie calm hovered within the house. The laughter of children echoed faintly from downstairs where Madame Lenoir busied herself, preparing food and tending to Hadeline and Abeline. It was a day that should have felt ordinary, yet for Severin, it was anything but.

Tomorrow, he would leave. He would say goodbye to this place that had been both a home and a prison. He had played his roles well: an older brother to the young girls, a loyal guest to the matron, a friend—and nothing more—to Bethania. Yet in every quiet moment, he felt like a stranger, a man lingering where he did not belong, longing for a love that hovered forever beyond reach.

Sitting on his bed, a book in hand, Severin read quietly, hoping the words would ease the turmoil of his thoughts. The door creaked gently. He looked up.

Bethania entered, her steps light, her face calm. She wore her usual casual house attire, her hair loose and long, flowing like black silk to her waist. There was a softness about her, a lightness that had not been present earlier at the chapel. She greeted him lightly, her voice calm.

“Would you mind,” she asked, “if I did my hair and makeup here?”

He did not complain. He said nothing but nodded, watching as she stepped toward the corner where a tall body mirror stood.

She sat before it, and Severin watched as she began brushing through her long hair, the strands flowing beneath her fingers like water. Occasionally, she would turn her head slightly, glancing at him through the mirror, a loose smile dancing on her lips. It was nothing, yet it was everything.

To Severin, it felt like a dream. As if, just for these moments, he lived the life he longed for—a husband, quietly watching his wife prepare for the day. An eternity of such simple scenes would be heaven to him. A helpless place to be, yearning for something he could not have. Seeing himself in the mirror—like watching the past unfolding the seemingly inevitable separation from her to come.

She brushed through her hair again and began applying light touches of makeup—a stroke of blush, a thin line of eyeliner. The wing of it arced delicately, highlighting the cat-like tilt of her eyes. She did not know, but that was his favorite. Always had been.

He rose, standing behind her. Admiring her, watching her transform. She glanced up at him once, a quiet question in her eyes, but he said nothing. He only observed.

They spoke then, lightly, about the book he read. She asked about its content, her curiosity genuine.

He quoted softly, his voice low. “We get caught up in the motion of life, forgetting the present deserves our deepest respect.”

Bethania paused. She set down the brush and turned to face him. Her eyes caught the light of the late afternoon, fluttering like butterfly wings. Her hair glowed, jet-black

but shimmering, as though darkness itself had been gifted radiance. Her face, serene. The sharpness of her cheekbones softened by the faintest shadow of blush. Her lips, untouched but perfect. Her nose, the small, delicate thing she claimed to despise, yet Severin adored it as if it were sculpted from art itself.

She was beautiful. More than that, she was *his* beautiful.

And she stood there, so close, closer than propriety would allow, but not enough to satisfy his longing. Her eyes betray her again- telling him more than words probably could. Her lips seemingly twitched with anticipation. It felt like standing at that spiral staircase again with her. Like many times before the back of his finger touching her cheek without thought- ever so faintly pressing into his touch as to say she accepts it.

He could kiss her. Oh, how he wanted to. How his heart screamed for it. But more than that, he wanted to tell her.

Tell her that he loved her.

But he stood frozen. His heart burned, his mind clouded. He could say it. He *should* say it. Was this the moment? Was this the last chance?

And then it happened.

## **Chapter 27 - Chaos at Cellettes**

The screams echoed through the Lenoir estate like a strike of lightning, shattering the calm—breaking the mirror moment. Severin's heart seized, his body moving before thought could catch up. He rushed downstairs, each footfall heavy and urgent.

"Mother! Mother!" Faustina's cry split through the air. She was on her knees, her body crumpled in despair. Madam Lenoir lay motionless on the floor, her figure pale and still. The sight was terrible. Hadeline and Abeline huddled nearby, their small bodies shaking, their eyes wide with terror.

Severin snapped into action, instincts overriding the storm of fear in his chest. He knelt before Faustina, his voice steady though his heart pounded.

"It will be alright," he said firmly, his hand gently resting on her shoulder. "Take the children. Go to another room. Keep them calm."

Faustina's eyes, tear-stained and wide, met his. She hesitated but obeyed, gathering the trembling girls and guiding them away.

Severin turned to Madam Lenoir. Relief flooded him at the faintest flicker of movement—a twitch of her fingers, a shallow breath. Without hesitation, he scooped her from the cold floor, carrying her to the living area and laying her upon the couch. His hands were gentle as he brushed hair from her face, his voice low and soothing as he whispered words of comfort. She stirred, her eyelids fluttering weakly.



Whimpers escaped her, but she remained conscious. Was it exhaustion? A fainting spell? Something worse? Severin had seen illness, had watched comrades fall in war, but this felt more personal. More dangerous. He knew of her recent visits to the physician. Her strength had been faltering long before he arrived in Cellettes, though she concealed it with practiced grace.

Faustina returned with the children, her composure cracking but her resolve firm. She knelt at her mother's side, her arms enveloping her sisters. Fear clung to her face. This proud, fiery woman—the one who had challenged him so often—looked broken. Yet Severin saw her love, her vulnerability, her humanity.

He embraced Faustina, holding her with the tenderness of an older brother. She clung to him for a moment, her strength faltering. The children pressed close, their small hands finding their mother's as they whispered prayers.

The sound of a galloping horse can be heard from outside—And then, the door opened. Bethania entered with a man Severin did not recognize—the local physician. Her hair was windswept, her cheeks flushed from haste, her eyes blazing with determination. She had not crumbled. She had acted. Severin could only stand in awe.

The physician wasted no time, examining Madam Lenoir, checking her pulse, her breathing, asking pointed questions. Bethania stood nearby, her face composed but her eyes betraying her worry. Severin had never seen her so focused, so commanding.

Faustina held Hadeline close, whispering comforts as the physician worked. The scene tore at Severin's heart. He

longed to offer comfort, but words felt futile. He could only stand, observing, powerless.

At last, the physician straightened. "She must go into town," he said firmly. "A proper evaluation, more medicine. She cannot delay."

But Madam Lenoir refused. Her pride, her stubbornness, ignited a fierce debate. Her daughters pleaded, their voices urgent. Faustina's voice cracked with desperation. Severin said nothing, feeling like an outsider.

Until Faustina turned to him, her eyes bright with fear. "Severin, please. Tell her. Please."

The weight of her words stunned him. Faustina—the one who had doubted him, who had resisted his presence—now looked to him as the steady hand. In that moment, he was no longer a guest. He was family. He was needed.

He approached Madam Lenoir, his voice calm but firm. He spoke of duty, of care, of love. He reminded her of what she had built and what she must preserve. He saw the conflict in her eyes, but at last, she yielded.

"I will go," she said softly.

Severin exhaled with relief. "I will take you."

He turned to Faustina, who stood clutching her sisters. "Stay with them," he urged. "They need you."

Faustina nodded, her eyes shimmering. She pulled him into a brief hug, one filled with gratitude and lingering fear. It was a bond formed not through ease, but through fire.

Bethania stepped forward. "I will come too."

And so it was. Severin found himself in the carriage, seated beside Bethania, the roads to town winding beneath them. Their mother's safety weighed heavy, but so did the moment. Alone together. After all these months, after all the distance and missteps, it was here—a fragile space that belonged only to them.

Bethania's eyes met his, strong but shadowed. She said nothing, and neither did he. Words would come later. For now, they had only time—and the weight of what was unsaid pressing between them.

## Chapter 28 - Weight of the Past

The road stretched before them, dappled in golden light, and the countryside swayed gently beneath the summer breeze. The air was warm, yet inside the carriage, Severin felt a calm he had not known for days. Perhaps it was the release of adrenaline after the chaos, or perhaps it was something deeper. He was alone with her now. Finally.

Bethania sat beside him, her posture serene, her face unreadable. She did not seem worried, though her mother lay under a physician's care. No, she held herself with a resolve he had never known. And Severin could only admire her more for it. She was remarkable—a woman molded in fire, shaped by forces that would have broken others.

And yet, for once, he did not feel the terrible tension that usually plagued him in her presence. He felt calm. Grounded. A soldier ready to face his final battle.

The silence between them was companionable, heavy only in its anticipation. Until she broke it.

Her hand—that hand he had longed to feel for months—slipped gently over his. A gesture so simple, so soft, yet so profound. His heart paused, then surged with warmth. The last time her hand had touched his was at the wedding. That moment felt like a lifetime ago. The past week in Cellettes had been its own lifetime—a lifetime of hope and loss and confusion. And now, this. Her hand, warm over his.

She looked at him. Her voice low, sincere. “Thank you, Severin. Thank you for what you did for my mother. Thank you for being here.”

The words struck deeper than any blade. For a moment, his voice abandoned him. He could only nod, struggling to steady his breath. When the words did come, they were quiet but earnest. "It was my honor."

And then the ice was broken. Slowly, but surely, their conversation unfurled like the soft blooming of a flower. Hours passed as they spoke—of life, philosophy, faith. Of duty, of honor, of longing. Bethania, with her sharp mind and depth of knowledge, challenged him and inspired him. And yet, every so often, a flicker of girlish playfulness peeked through her composure. A tilt of the head, a knowing smile. She was young, still, despite the wisdom born of suffering.

As they rode up looking for a stopping place, she jokingly remarked, "Do you kiss as bad as you drive?" Severin sheepishly laughed. "I've always preferred horseback my dear." Giving her a jestful leer.

Moments after stopping the carriage with a view of the loire valley's rolling hills. The mood grew somber. Her voice dropped low, a shadow passing across her face.

She spoke of her father. Of his cruelty. His anger on many occasions in that household. How he had tried to force his way into the home that night of the Ball. The terror that gripped them. The strength of her mother shielding them from his wrath, standing between his violence and her children like countless times before. And the betrayal that came after her mother made the decision to divorce—how the local Protestant community, even upon learning of his brutality, turned its back on her family. On her mother. On her sisters. On her.

And it explained so much. Her behavior at the chapel that morning. Her coldness. Her anger. Her defiance.

Severin listened, his heart burning with every word. And when she finished, he spoke.

He told her of his own father. Of the man who had taught him to wield a sword but wielded cruelty even better. A man of cold eyes and colder harder hands. How his mother had tried in vain in taking the beatings meant for her children. How blood and terror had marked their household. How fear had made a home there. How even now, he felt its ghost.

And he told her, too, of the hypocrisy. Of how the men of God turned blind eyes, how faith was twisted to justify violence.

Bethania watched him. Listening. Understanding.

“All my life,” she said quietly, “my mother forbid us—every daughter—from marrying a Protestant.”

A pause. Heavy.

“But she made an exception for you. Because you are a good man”

Severin’s breath caught. His heart thundered in his chest.

An exception.

It was an honor greater than any medal. Greater than any victory. An acknowledgment he did not deserve, but would cherish forever.

A silence followed. One not of discomfort, but of understanding. A rare moment of mutual connection. Of burdens shared. Of pain laid bare.

And when the weight of words became too heavy, they drifted into quiet. The countryside rolled past. The sun warmed the carriage. And exhaustion took hold.

They lay side by side, their heads resting back, the hum of wind and horses lulling them into a fragile, uneasy sleep.

Yet, there was comfort in the closeness. In the stillness. In the knowledge that perhaps, for the first time, they truly understood each other.

And maybe, just maybe, she felt safe with him now. He prayed that it was so. And iff he achieved nothing else- that would be... ok.

## Chapter 29 – The Sunset is Beautiful

Severin stirred from his light sleep, the gentle sway of the carriage lulling him back to wakefulness. The countryside of Cellettes stretched beyond the window, awash in the tender gold of late afternoon. The pink-flowered trees—those that had come to define this land in his mind—dotted the horizon like scattered brushstrokes on a master’s canvas. The air smelled sweet, perfumed by the blossoms, the soft hum of summer lacing the world in warmth.

The sun, heavy and tired, began its slow descent, slipping beneath the horizon to rest. Severin watched it for a moment, letting the comfort of its fading light soothe him. But his gaze did not linger long on the horizon. Instead, it drifted to the woman beside him.

Bethania.

She still slept, her posture relaxed, her breathing even and soft—like a melody barely heard but deeply felt. Her hair fell over her shoulder in dark waves, catching the amber of the sun. There was a peace to her face, her lashes casting long shadows against pale skin, her lips parted slightly as if still caught in the memory of dreams.

Severin watched her, though he tried not to stare. But how could he not? How could he resist committing her face to memory, to etch every line, every soft curve of her cheek, into his soul? He feared—no, he knew—that soon he would have nothing but memory left. And memory, cruel as it was, had a way of slipping away when one most needed it.

Her brow twitched, a soft whimper escaping her lips as if some shadow of thought had stirred her. Her eyes fluttered



open. And she caught him—caught him watching her with that look, the one that gave away more than words ever could.

She did not chastise him. She did not look away. She only met his gaze with an expression so unreadable it unnerved him. As though his admiration had become a familiar thing to her. As though she had accepted it, though she would never name it.

The carriage rocked slightly, breaking the moment. She looked out the window, and Severin tore his gaze away, ashamed of his own longing.

---

They arrived soon after at the physician's home, where Madame Lenoir rested. The doctor greeted them, his face tired but calm. The news was as Severin hoped—her condition stable, her rest essential. Bethania asked the questions with precision, her voice steady, her focus unwavering. She carried herself with strength, and Severin admired her all the more for it.

She had learned to be steel, to be unyielding, to survive. There was no choice but to be so.

Satisfied with the doctor's reassurances, they took their leave to find food while the physician tended to her mother. Severin wondered at Bethania's calmness. How did she bear this weight? How did she carry the burden of fear so quietly, so gracefully?

He thought of his own mother. Of the burdens she had borne in silence. Perhaps strength was not something learned but inherited.

---

The carriage ride into the village was easier, the earlier tension between them eased by fatigue and necessity. Bethania sat closer now, and Severin found that he did not mind the lack of distance.

Their conversation, at first, was light. Bethania poked fun at his driving, teasing him with that subtle, dry humor that Severin had come to adore. He smiled, throwing back his own jests, playful and easy. There was no fear here, no heaviness of regret. Only two souls sharing a fleeting hour.

It was the first time in what felt like forever that he heard her laugh. And he realized, painfully, how rare and precious that sound had become.

---

After acquiring bread and fruit from a local vendor, they rode again, their bellies eased by simple fare. They found a place along the hills, a patch of grass where they could sit and watch the world fall into shadow.

The sky blazed in hues of crimson and violet, the last light of the day scattering across the horizon. The trees of Cellettes swayed gently in the golden wind, their pink blossoms catching the final rays as though reluctant to surrender to the night.

Severin sat back, his hands behind him, leaning into the grass. Bethania, quiet, nestled closer than before. She did not lean against him, not fully. But her nearness spoke volumes.

And then, without warning, she did. She rested her head against his shoulder, her body warm and delicate beneath the veil of her simple gown.

Severin froze, his heart hammering beneath his ribs. It was a simple gesture, but to him, it was a world. A breathless, beautiful world.

He could not speak. He could barely think. But he knew that if he moved, the moment would vanish. So he stayed still, allowing her to lay there, allowing himself to feel the weight of her against him.

His breath slowed. His pulse steadied. He wanted to ask her why. Why now? Why this tenderness? But he feared the answer, so he swallowed the question.

For this moment, he would be content.

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"The sunset is beautiful, isn't it, Severin?" she whispered, her voice barely louder than the breeze.

He looked at her then, but she did not meet his gaze. She stared into the horizon, watching as the last threads of light disappeared behind the distant hills.

Beautiful, yes. But fleeting. Temporary. Soon, it would be gone.

Like this moment. Like her.

He said nothing, afraid that any words might break the spell. But he knew the answer in his heart.

Yes, it was beautiful. Because it was slipping away. Because it would be remembered.

And so he stayed still, memorizing every detail—the brush of her hair against his arm, the warm weight of her hand in her lap, the scent of her skin beneath the dusk. Saving it, holding it close.

Perhaps the sun was setting on their love. Perhaps tomorrow would bring only distance and final goodbyes.

But not yet.

For now, the sunset was beautiful. And Bethania was still beside him.

## Chapter 30 - That's It?

The return to the Lenoir estate felt quieter than Severin expected. The carriage ride, though short, hummed with an unspoken relief—Madam Lenoir's health seemed stable, and for that, Severin was deeply thankful. Yet, every tick of the clock felt like a heavy step toward his own end, a finality he could no longer avoid.

His departure loomed. Tomorrow, he would leave Cellettes behind. Leave Bethania behind.

Upon arriving at the estate, the scene was almost too perfect, too bittersweet. The daughters flocked to their mother with quiet affection, surrounding her with warmth and care. Severin watched, his heart twisting, seeing so clearly how much Madam Lenoir was loved. And in their love, he saw the reflection of her own strength and sacrifice. It was a beautiful thing, this family, and it pained him to know he may soon be cast from its fold.

He spent time with Hadeline, fixing her broken toys, tinkering and laughing. She was sweet and innocent, her joy a balm to his heart. His conversations with Faustina and Angelica were natural, like speaking to sisters rather than strangers. Even with Madam Lenoir, who reclined gracefully in the family room, he felt at ease. She thanked him softly for all he had done, her words heavy with gratitude and something deeper—hope.

But then came the moment Severin dreaded.

Madam Lenoir called Bethania to her side, her voice light but expectant. There was pressure in her tone, a silent urging that Severin could not ignore. She wanted answers, and Bethania knew it. The room felt thick with tension.

Bethania offered vague words, ambiguous as ever, her eyes unreadable. Severin said nothing. He had learned his lesson. The past week had taught him enough about pressing too hard. But he could sense the weight of Madam Lenoir's hope—the deep wish of a mother who wanted her daughter wed to a good man, safe and loved.

It was an honor, Severin thought, to be considered worthy. Yet, it felt like standing beneath a guillotine, waiting for the blade.

After dinner, Severin decided. If nothing else, he would have this final conversation. He would speak to Bethania one last time—on his terms, not forced by anyone, not dictated by unspoken expectations.

He asked her for an audience.

She agreed quickly. Too quickly. Almost as if she had been expecting it.

He waited on the upper sitting area, staring out toward the moonlit fields. The night was beautiful, deceptively so. The world outside felt still, a cruel contrast to the storm in his mind. He had no grand speech, no clever words. He knew now that words would fail him. It had to be simple. It had to be real.

Lost in thought, he almost didn't hear the soft call from within his room.

"Severin."

He turned, surprised. There she was. Bethania.

She sat on the edge of his bed, her hands folded neatly in her lap. Her expression calm but distant, like she waited for something. A question. A confession. A moment.

This was it.

His heart pounded. His breath faltered. But he stepped forward, resolute.

"Bethania," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

He reached out. His fingers, trembling with restraint, brushed against her cheek. Just as he had done before, countless times. Her skin was cool beneath his touch, porcelain and delicate. She didn't move. She didn't flinch.

And so, he did the only thing he could. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. A gesture of reverence, of longing. A simple offering.

She didn't pull away. She accepted it.

He lingered there for a breath longer than he should have, his heart screaming for more. But he pulled back, his chest hollow.

Bethania's eyes locked with his. Something glimmered there—desire, defiance, a mystery he would never fully understand.

And then she spoke.

"That's it?" she blurted.

The words struck like a blade. Simple. Sharp.

Severin froze, caught entirely off guard. He could have prepared for rejection, even a slap to the face. But this? This confusion, this challenge—he hadn't foreseen it.

He searched her face, but it betrayed nothing.

Was it disappointment? Teasing? A test?

She stood then, circling him slowly, her steps measured. Like a predator observing its prey. Her eyes never left his.

And he, helpless as ever, watched her.

At last, he turned to face her fully. Summoning what little courage remained, he offered a lopsided, almost foolish smile.

"Well," he said, his voice low, "do I deserve a kiss, my lady?"

He tilted his cheek toward her, a challenge, a plea, a surrender.

Bethania paused. She watched him. Her gaze lingered on him like fire.

And then—softly, but with a cool edge—she said, "No."

No hesitation. No cruelty. Just certainty.

Yet she steps immediately closer, and touches his cheek with the back of her finger.

Finally, she stepped toward the door. Her fingers brushed against the wood as if testing its weight. And then she turned, just once more.



Her eyes met his. A twinkle there. Mischievous. Mocking. Mysterious.

And then she left, the door clicking softly behind her.

Severin stood alone, the echo of her footsteps fading into the walls..

## Chapter 31 - A Mother's Goodbye

Severin sat on the edge of his bed, his fingers brushing against his lips, still warm from the ghost of Bethania's skin. Her scent lingered in the air, as did the echo of her parting words—"*That's it?*" Two words. Two words that unraveled his composure and left him suspended in torment. What had she meant? Was it disappointment? A challenge?

He couldn't know. He might *never* know.

The adrenaline of the moment still pulsed faintly in his veins, but beneath it was a deeper emotion. A quiet, consuming despair that weighed him down, sinking him into the mattress beneath him. Tomorrow, he would leave. And if her answer was truly *no*, if her silence was rejection—this was the last time. The last moment. The last memory.

It wasn't enough. He wasn't enough.

Perhaps he had failed her test. Failed to be the man worthy of her trust. Worthy of her love. She was a rare woman—too rare for a man like him. Perhaps no man was worthy of her. And beauty? Not even Helen of Troy could compare. Yet it wasn't her beauty that undid him—it was her mystery, her depth, her soul that flickered like a candle behind veiled glass.

And Severin, for all his strength and valor, had never been able to breach that veil.

He could not blame her. She had lived a lifetime of betrayal. Her father's wrath. The cruelty of her faith community. What reason did she have to trust him? To

believe in love? This visit to Cellettes had been less about romance and more about proving one simple, impossible thing:

That he was safe.

And perhaps, he had failed in that. For trust must come before love.

The ache in his chest burned. He reached for parchment. His hand trembled as he picked up his quill, dipping it into ink that felt as dark as his thoughts.

He would write her a letter.

Not of grand confessions or dramatic pleas. But a simple, honest farewell. A letter to say goodbye with dignity.

*"Bethania," he began, his handwriting shaken. "I thank you for your kindness. For the conversations shared, for the hospitality I have received here. It has been an honor to walk alongside you, even for a short time."*

He paused, his hand hovering.

*"Forgive me for any moments where I was less than the man you deserve. If I have pressed you, or made you uncomfortable, it was never my wish."*

He swallowed. The words that followed clawed from his chest.

*"Your sister Hadeline has been a joy. I will miss her laugh most of all. She carries within her the light of this home. And your mother—what strength and love reside within*

*her. She is a woman of grace, and her kindness will not be forgotten."*

His breath hitched as he neared the end. The hardest words to write.

*"These have been the best months of my life, yet the hardest. To know you has been a blessing. To leave you... will be the greatest sorrow."*

He hesitated, quill shaking as he dipped it again in ink.

*"And still... I ask only one thing. If there is even a shadow of hope, if you feel anything that might grow with time... I ask that you wait for me. That you not cast my memory aside too quickly. For I would wait an eternity for you, Bethania. Even if it is in vain."*

He finished the letter with a simple sign-off—no flourishes, no titles. Just his name.

*Severin.*

Folding it carefully, he sealed it, though part of him ached to tear it apart. Was it desperation? Was it dignity? He couldn't tell anymore. Perhaps it was both.

As he placed the letter by his bedside, a soft knock sounded at the door.

His pulse spiked. Bethania?

But no. He heard the quiet, weary voice of Madam Lenoir.

He composed himself and opened the door. She stood there, pale and drawn, but graceful as always. A woman

who had endured a lifetime of burdens and carried them all with dignity.

“May I?” she asked.

He stepped aside, gesturing her in.

They spoke quietly. Of simple things. She did not mention Bethania, though Severin sensed the unspoken words in the air. Perhaps she already knew what had transpired. Perhaps she trusted that whatever had happened was already in God’s hands.

He thanked her for her kindness. For welcoming him, for trusting him.

“You are always welcome here,” she said softly, though her voice trembled with weariness. “This is your home as long as you desire it.”

But Severin shook his head. The words burned as he spoke them.

“I thank you,” he said. “But I will not return... unless Bethania herself desires it.”

The words cut him to say. They cut her to hear. Severin could see it in her eyes—something ancient and pained, something motherly. She reminded him so much of his own mother. Of the woman who had shielded him from darkness. Of the woman who had sacrificed for love.

His heart broke. Not just for himself, but for her. For all of them. For the home he was about to leave behind.

And Severin, who had survived wars and bloodshed, felt like a soldier wounded beyond repair.

He stood, bowing his head.

“You are a mother I would be proud to call my own,” he said. And it was true.

Madam Lenoir smiled faintly. “God’s will is stronger than ours, Severin. Do not forget that.”

She left with those words, her strength somehow even greater in the face of her pain.

Severin sat in the darkness, alone once more. He thought of Bethania. Of her quietness. Of her fierce strength. Of her mystery.

And he prayed.

Not for victory. Not for love. Not for anything specific.

Just prayed.

Until sleep took him, heavy and uncertain. Until dreams swallowed him whole.

## Chapter 32 - Aubade Ataraxia

It was early, colder than any other morning Severin had known in Cellettes. His body stirred before his mind was ready, leaving him feeling numb, emotionless—a defeated warrior forced into retreat. Ironically, he found himself wishing he could endure the brutality of Moscow again rather than face this quiet, freezing departure.

He was surely the only one awake at this hour. Outside, the darkness was slowly breaking, dawn lingering just beneath the horizon. Hastily, he gathered his things, determined to leave before the house awoke. Severin had already said enough goodbyes to last him a lifetime. No more farewells; no more promises that may never be kept. He would slip away quietly, a ghost in the early morning darkness, bound for Vendôme and whatever waited beyond.

Yet as he moved through his preparations, something within him hesitated. He stopped, exhaling slowly. Around his neck hung his Greek cross—his most treasured possession, the thing he had carried through war, loss, and triumph. Beside him lay the letter he had penned late into the night for Bethania, words of gratitude, apology, and quiet hope. He carefully lifted the cross over his head and placed it gently upon the letter, the cold silver gleaming softly in the dim light.

In that moment, Severin knew he had given Bethania not just a token but his very heart. Figuratively and literally, the cross represented everything he was, everything he carried within. How could he ever truly love another as he loved her?

Quietly, now determined, he gathered the rest of his belongings. Like a phantom, he descended the staircase,

each step an echo of the home that had embraced him so briefly yet warmly. He felt its emptiness now, a hollow space that had once been alive with laughter, tension, and the possibility of love.

In the kitchen, he had left behind a few scattered belongings. His philosophy book sat on the table, silent and patient as ever. He reached for it quickly, hoping to avoid drawing attention. Dawn's first golden rays slipped through the windows, bathing the room in quiet warmth.

As he picked up the book, Severin froze. Steam rose lazily into the morning air, dancing gracefully within the gentle dawn light. His eyes drifted downward to the source—a freshly brewed cup of tea, placed there with care. Mint tea, exactly as he had requested days prior when Bethania had asked what he preferred. Beside the tea rested a neat bowl of tea packets, arranged carefully alongside a small handful of the same candies he had once gifted her, now returned thoughtfully.

He stared at the gesture for a moment, heart swelling, a slow smile forming upon his lips. Perhaps Bethania had heard him stirring earlier, quietly rising to prepare this farewell gift. It was tender in its simplicity, powerful in its unspoken words.

Severin took the cup, feeling the warmth of the porcelain through his fingers, inhaling the familiar scent. As he sipped the tea, he wondered briefly—would Bethania appear suddenly, rushing to him with the embrace he had long dreamed of? Would she whisper words he longed to hear? Or was this cup, this small act of kindness, her gentle way of saying goodbye—letting him go without fuss or grand gesture?



He lingered for only a few more precious moments. The tea soothed him, the sweetness of her gift both comforting and sorrowful. But he had already made his decision: no more goodbyes, no more uncertain conversations. He had done all he could, said all that he dared.

Quietly, Severin made his way out of the estate, the sun now steadily rising behind him, casting long shadows along the pink-flowered trees of Cellettes. He mounted his horse and turned toward Vendôme. As he rode forward, the dawn itself became his companion—a silent passenger guiding him home.

With the gentle warmth of the morning sun upon his skin and the sweetness of Bethania's candy on his tongue, Severin felt a quiet peace, a calm surrender. If fate allowed, perhaps one day he might return. But for now, he accepted the stillness, content in this quiet aubade of ataraxia—a peace found not in victory, but in acceptance.

## Chapter 33 - His Necklace

Bethania stood by the bedroom window, her breath softly fogging the cold glass as dawn painted its first strokes across the horizon. Her gaze was locked upon the retreating silhouette of Severin, slowly fading into the gentle landscape of Cellettes. She did not move—not until his figure became indistinct, blending completely into the morning mist.

In her hand was the necklace—**his** necklace. She ran her thumb gently over the Greek cross, feeling the smoothness of worn silver, tracing its delicate engravings. The metal carried warmth as though it still held a fragment of his essence. It was heavy, far heavier than she'd expected, burdened perhaps by years of memories and unspoken stories. Its aged appearance told of battles, struggles, hopes, and silent prayers—now a token left behind, resting quietly in her palm.

She shivered slightly, conscious for the first time that she stood barefoot on the cold wooden floor, still clad in her sleepwear. She glanced down, unfolding again the letter Severin had carefully penned before his departure, and began reading it anew. Each word, gentle yet sorrowful, felt like a delicate brushstroke upon her heart. The apologies, the gratitude, the affectionate mention of little Hadeline and of her beloved mother—all filled her with warmth, yet pierced her with quiet regret.

"Wait for me," he had written, his handwriting a careful dance of hope and resignation. It was a desperate plea, barely hidden beneath his elegant, disciplined script. She folded the letter slowly, biting softly at her lower lip, gaze drifting toward the window again, searching hopelessly for

any trace of him. But Severin was long gone, swallowed by distance and circumstance.

A pang of sadness mixed with guilt tugged at her chest, realizing she'd watched him leave—again. Twice now she'd let him go, standing idly by, cloaked in silence, shadows, and indecision. Twice now she'd felt this ache, this hollow emptiness. Bethania exhaled slowly, feeling frustration build within herself.

Her thoughts flickered to the cup of tea she'd brewed earlier, hoping he would notice the gesture, perhaps linger just a bit longer, hesitate long enough to give her courage to emerge from her hiding place. Yet she'd stayed hidden in the shadows, afraid, uncertain. And he had left, quietly, without another word.

As she considered this, memories flooded her again—memories of tenderness, kindness, and, inevitably, anger. Her proud heart recoiled at the harsh words Severin had spoken just a few nights before, words born of hurt and prideful frustration. Her frown deepened. She closed her fingers around the necklace firmly, willing herself not to be swayed by sentimentality. With determination, she crossed the room, opened a drawer, and placed both the necklace and letter inside.

With a confident flick of her wrist, she shut the drawer decisively, turning away as though dismissing the emotions within it. She stepped toward the door, head held high, shoulders squared. Yet, after only a few short steps, she hesitated, her feet anchored suddenly by an unspoken truth. Her resolve wavered; her heart softened.

Defeated, Bethania sighed, her proud shoulders relaxing as she turned slowly back toward the drawer. She opened it

again, this time tenderly, her touch reverent. She lifted the necklace out once more, carefully running her fingers along the delicate cross.

"Something so beautiful," she murmured softly to herself, "deserves the light."

She walked quietly toward the mantle, placing Severin's cross delicately upon it. The silver caught the pale morning sunlight, gleaming softly. It felt as if she'd finally allowed him a rightful place, a presence, in her life, in her space—openly rather than hidden away.

Bethania sat down softly upon the bed—the same bed Severin had slept upon for nearly a week. She felt strangely close to him, as though his essence lingered in the very air around her. Her eyes drifted upward toward the ceiling, then slowly to the mirror by the bedside.

Staring back at her was a woman she scarcely recognized—softness in her expression, vulnerability evident, eyes filled with undeniable longing. She blinked softly, looking away in surprise and shame. Yet when she returned her gaze to the mirror, she saw herself clearly again, and in that quiet moment she could no longer deny what she'd tried so hard to resist:

She missed him.

## Chapter 34 - Girl in My Heart

Two weeks had passed. Yet, in Séverin de Derbois's mind, it might as well have been a lifetime. He had returned to Meslay, resumed his duties, trained diligently, and engaged in his familiar routines. Yet nothing felt quite the same. Loneliness now shadowed his every step, casting even familiar comforts into bitter relief.

He found himself at his fencing practice more often now, the weight of the blade familiar yet unable to distract him fully. It occupied his body but left his mind free to wander—to drift toward her. Even in the midst of a bout, as his blade sliced through air or parried a phantom blow, he imagined Bethania's face—her intense eyes, her elusive smiles, her infuriating ambiguity.

Each time he ventured into town, whether for business or mere distraction, Severin found himself scanning the crowd for glimpses of raven-black hair or slender, graceful figures that could belong to her. Every woman with even the vaguest resemblance triggered a tightening in his chest, a painful surge of hope followed inevitably by disappointment. He knew his foolishness, but logic had no hold over his heart.

At night, when he lay awake, unable to sleep, he retraced every moment spent at the Lenoir estate. Every conversation analyzed, every argument regretted, every missed opportunity felt like a dagger in his heart. He wondered endlessly what might have changed had he been gentler, more patient, more understanding—or perhaps more decisive. Could he have altered their fate if he had kissed her lips rather than her cheek? Was the difference

between happiness and heartbreak so simple, so cruelly slight?

He had told his friends of Bethania, each one responding differently—some sympathetic, others skeptical. Yet when Severin spoke of her, even amid the painful memories, his voice carried a note of reverence. Honey dripped from his words; his eyes shone brighter. It was an odd joy, speaking of her, reliving their fleeting moments, even if each recounting reopened wounds barely begun to heal.

And Severin found himself praying more fervently than he had in all his life—more than he had on the battlefield, more than during any tournament or crisis. His prayers were raw, desperate pleas whispered into the quiet darkness:

*"Lord, take this desire from my heart. Take this Girl from my heart."*

But no matter how desperately he prayed, Bethania remained fixed firmly within him, unyielding to his pleas.

Then came a quiet, ordinary morning. Severin was sipping his tea, the world around him peaceful yet joyless, when the mail arrived. The servant brought him a letter, its delicate parchment immediately familiar. His heart jolted violently within his chest.

It was from Bethania.

For a moment, he simply held the letter, savoring its weight, afraid of what it might say. Finally, with trembling fingers, he broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

*Your Grace,*

*I pray you traveled safely and are in good health. My family and I are faring adequately, considering recent events. My mother's condition is improved, and she wishes me to send her warm regards.*

*Yours respectfully,  
Bethania Lenoir*

He stared at the parchment, reading it again and again. It was polite, formal, and frustratingly vague. No questions. No reference to his necklace or the deeply personal letter he had left her. No indication of her true thoughts or feelings. It felt like a letter she would send a distant acquaintance—not the man who had kissed her cheek, who had shared her carriage, who had held her through her fears.

Disappointment curled around him. He began composing a reply, bitterness fueling each stroke of his pen. He would respond in kind—cold, courteous, distant. If she wanted detachment, he could grant her that dignity, painful as it was.

But halfway through the letter, his hand slowed. He felt shame. He realized how unfairly harsh he was being. He remembered vividly Bethania's weary eyes, her tired feet on cold kitchen floors, her heavy burdens—the painful divorce of her parents, the relentless judgment of her community. Her hesitation and aloofness were not cruelty; they were her defense. He knew too well the wounds that mistrust and betrayal left upon one's heart. Who was he to judge her now?

Gently, he crumpled the half-written letter, tossing it aside. He took a fresh sheet, breathing deeply to settle his heart. This letter would carry grace, not judgment.

*Dear Mademoiselle Lenoir,*

*I thank you kindly for your letter, and I am greatly relieved to hear of your mother's improving health. Please convey to Madame Lenoir my deepest regards and sincere well-wishes.*

*I find myself thinking often of my time in Cellettes. Your family's warmth and kindness have left a deep mark upon my heart. May your days ahead be filled with joy, strength, and peace.*

*If you should ever need a friend or an ally, know that I remain forever at your service.*

*Yours most respectfully and sincerely,  
Séverin de Derbois*

He sealed the letter with careful precision, entrusting it into the servant's hand before he could second-guess himself again.

Stepping to the window, he watched as the messenger departed toward Cellettes, carrying a piece of his heart along with it. He prayed softly once more—not a desperate plea this time, but rather a gentle hope that someday, somehow, his heart would find peace.

Yet even as he prayed, Severin knew the truth: Bethania still held him, captive within the fortress of her mystery. And he doubted very much that peace would come easily, if at all.



## Chapter 35 – "Remembering Elise"

He was dreaming again.

Dreaming of a love long past, a love so gentle and tender that even now, its echoes brought warmth amid the storm of his present torment. In dreams, time unraveled, pulling him back to Vendôme, to the days when love had seemed so uncomplicated, so innocent—before titles and war, before pain and loss.

To Elise.

In the dream, she stood among the flowering fields, bathed in a golden spring sun. Her dark brown hair, soft and flowing, framed a delicate face that held eyes of deepest amber. Those eyes—he had nearly forgotten their quiet intensity, the intelligence and gentle wisdom that always shimmered within them.

She smiled at him, as she always had, her expression simple yet profound, promising everything yet demanding nothing. She was holding a book, her fingers tracing softly over the pages as she always did, lost in thought yet aware of his presence. Elise, the quiet romantic, who spent hours wandering worlds contained within novels, always ponderous, forever curious about life's mysteries.

"You always come back here, don't you?" she said softly, her voice as clear as a bell, bringing tears to his dreaming eyes.

He stepped closer, as if doing so could hold this memory longer, keep it from fading into mist. The scent of wildflowers danced around them, mingling with Elise's familiar fragrance. She was real here, in this place. Real in his heart still, after all these years.

He remembered clearly those countless letters she had written—her words, elegant and honest, inked upon pages that were now hidden away in a box he could never bring himself to reopen. It was all he had left of her, that box of letters, each sentence containing pieces of her soul. The thought of reading them felt overwhelming, too vivid and real. A testament to the love he had lost, to the young woman who had loved him purely and completely, not for who he had become, nor for his titles and honors—but simply for being himself, Severin.

He reached out, his fingers brushing hers lightly. Warmth surged through his veins, both comforting and torturous. "Elise," he murmured softly, his voice breaking, "you understood me in a way no one else ever could."

Her amber eyes looked up into his, penetrating, seeing beyond what anyone else had ever bothered to find. "You made it easy, Severin. Loving you was the easiest thing I've ever done."

Her words pierced him, more painful in their truth. He thought immediately of Bethania, of the labyrinth he navigated daily, striving desperately to earn her trust, her approval, her affection. Elise had never asked for that—had never required proof of worthiness. With her, love had been simple, safe, unconditional.

"Maybe I don't deserve easy," he admitted softly, feeling vulnerable even within the privacy of his dream.

Elise shook her head gently, her eyes filled with compassion. "Everyone deserves to be loved purely, Severin. Even you."

"But I failed—"

"No," she interrupted firmly, embracing him with a soft hug. "You never failed me. Life took me away—not you. You never stopped loving me."

He closed his eyes, fighting the ache that rose in his throat.

"But now your heart yearns for another," she continued, stepping back slightly, her expression wistful but understanding. "And she is not easy, is she?"

Severin lowered his eyes, shame and guilt flooding him simultaneously. "Bethania is... complicated. It is different with her. Difficult."

Elise smiled gently. "But you love her."

He nodded slowly, painfully.

"And that frightens you?"

"It terrifies me," he confessed. "To love someone who seems so far beyond my reach."

Elise placed a hand softly over his heart. "Remember Severin- It took you a year to find the courage to even have our first conversation 14 years ago. I might have seemed out of reach then."

"Bethania challenges you, makes you confront parts of yourself you'd rather avoid. Perhaps that is why you cannot let her go."

"Perhaps," he agreed reluctantly. "But I fear I may never have her."

She laughed softly, a sound sweet and musical. "You were never one to surrender, Severin. Not to anything. Not even fear. Especially not love."

He looked at her, desperate for the wisdom she had always offered freely.

Her gaze softened, filled with a tenderness that he had missed profoundly. "Love her with the same purity with which you once loved me. Not because of who she is, nor who you are, but because your heart knows no other way."

He inhaled sharply, knowing he would awaken soon, that this precious moment was slipping through his fingers like sand.

"Eli—"

"I know," she interrupts, *gently touching his cheek with the back of her finger*, stepping away as the golden fields begin to fade into mist.

As the vision of her dissolved, he was left standing alone in the field, holding nothing but the lingering warmth of her presence. Slowly, Severin opened his eyes, staring at the familiar ceiling of his room in Meslay, tears gently tracing his cheeks.

Elise was gone again, yet her words echoed clearly in his mind.

## Chapter 36 – "Sisters"

The carriage ride to Blois was bumpier than usual. Each rut and stone along the dusty summer road seemed exaggerated, unsettling all passengers and thoughts alike. Bethania gazed absently at the horizon, where the late-summer blooms painted the trees in bursts of delicate pink and ivory, creating a beautiful yet melancholic tapestry beneath the waning sun.

Faustina sat quietly beside her, holding Hadeline securely in her lap, gently smoothing the little girl's curls with sisterly tenderness. Hadeline, blissfully unaware of the burdens the older sisters carried, stared eagerly out at the countryside, bright-eyed and curious about everything that crossed her view.

"Bethania," Hadeline suddenly chirped, breaking the silence. Her innocent voice was clear and bright, a welcome distraction from Bethania's swirling thoughts. "What are you doing for your birthday?"

The question caught Bethania off guard, her heart skipping a beat. Had it truly slipped her mind? The truth was, between their mother's illness, the countless household duties, and the unending turmoil of her heart regarding Severin, Bethania had scarcely given thought to her approaching birthday. The idea felt foreign—almost trivial—in light of their family's current difficulties.

She hesitated, unsure how to respond. The question hovered in the air, waiting, until Hadeline's patience snapped like the delicate stem of a flower.

"Will Severin be coming?" Hadeline blurted eagerly, eyes lighting up with unmistakable excitement.

Bethania felt her breath catch, and the carriage seemed suddenly much smaller, the air stifling. She glanced at Faustina, expecting judgment or perhaps disapproval, but was startled to find only genuine curiosity in her older sister's eyes—curiosity mixed, perhaps, with a softened acceptance she had not expected. Had Faustina come around, at last, to approving of Severin?

Clearing her throat, Bethania managed a gentle but evasive reply. "He's a very busy man, Hadeline."

But the child was not easily pacified, nor did she accept vague answers so easily. Her small face twisted with frustration and disappointment, tears glistening at the corners of her eyes.

"But I miss him," Hadeline persisted, voice trembling with the earnestness only a child possessed. "He promised he would come again!"

Those words stabbed deeply into Bethania's heart, sharp and painful. The image of Severin's last goodbye flashed vividly in her mind—his quiet departure in the early morning, the silver necklace, the letter she had read a hundred times already. She found herself unexpectedly emotional, her usual careful composure fracturing. Her voice came out softly, without thought:

"And I miss him too."

It was the first time she'd allowed herself to admit those words aloud. They echoed in the air, surprising even herself. Bethania quickly turned away, unable to bear Faustina's penetrating gaze, nor the inquisitive eyes of Hadeline. She stared resolutely out the window, pretending

to focus on the trees and blossoms that passed, though her vision blurred slightly with unshed tears.

In the silence, Faustina chuckled softly, more gentle than mocking. It was a laugh of quiet understanding, born from the years of shared pain, joy, and everything between them. Bethania felt Faustina's hand touch hers briefly, a silent gesture of sisterly reassurance.

Then, with practiced ease, Faustina reached into the small bag beside them, retrieving a familiar small bundle of sweets tied in a delicate ribbon. She leaned forward, gently brushing away Hadeline's tears, and smiled warmly.

"Look here, Hadeline," Faustina soothed gently, presenting the candies. "These are from Severin himself. Would you like one?"

Hadeline's sniffles slowed, her eyes widening as she carefully selected a candy, popping it thoughtfully into her mouth. A smile spread slowly across her face, sunshine emerging after a storm. "He always brings the sweetest candies," she murmured, instantly comforted.

Bethania watched the exchange quietly, feeling a warmth blossom in her chest. In that moment, Faustina's gesture was more than kindness—it was an unspoken acceptance, a recognition that perhaps Severin was already part of their lives in a deeper way than any of them could fully admit.

As the carriage continued on its bumpy journey, Bethania leaned her head back against the cushioned seat, stealing quiet glances at Hadeline and Faustina. Her heart felt tender and full—both warmed by her sister's newfound acceptance and saddened by her own complicated feelings. Yet, in the gentle sway of the carriage, as Hadeline's tears

dried and Faustina watched them both with knowing affection, Bethania realized something profound:

Perhaps loving Severin wasn't entirely her own decision. Perhaps fate—and those she loved—had already chosen for her.



## Chapter 37 – "Gossip Girl"

The low hum of conversation filled the cozy restaurant, its walls warmed by candlelight, the scent of food and ale mingling pleasantly with the chatter of familiar voices. Severin sat among his friends, Marcel and Cristian, along with a handful of acquaintances from his religious community in Vendôme. Despite the smiles and laughter that surrounded him, Severin felt distant—his mind adrift, endlessly contemplating Bethania.

He'd been providing his friends with the latest updates in his unfolding saga—the highs and lows, the unanswered questions, the lingering ache of unfulfilled love. With Bethania's birthday nearing, his mind had become restless, uncertain how to acknowledge the date, or if he should at all. Yet deep within, he knew precisely what he desired: to shower her with affection, to give her everything, to express his heart openly and without reservation.

"What do you think I should do?" Severin finally asked, his voice earnest yet weary. He glanced at Marcel, whose eyes twinkled knowingly, and then Cristian, whose expression was more cautious.

Cristian shrugged gently. "Perhaps you should give her space, Severin. Let her miss you a bit. After all, you've done more than enough already."

Marcel chuckled softly, shaking his head in disagreement. "Nonsense. If you love her, don't hold back. Send flowers, chocolates—write her poetry. Do it all! Let her know precisely how much she means to you."

Severin smiled wryly at their conflicting counsel. As usual, he was caught between two opposing impulses: patience

and passion. Still, neither piece of advice settled comfortably within his chest. The internal struggle remained unresolved.

Across the room, unnoticed by Severin and his friends, a young woman sat alone, ostensibly absorbed in her cup of tea. But her eyes flickered frequently towards Severin's table, her attention sharp and unwavering, absorbing each word.

Feeling a restless urge, Severin stood abruptly, excusing himself from the table. "Pardon me, I must find our waiter—I have a question," he murmured vaguely to his companions, not waiting for a reply before stepping away.

He navigated through the crowd, toward the back of the restaurant where the staff typically lingered. But before he reached the door, a snippet of conversation drifted into his ears—feminine voices speaking in hushed, conspiratorial tones. He paused instinctively, curiosity drawing him toward the hidden speakers. Silently, he turned the corner and pressed himself against the wall, ears attuned to the whispers.

"Did you hear about the Lenoir family?" said one voice, high and sharp-edged, dripping with disdain masked as excitement.

Severin tensed immediately, a surge of anger flaring within him. He hated gossip, especially when it concerned people he held dear. He was about to step forward, prepared to sternly defend the honor of Bethania and her family, when the next words paralyzed him.

"Godfrey Rousseau told me himself," the woman continued, her voice tinged with bitterness. "I suppose he

lost interest in me now that he's set his sights on a Lenoir girl. He spoke highly of her—though not by name, of course—until last week when he finally let it slip. It's Bethania, can you believe that?"

The name struck Severin like a blade, sharp and deep, slicing directly into his heart. He gripped the wall for support, nausea roiling through him as he struggled to process the revelation. Godfrey Rousseau—the same Godfrey he'd faced and defeated in Blois. Godfrey Rousseau—cruel, manipulative, and dishonorable. Severin's pulse quickened, his jaw clenched tightly, every muscle in his body rigid with rage and disbelief.

"Poor girl," responded another voice, dripping with condescending amusement. "Doesn't she realize the sort of man Rousseau is? A heartbreaker, a scoundrel!"

Severin could bear no more. His fists clenched, his chest tight. A dizzying mixture of jealousy, anger, and helplessness surged through him. He stepped away from the wall, nearly stumbling as he fled the suffocating conversation.

Composing himself just enough to mask the storm within, he quickly returned to his friends' table. Cristian noticed his pallor immediately.

"Severin? What's wrong?" Cristian's voice was laced with genuine concern.

"I...I must leave," Severin muttered, voice strained. His face was pale, his eyes bloodshot with suppressed emotion.

Marcel stood abruptly, reaching out gently to halt him.

"Wait—Severin, tell us what's happened. You're shaking!"

But Severin shook his head, brushing off Marcel's hand softly. "I can't—I must go. Forgive me."

And with that, he left quickly, leaving his bewildered friends staring after him.

Outside, the cool evening air did nothing to calm the tempest raging within his chest. His thoughts spiraled dangerously, questions filling his mind with torment. Was Bethania truly entangled with Godfrey Rousseau, that loathsome man? Was her heart lost to him already? Or worse—was Severin merely another fool who'd fallen prey to her charms, unaware of her affections for another?

He walked rapidly, each step pounding on the pavement as if trying to outrun the words he'd overheard, the awful doubt now clawing its way through his heart. But no matter how swiftly he moved, the name echoed cruelly in his mind:

Godfrey Rousseau.

And with every echo, Severin felt the foundation beneath his hopes and dreams begin to crumble.



## Chapter 38 – Painful Truth

The candle flickered dimly in Severin's private study at Meslay, its gentle glow barely illuminating the weight of turmoil shadowing his features. His mind raced uncontrollably, the sting of betrayal sharp and bitter in his chest. The overheard conversation at Blois played again and again, like the relentless pounding of war drums echoing through his heart.

The name—Godfrey—had felt like a dagger plunged into his gut. How cruel fate could be, that such a man might compete for Bethania's heart. Yet more agonizing still was Bethania herself—so seemingly unreadable. Could it be true? Could she have concealed this interest from him?

His jaw clenched. This uncertainty gnawed at him relentlessly. He reached for parchment, hastily penning his thoughts, seeking answers from the only person he believed could clarify this torment—Madam Lenoir.

The words spilled forth raw, unfiltered:

Madam Lenoir,

I must ask you plainly—I overheard troubling news today. Is it true that Bethania has correspondence or affection toward Monsieur Godfrey Rousseau? I must know this truth from you. I place my trust in your honesty.

Yours earnestly,  
S. de Derbois

Severin sealed the letter immediately, dispatching it by express courier without hesitation. Restless, sleep eluded him that night, thoughts spiraling like a tempest.

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Two days later, a courier arrived at Meslay bearing letters from Cellettes. Severin's heart quickened as he took them in hand. There were two envelopes. One clearly penned by Madame Lenoir, with its familiar elegant handwriting, the other smaller, starkly plain, uncharacteristically devoid of the elaborate adornment Bethania had always favored. He opened Madame Lenoir's first.

*"My Dear Severin,  
Your letter comes as a shock, for this is news to me as well. Indeed, Godfrey Rousseau previously expressed his intent to marry Maria. She declined his hand. He is not a man our family admires or wishes to associate with, and I can assure you Bethania holds no affection toward him. Rest easy, for my daughter has made no indication to me of interest in him."  
— Madame Lenoir*

Severin's breath calmed slightly at the clarity of Madame Lenoir's message, yet his heart still pounded as he turned to the second envelope—Bethania's.

He hesitated, then tore it open with trembling fingers.

It was brief. Cold. Written hastily.

*"Severin,  
You presume too much. You have no right to meddle in my personal matters, romantic or otherwise. You are neither my fiancé nor husband. I am deeply upset with*

*you, Severin. Let it be known—my life and my choices belong solely to me."*

There was no signature, no decoration—just those sharp, defensive words. The pain stabbed deeper than any blade he had ever felt. His pride wounded, his dignity shredded. He could feel Bethania's frustration, her anger searing through the page.

How could she misunderstand him so gravely?

He thought to reply immediately, to clarify, to justify his intentions. But pride, wounded deeply, held him still. Why apologize for a crime he never committed? He had only acted upon truths revealed to him. The letter fell from his fingers onto the desk.

"I have done enough," he whispered to the empty room, his voice choked with pain. "Perhaps too much already."

He passed the night in torment, his mind spiraling into despair. Bethania had never felt further away, her trust severed by his own hand, even if inadvertently.

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Morning came with dreary skies, matching Severin's mood. Training provided no comfort, nor did prayer or meditation. He resolved himself: it was over. It had to be.

But just as resignation settled in his heart, another letter arrived. He recognized the delicate script immediately. Bethania again.



This letter, he saw at once, held all the familiar flourishes he had come to associate with her gentle touch. He opened it with cautious optimism.

*"Severin,*

*I regret deeply my harsh words. They were unworthy of you, and unfair. My anger is my own, born of pressures and fears you cannot know.*

*Please forgive my abruptness. Know that my frustrations were not truly for you. You have been nothing but patient, and perhaps I resent my inability to return your kindness adequately.*

*There are indeed many suitors, Severin, as you must know. Yet my feelings, whatever they might become, will never be determined by others' wishes or expectations, only by my own heart.*

*Take care. I wish you happiness, always. God bless you.*  
– Bethania.

This letter, softer, with familiar ornamentation and gentle curves of her handwriting, held a warmth absent from her previous one. Severin breathed deeply, a slow ache settling in his chest.

He felt confused. Conflicted.

She pushed and pulled like the tides, leaving him drowning in uncertainty. Clearly, other men circled around her, waiting for a chance—Godfrey among them, sinister and dark. The thought of Bethania even considering Rousseau made him feel physically ill.

He stared at the parchment, weighing the sincerity in her words. She apologized, yes, but offered nothing else. No reassurance, no promise. Only sorrow, only softness, a careful tenderness that almost felt like goodbye.

Severin folded the letter gently, placing it carefully in the small box where he kept her previous letters, beside Elise's forgotten correspondence. His fingers lingered momentarily, tracing over her name—Bethania Lenoir.

He knew now how thoroughly she had infiltrated his heart. She was not a mere infatuation, not an easy fancy to abandon. No, he loved her truly, painfully, desperately.

Yet he also realized the sobering truth—that loving her might mean accepting this eternal uncertainty. Accepting her contradictions, her mysteries, her barriers. Perhaps, he thought with sadness, he was simply not destined to understand her completely.

He closed the box, rising slowly from his desk, turning toward the window. The countryside stretched endlessly before him, empty and beautiful and lonely.

“Is this my fate?” he whispered, his heart heavy. “To wait forever for a woman who cannot—or will not—decide?”

There was no answer. Only silence.

And in that silence, Severin felt something shift within himself. A quiet resolve, painful yet necessary. He would wait, yes. Perhaps forever. Because what else could a man in love do but wait?

And in that moment, alone beneath a sky heavy with sorrow, he finally understood the true weight of love's painful truth: It asked for everything and promised nothing in return

## Chapter 39 – "Bakeware"

As Bethania's birthday approached, silence had settled between her and Severin. No letters, no notes—only distance and quiet contemplation. Each day, Severin found himself guarded yet hopeful, his heart a cautious ember still glowing in the dark. He missed her terribly, though he admitted it only to himself in the solitude of his prayers.

For weeks, he wrestled with himself, weighing the words from her last letter, haunted by the gossip linking Bethania to Godfrey Rousseau. He was painfully aware of his jealousy, recognizing it as both weakness and proof of the sincerity of his love. The memory of their argument still stung, yet he held no bitterness toward Bethania—only regret at his hasty assumptions.

But he would not let such shadows spoil her birthday.

Determined to do something special, he spent hours reflecting on what would bring her true joy, what would speak softly of his thoughtfulness and care without overwhelming her. Eventually, the memory of the tournament day in Cellettes surfaced warmly—the aroma of cakes baking, her proud and delicate hands decorating with such elegant detail, her joy in sharing her creations with her family. And the softness in her eyes as they had stood side by side, making his chocolate brioche together.

Yes. Baking had always brought her happiness.

He quickly engaged a master craftsman in Vendôme, commissioning a unique set of bakeware. Each piece meticulously fabricated—beautifully engraved, intricate yet subtle, embellished with delicate floral patterns that matched Bethania's elegance. He had the set personalized

discreetly: her initials, gently intertwined, tucked within patterns that only she would notice upon close inspection.

Holding the finished pieces, Severin felt a rush of tender satisfaction. This gift was not extravagant in the traditional sense, but deeply personal—thoughtful enough to be cherished, practical enough to remind her of him whenever she baked. He hoped it would foster and nurture the quiet passion he had witnessed firsthand.

Yet his heart wasn't settled until he had prepared gifts for Hadeline. Sweet little Hadeline—who had offered him a place in her heart with childlike purity and acceptance. To her, he sent a box brimming with fine, artisan candies from Vendôme's most famous confectioner. Alongside that, a carefully chosen collection of beautifully crafted porcelain dolls, each one dressed in luxurious fabrics with delicate lace trim. He imagined her tiny hands holding them with excitement, her bright eyes widening at such treasures.

The ache of longing filled him, wishing he could be there to see her reaction, to hear her joyful giggles. Hadeline deserved happiness, just as Bethania did.

On the day he carefully packaged the gifts for transport, his emotions were tangled. He wrote no elaborate letter—just a small card, simple and sincere:

*"For your birthday, Bethania. May it bring you happiness always. And for your dear sisters, candies and dolls to sweeten their smiles. Warmest regards, Severin."*

No grand declarations. No assumptions. Just enough to remind her that despite distance and misunderstanding, he remained there—always there—should she need him.

He secretly hoped for an invitation, an opening from Bethania, a whisper of reconciliation. Yet he knew it was unlikely, perhaps impossible. Still, he prayed quietly for the courage to accept her decisions, to find peace if her happiness meant his absence.

And so, the gifts left Meslay, traveling toward Cellettes carrying not just bakeware, candies, and dolls—but Severin's quiet, unwavering hope.

## Chapter 40 – "Birthday"

It was a lively morning at the Lenoir estate, a festive energy filling every corner of the house. Hadeline's cheerful laughter echoed throughout the halls, her tiny feet pattering swiftly over the floors as she ran excitedly from room to room. Madame Lenoir, in brighter spirits than she'd been in weeks, busied herself in the kitchen alongside Faustina and Abeline, the delightful aroma of freshly baked pastries and simmering dishes filling the air. The estate was filled with joyful chatter; all the Lenoir sisters were present, gathered to celebrate Bethania's birthday—just a small, intimate gathering, exactly as Bethania herself had requested.

Upstairs, Bethania sat quietly at her vanity, gazing pensively out toward the driveway. Her eyes lingered over the distant horizon, memories unbidden yet gently welcomed, taking shape before her eyes. She remembered clearly the vision of Severin riding toward the estate, proud and dignified, his eyes forever seeking hers, the warmth of his presence both comforting and unnerving.

She sighed softly, forcing herself from the reverie, and began readying herself for the day. Gently applying touches of makeup, she watched her reflection in the vanity mirror. Behind her, the empty room felt colder now. For a moment she half-expected—half-wished—to see Severin standing there, his gentle gaze and that familiar silver cross glinting softly in the sunlight. Her eyes flickered momentarily to the mantle, where Severin's cross still rested, untouched yet often admired.

Just as she turned her gaze toward the window again, movement caught her eye. A mail carrier was slowly

approaching the estate, carefully carrying a large box along with a bundle of letters. Her heart stirred with anxious curiosity. She had not written Severin again—neither had she heard from him. Had he forgotten her? She shook her head slightly, dismissing the foolish thought.

A moment later, a knock echoed gently through the home. Bethania stood, stepping gracefully toward the top of the staircase, watching as Madame Lenoir opened the door downstairs. The mail carrier greeted her warmly, setting down his packages inside.

Looking upward, he tipped his hat. “Happy birthday, Mademoiselle Bethania!”

She smiled graciously in reply, offering a gentle nod. Madame Lenoir laughed playfully, “My, my, Bethania—you seem to be quite popular today. Someone’s thinking of you!”

Bethania descended the staircase slowly, approaching the packages, her pulse quickening slightly. The large box, elegant and carefully wrapped, bore a familiar script—Severin’s handwriting. She swallowed softly, feeling a wave of unexpected warmth flood her chest.

Yet beside the beautiful package was another letter, smaller and discreet, but bearing an unmistakable seal: Godfrey Rousseau. Her breath caught, a coldness spreading through her chest. Quickly, almost as if dismissing an unwanted intrusion, she placed it aside onto another counter.

Focusing again, she opened Severin’s gift carefully, peeling back the wrapping until the contents revealed themselves—a stunningly crafted set of bakeware. The

bright sunlight poured through the kitchen window, illuminating the polished silver, making the ornate, delicately embroidered edges shimmer. Bethania gasped quietly, genuine delight slipping past her guarded expression. Slowly, reverently, she took each item from the box, laying them upon the counter with tenderness. Her fingertips traced the exquisite detailing, appreciating the fine craftsmanship and the heartfelt thoughtfulness behind each piece.

Faustina observed quietly from a distance, a thoughtful look in her eyes, while Madame Lenoir made soft approving comments, clearly appreciating Severin's thoughtful gesture.

"Oh, Hadeline," Bethania called softly, smiling as she heard the rapid approach of tiny footsteps. Hadeline burst into the kitchen, nearly colliding with her sister, eyes wide with excitement and curiosity.

"What is it, Bethy?" Hadeline's little voice asked eagerly, looking up with expectant wonder.

Bethania gently lifted the smaller package within the box, revealing an exquisite collection of beautifully packaged porcelain dolls, each delicate and lovely. Hadeline shrieked with pure joy, her voice ringing clear and bright, drawing laughter from everyone present. Abeline quickly stepped forward, picking Hadeline up gently, promising to help her unwrap and play with the new treasures.

A quiet, awkward pause fell over the room, until Angelica, leaning casually against the counter, broke the silence with a teasing tone, "That man doesn't seem to give up, does he?"



Faustina chuckled softly, her eyes darting quickly to Bethania, gauging her reaction. Bethania said nothing, only smiled faintly, her cheeks gently warmed by embarrassment and quiet pleasure.

Suddenly, Faustina's eyes sharpened, settling on the letter Bethania had carefully set aside moments ago. Her voice edged with curiosity, Faustina questioned, "What about that letter, Bethania? On the counter there. Who's it from?"

Bethania stiffened slightly, glancing briefly at the letter bearing Godfrey's seal. She had hoped no one would notice. Her heart tightened, defensive walls quickly rising.

Saying nothing, she scooped up the letter abruptly and stepped swiftly from the room. She felt Faustina's curious gaze on her back, but paid no attention. She needed air.

Moving quickly through the estate, Bethania soon found herself outside, walking amongst the garden flowers, still clutching the sealed letter tightly. Her mind raced—uncertainty, frustration, and resentment all interwoven.

Stopping abruptly beside a small water-filled ditch, Bethania stared at the reflection -*the mirror*- staring back at her from the water's surface. Severin's image filled her mind, his gentle eyes and soft gestures, and she felt the weight of the letter heavier still.

Without another moment's hesitation, she deliberately dropped Godfrey's unopened letter into the water. It fluttered briefly before sinking, dissolving into oblivion beneath the surface.

She stood silently, watching as the water reclaimed the unwanted intrusion, a soft sigh escaping her lips. In that quiet moment of defiance, Bethania's heart tearing with conflict- decides.

## Chapter 41 – Family Matters

It happened swiftly, unexpectedly—a storm brewing quietly beneath the surface of their lives suddenly burst forth, altering the calm rhythm of the Lenoir estate.

The next morning, as the golden hues of early autumn painted the fields around Cellettes, a courier arrived bearing an ominous letter, sealed and official, demanding urgent attention. Bethania watched silently from the staircase, heart tightening with anxiety, as her mother's hands trembled slightly upon breaking the seal. Madame Lenoir's eyes moved rapidly over the page, her face paling visibly, the fragile peace of the morning shattered instantly.

Bethania approached cautiously, laying a comforting hand upon her mother's shoulder. Madame Lenoir turned, worry etched deeply into her features. Her voice trembled with restrained anguish.

"It's your father, Bethania," she began softly, her eyes heavy with an unspoken burden. "He seeks to challenge the custody arrangement—to question my rights, to reopen the wounds of our separation. The court requires our immediate presence."

Bethania felt as though her heart had turned to stone. A father's love should never bear such weight, nor cause such anguish. Yet, the shadow of her father's cruelty loomed again, disrupting their hard-earned tranquility.

"When must we leave?" Bethania asked quietly, her voice carrying a resolve far beyond her years.

"Immediately," Madame Lenoir whispered regretfully.

"The court convenes in Avignon, where your father and I

married. We must be present to contest his claims. It may take weeks—perhaps months."

Bethania nodded slowly, forcing herself to breathe steadily, already beginning to brace for the journey and trial ahead. She knew instantly what this meant—weeks or even months away from home, far from the comforting familiarity of Cellettes. Far from Severin.

The preparations unfolded rapidly, their home bustling with hurried activity. Madame Lenoir, with help from Faustina and Abeline, arranged everything swiftly yet carefully. The younger girls, confused by the urgency but understanding enough to be anxious, hovered close to their mother, seeking reassurance that felt too fragile to grant.

Bethania, feeling the heavy burden of the moment, quietly retreated to her bedroom as night descended. She sat silently at her desk, lit by the soft flicker of candlelight, and took a piece of fine parchment from the drawer. Severin's silver cross lay there, glittering softly—always present, never forgotten.

She gazed at it, her heart heavy. She had tried. Tried to open her heart, to give him some hope. But life had been relentless, and her obligations, endless.

She began to write, each word a painful severing.

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"My Dear Severin,

I have thought long upon how I might say this, how I might convey it in a way that would not wound. But I fear there is no gentle way.

I must let you go.

You have shown me nothing but kindness, grace, and generosity. For that, I will forever be thankful. The gifts you sent, the care you've shown my family—these are treasures I will not soon forget. And yet, my life is not my own, Severin. My duty is here, with my mother, my sisters. They need me, and I cannot divide myself any longer.

It pains me deeply to write these words, for I have cherished our time together more than I can express. I wanted to believe we could weather any storm. But I must be honest with myself, and with you. My heart cannot hold hope when so much of it is required elsewhere.

Please do not think this an act of cruelty. It is not rejection, but surrender. Surrender to what I must be for my family.

I ask you not to wait for me, not to carry false hope. Your kindness deserves more than silence, and I would not wound you further by keeping you tethered to uncertainty.

Think of me kindly, Severin, as I shall think of you. And should our paths cross again, I hope it will be in peace.

Yours sincerely,  
Bethania"

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She folded the parchment gently, pressing a seal with trembling fingers. Each motion felt heavy, as though she were closing a door she desperately wanted to leave open. Her heart twisted with grief—not merely from her father's interference, but from this forced ending. From letting go of something that had almost, almost been love.

She reached for the silver cross, her fingers trembling. She wanted to leave it behind, to sever that tie as well—but she could not. Instead, she slipped it gently over her head, tucking it beneath her dress, close to her heart.

It would remain there, even if Severin himself could not.

The following morning, as dawn's first light stretched softly across Cellettes, the carriage stood waiting. Madame Lenoir, wrapped in a thick traveling cloak, stood quietly by its side, her eyes heavy yet resolute. Faustina, Abeline, Hadeline, and the others stood close, bidding heartfelt goodbyes filled with quiet tears and whispered encouragements.

Bethania turned to glance once more towards the road that led north—to Severin's distant home—before stepping into the carriage alongside her mother. She said nothing. Did nothing. But her heart lingered.

A deep breath steadied her trembling heart. She would face whatever awaited her bravely, as her mother had taught her.

The carriage pulled forward slowly, wheels crunching softly upon gravel. The family watched from the doorway, a silent tableau of strength and sorrow, until the carriage vanished beyond the gentle hills.

And with it, so too vanished the last thread of a romance that had begun with hope, but ended with duty.

A heavy quiet settled over the Lenoir estate, as if holding its breath, awaiting their safe return—but knowing that some things, some hopes, may not return at all.

## **Chapter 42 – 40 Days and 40 Nights**

Forty days had passed since Severin first read Bethania's final words. A letter of graceful thanks for his birthday gifts—an acknowledgment of his kindness—but also, heartbreakingly, her final rejection.

There would be no promises. No maybes.

It was over.

Autumn had come to Vendôme in full, casting the town in golden hues and soft shadows. The trees along the Loire River shed their leaves with quiet elegance, carpeting the earth beneath them in amber and rust. The air had grown sharp and cool, a biting wind that seemed to mirror the cold stillness inside Severin.

Yet despite the pain, there was no anger. Only resignation. And prayer.

Severin withdrew from society during those days, distancing himself from social obligations, dinners, and gatherings. He kept to his estate, to the quiet chapel that overlooked the river. It became his world, his refuge, his confessional.

He did not pray for Bethania's heart—he would not dare to pray for something selfish. No, his prayers were solely for her: for her safety, for her mother, for the family torn by the trials of Avignon. He prayed for Madame Lenoir's strength in the courtroom, for clarity and justice. And when he could think of nothing else to pray for, he prayed for the endurance to accept whatever the future held for them, whether that meant joy or sorrow.

For forty days and forty nights, Severin knelt. His knees ached. His throat grew raw from whispered pleas. His voice trembled beneath the weight of his longing, his remorse. Yet still, he prayed. Because if there was one final thing he could give Bethania, it was his devotion, even from afar.

But with every passing day, hope faded.

He corresponded sparsely with Silvian, the cousin who had taken temporary charge of the Lenoir estate. Silvian, a loose acquaintance from the old war campaigns, wrote in clipped but steady tones. His letters provided only the smallest comfort—confirmation that Bethania and Madame Lenoir were safe in Avignon. The details were scarce, though. Silvian's words were guarded, and Severin understood why.

It was in one of those letters that Silvian offered a piece of advice that lingered longer than Severin wished.

*"I say this not to wound you, Severin, but to offer clarity. The Lenoir women are not easy to win. Many have tried, and few have succeeded. Perhaps it is a family curse or simply their nature. They love fiercely, but they guard their hearts behind walls no man may breach. Bethania is no exception. She will not love lightly, nor yield easily. I wish you well, though I fear the road you tread is harder than you imagine."*

Severin's hands tightened around that letter. He read it again and again. At first, it felt like an arrow piercing his already wounded pride. But then... acceptance.

Was that not the truth?



Bethania had chosen her path—one bound in duty, family, and obligation. She had given him her answer with as much gentleness as she could muster. And perhaps Severin had been naive to think he could offer her anything that would ease that burden.

He did not write to Silvian again.

Nor did he write to Bethania.

He wanted to—God, how he wanted to. There were moments when the urge became unbearable. When every word he longed to write ached in his fingertips. Yet he fought it. Fought it because he respected her decision.

He fought it because he had no right to disrupt her peace.

Instead, he poured himself into his prayers, into his fencing, into his land. The simplicity of physical labor grounded him. The sharp clash of steel against steel, the wind whistling past as he trained in the cold autumn morning—it gave his pain a place to exist. A place outside his soul.

And every night, when the estate fell silent, Severin would walk alone through the quiet vineyards, staring up at the moon, speaking softly to the heavens. He would remember her face, the softness of her laugh, the warmth of her touch, and wonder if she thought of him at all.

And when he returned to the chapel, he would kneel again.

He prayed for strength. For clarity.

He prayed for the day he could look upon her memory and feel nothing but peace.

## Chapter 43 – The Barley Suite

Forty days and forty nights had passed in solemn prayer, and Severin felt himself transformed. The weight of longing for Bethania had carved something deeper within him—a cavern of ache and understanding, hollowed by loss, but not devoid of purpose. He had prayed until his knees were bruised, until his voice grew hoarse, until his heart learned the harsh acceptance of surrender.

And surrender, he did.

He accepted the truth: Bethania would not be his. Her heart belonged to her family, to duty, and perhaps to her own quiet solitude. It was a loss that seared him, a wound he would bear in silence.

Yet, when the final prayer was spoken, and the last candle burned low in the chapel, Severin discovered something unexpected in the hollow of his grief.

Music. The force that originally introduced her to him- lead him to her at that wedding.

It came to him like a whisper in the night, a memory rising from forgotten corners of his soul. Elise. The name echoed softly, bittersweet. Years ago, in a life that now felt like another world, he had composed for her—melodies of love, of longing, of tenderness. Songs born of passion and loss. He had not touched a piano in years. The keys had gathered dust, and the notes had faded from his mind.

But now, after Bethania, after the pain of letting her go, he found himself drawn back. Drawn not to reclaim the past, but to express the present. Not for Elise. Not even for himself.

For Bethania.

And so, with quiet resolution, he sat at the old piano. Its keys felt foreign beneath his fingers at first, their coolness like a forgotten lover. But as his hands moved—hesitant, trembling—music began to stir again. Melodies unfurled softly, uncertain, like dawn's first light.

This would be his final offering to her. Not a plea. Not a protest. But a gift.

He called it *The Barley Suite*.

Six movements, plus one- each with measures of his love, his sorrow, and his ultimate surrender. Inspired by the romance of Ruth and Boaz—an ancient love story that spoke to Severin's own heart. In Ruth, he saw Bethania: loyal, steadfast, devout. In Boaz, he saw himself: a man who loved and protected, even when love could not be claimed.

It would take him two months to complete. Two months of pouring out his soul in notes and chords, shaping each song with delicate care, as though composing was akin to sculpting something sacred.

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The first movement was "Noir"—a melody capturing the moment he first saw her. A dark melody- for a Lenoir\* lady. The Lenoir surname meaning "dark light". A Mysterious theme and harmonic mode. For she was the girl in the dark dress at that wedding that captured him in her beautiful tenebrosity.

The second movement was "Spiral"—a piece portraying the delicate tension of their first conversation. Awkward, uncertain, yet stirring with promise. Rising and falling arpeggios captured the ebb and flow of their hesitant words, the moment when a stranger became something more.

The third movement was "Hazel"—a song of deep, stirring chords, low and rich, but with a light, almost trembling melody beneath. For her eyes, for the questions they held, the softness, the uncertainty. Music that spoke of how they seemed to see through him, and yet hide so much.

The fourth movement was "Flowers"—a piece delicate and ethereal, as though the piano itself whispered. Light, fluid motifs shaped the song, gentle yet unwavering, representing the roses that would not fade. It was his attempt to capture the unspoken hope they once shared, the bond that seemed resilient, though now only a memory.

The fifth movement was "Passions"—the sharpest, fiercest of them all. It stormed through minor keys, crashing chords, and broken rhythms, embodying the night of their worst argument. The words that could not be unsaid. The accusations, the betrayal, the pain. It was raw, it was honest. It was necessary.

The sixth movement was "Abnegation"—the most somber of all the tunes. Representing the idea of him letting her go. Of him being without her for the 40 days and 40 nights. A piercing abnegation of all that he desires. A letting go of the love he so desperately wants to fulfill.

And finally, the seventh movement. The grand ballad. "Heart" A farewell. Melancholic but gentle, filled with love

and acceptance. It was not meant to win her back, nor to haunt her. It was a simple confession of love, carved in sound. A thank-you, a goodbye. A letting-go.

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Each day, Severin labored over the suite. He poured himself into it as though every note were a tear he could not shed. And as the days passed, the act of creation soothed something deep within him. It was not healing, not entirely. But it was closure. In a way, her absence now has left him with the gift of music composition— filling the void, albeit not completely, of his heart.

And when the final note was written, the final chord struck, Severin sat back in his chair.

He knew he would never send it to her.

It was not for her ears. It was for her hands, should she ever choose to play it. And if she never did, that too was fine. This music was not meant to earn her love, nor prove his worth.

It was only meant to be.

A gift for a gift. A letting-go.

He had it bound in simple parchment, the cover bearing only her name and the title:

*The Barley Suite.*

And he entrusted it to Silvian, asking him only this: “If she wishes to play again, give her this.”

He would never ask if she did. He would never know.

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Afterward, Severin sat once more in prayer. Not for her return. Not even for her happiness.

But for himself.

That he might learn to love without holding on. To remember without pain. To move forward without bitterness.

And perhaps, to one day find peace again.

## **Chapter 44 – Flowers for Bethania**

Late fall draped Cellettes in a subdued beauty, the golden sun casting muted light over the fields. Bethania walked alongside her sisters—Hadeline, Abeline, and Faustina—moving through the sea of autumn buttercups. The wind was gentle, carrying the last warmth of the season, brushing lightly against Bethania's face as she watched Hadeline run with abandon, her laughter bright and unburdened.

Yet Bethania could not share in the joy. A shadow clung to her, a melancholy she could not shake. She watched Hadeline's small figure dart through the field, a memory rising to meet her. Severin had once stood here, Hadeline's tiny hand clasped in his, walking this same path. His laughter, his warmth. She had tried to let him go. She had tried to be firm. But his absence left an ache, hollow and quiet, like the autumn wind.

"Bethania!" The call broke her reverie. Her mother's voice carried from the back of the estate. "You have a delivery."

Bethania turned, a frown creasing her brow. Who could it be now? She had closed her heart. Severed ties. There was no one left to send her gifts. Almost annoyed but still curious, she left the fields, her steps slow and uncertain.

She entered the estate, the air inside cooler, heavier. Moving into the main living area, she stopped, breath catching in her throat.

Six bouquets, each distinct in its color and bloom, were arranged in a circle upon the floor. Each bouquet reflected a different color story, a different feeling. And at the base of each arrangement, barley flowers lay as the foundation,

their golden hues soft and sacred. Attached to every bouquet was a sheet of music—a movement from Severin's "Barley Suite," handwritten with care.

At the center of the circle, a letter rested beside a seventh sheet of music—the final movement. A conclusion. A farewell.

Bethania dropped to her knees, her fingers trembling as she reached for the music. She touched the parchment delicately, brushing over Severin's careful script. Her gaze flickered to the piano in the corner, its surface dust-coated and abandoned. She had not played since Severin left.

She was stunned. Moved. Unable to speak, unable to breathe. The thought and planning, the love that each flower and note represented, crashed over her like a wave. How could he still care? How could she deserve it?

From a distance, Madame Lenoir watched, her gaze sharp but unreadable. She said nothing, though Bethania could feel her mother's eyes upon her. Moments later, Faustina and Abeline entered, pausing at the doorway, struck silent by the display. Their expressions held a quiet awe, but no words passed between them.

And then Hadeline came running, her small feet tapping lightly over the wooden floor. She halted, her eyes widening, her small voice breaking the stillness.

"Bethy... who are these from?"

Bethania swallowed, her throat dry. Her heart warred between fear and longing. She hesitated, but the truth weighed too heavily to deny.



"Severin sent these, my dear sister," she said softly, her voice almost breaking.

Hadeline's eyes welled, her young heart full and open. "I know he loves you still," she whispered, as though offering a secret that could save them both.

Bethania looked away, eyes burning.

Madame Lenoir stepped forward, gently taking Hadeline's hand. "Come, child," she murmured. "Give Bethania some time."

The others left, their absence filling the room with an overwhelming stillness. Alone now, Bethania remained on her knees, her fingers tracing Severin's notes as though by touch she could understand his heart.

She gathered the bouquets carefully, one by one, and carried them upstairs. In her bedroom, she placed them around her bed, along the windowsill, the soft floral scent filling the space. It was her own hanging garden, delicate and sacred.

For hours, she sat in silence. She read Severin's letter, her eyes moving over each word, her heart aching with every line. Her fingers brushed over the music, tracing the notes, the time signatures, the markings that spoke of emotion too deep for words. She could almost hear it. Almost feel it.

Guilt gnawed at her, sharp and consuming. Anger rose too—toward herself, toward the duty that kept her bound, toward a world that made her deny love. And yet, there was warmth in these notes. A warmth that softened the pain, made her question her own resolve.

As the day waned, the afternoon light gilding the room in gold, Bethania rose. Her hands, steady but hesitant, pressed upon the keys of the piano in the main room. Dust stirred as if the instrument itself sighed in relief. She placed Severin's music before her and began to play.

The first notes were shaky, uncertain. But as she continued, the music carried her. Each song wrapped around her like a memory, like an embrace. She felt him there—in the rising melodies, the sorrowful chords. In every pause, every crescendo. She heard his heart.

And she wept. Not just for him, but for herself. For her longing, her regrets, her loneliness. For the love she had tried to deny but could not escape.

The music poured from her, tears falling freely. She played as though to speak to him, to answer all the letters she had never sent. Each movement was an apology. Each chord, a confession.

And when the final note faded into silence, Bethania sat back, her fingers worn from the keys. She stared at the flowers, at the gift he had left for her. At the love she doesn't want to could no longer deny.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the stillness, though she knew Severin would never hear.

But perhaps the music would. Perhaps it already had.

## Chapter 45 – Proposal

It had been nearly 3 weeks since Severin sent the barley flowers. And everything seemed to have come together beyond his wildest expectations.

Tonight it were as if they were in a celestial castle—grand, golden, and bathed in moonlight. Le Château de Vendôme. The sky shimmered like silver silk, the stars glinting through towering windows. Light and joy filled every corner. Guests from all over Vendôme And Cellettes were gathered. Familiar faces, beloved friends, and strangers who smiled like old companions. There was laughter, music, and the warmth of shared celebration.

Cristian and Tabitha stood nearby, their hands entwined, eyes gleaming with delight. Marcel, ever the jester, lifted his glass in a spirited toast. Beaumont and Rachel stood beside Severin's mother, who watched with teary eyes, joy radiating from her. Even Severin's father, stoic and reserved, wore a faint smile of approval, nodding silently as if granting his blessing. His brothers and sisters mingled, laughter rising from their circles.

And there, Hadeline. Sweet Hadeline. She giggled as she played with other children, her laughter ringing like bells in the night, her smile so bright it could rival the moon itself. Faustina and Abeline stood elegantly nearby, their expressions soft, their eyes alight with acceptance and joy. And Madame Lenoir watched with quiet pride. Her lips curled into a knowing smile, one that spoke of years of hope and sacrifice, finally rewarded.

But Severin saw none of them. Not truly.

Because she was there.

Bethania.

Sitting gracefully in his lap, her arms draped around his neck, her lips pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. Her lavender scent, familiar and warm, enveloped him. Her touch was light, yet grounding. He held her as though she were made of light and shadow, delicate and eternal. His heart hammered in his chest, a symphony of love and disbelief. Was this real? Could such a dream be his?

And then she moved, lifting her hand toward the crowd. The diamond upon her finger caught the moonlight, scattering it like stardust. The ring flickered, a tiny star resting upon her hand. A promise. An answer.

Yes.

Severin's breath caught. His heart swelled. He could barely think, barely breathe. All he could do was hold her closer. He remembered that moment—the moment before he knelt, before the words left his lips. He has been here before. The uncertainty, the fear. The hope. Would she say yes? Would she open her heart, take his, and make it hers?

And she had.

Yes.

The word still echoed in his soul. The moment was a haze of warmth, a blur of joy and disbelief. The ring had trembled in his fingers when he slid it onto hers. Her yes had shattered the walls of doubt within him, a confirmation that all his love, all his patience, had not been in vain.

And now, her eyes. Those feline eyes, deep and dark, filled with a fire he could never name. She gazed at him as though he was the only soul beneath the heavens. They were surrounded by music, laughter, cheers. Yet in her gaze, they were alone. A moment suspended in time. Forever.

He could stay in this moment forever. To be frozen beneath the moonlight, in the warmth of her arms, with the taste of her kiss upon his cheek. He would give anything to remain there—to bask in that simple, perfect joy.

Severin gasped awake.

Darkness. Coldness. Stillness.

The moon still shone, but it was filtered through the pale glass of his bedroom window. Shadows stretched long upon the floor. The wind whispered softly against the pane. His heart pounded, his body trembling from the remnants of the dream.

He lay still, his chest rising and falling with deep, aching breaths. His hand lifted to his face, as though to find where her kiss had been. But there was nothing. Only the cold, the emptiness of solitude.

Severin closed his eyes, but the dream did not return. Only the hollow ache remained, like a wound freshly opened. And yet, he could still feel it—the warmth of her skin, the light of her gaze, the weight of her hand upon his. And the word.

Yes.

He whispered it into the night, tasting its sweetness upon his tongue, knowing it belonged to a world he could not hold.

And though his body ached with loss, Severin knew this: the dream was real enough to remind him of what he wanted most.

## Chapter 46 – Forest from the Trees

Severin had stopped expecting answers.

The silence from Bethania was his answer in itself. A slow, unspoken farewell. He had prayed, waited, bled his heart onto parchment, into flowers, into melodies—and still, she did not come. He understood now: *she never would*.

So he did what he had always done—he endured. He let go in the only way he could.

The nights became a blur of compositions, his fingers restless on the piano keys, drawing out notes that felt both like longing and closure. His mind wandered to her as he played, but not in agony—not anymore. She was there in his melodies, woven into the fabric of every chord, lingering in each crescendo and resolution. *This* was what remained of her, and he accepted it.

Music, not love, had been the answer to his prayers.

But Severin was not a man meant to sit still. He could not linger in his grief forever, no matter how comfortable sorrow had become. As per Cristian's insistence, he traveled. He forced himself into the world again—not for romance, not for distraction, but to remind himself that there was *more* to life beyond the walls of his own heartbreak.

From **Tours to Le Mans, to Orléans**, he explored Protestant circles, attending churches, festivals, gatherings—meeting new faces, shaking hands, listening to conversations that did not belong to his past. *It was supposed to help*.

And yet, at every gathering, every town, he remained on the outside. *The outsider from Vendôme*. A man known by name, admired by reputation, but never *belonging* anywhere.

He met women, of course. Some who were pleasant, intelligent, even striking in appearance. Yet, every encounter ended in dissatisfaction. They were either too soft-spoken or too forceful, too simple or too affected—none of them carried the sharp, unwavering mind of Bethania, nor her mystery. He compared each of them unfairly, a cruel habit he resented in himself.

He had been open to the possibility, once. Of finding someone new. But no woman had captured him.

Until a face from the past found him where he least expected it.

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### **Vendôme, Late November 1813**

The church was unchanged.

Severin had not stepped foot inside since he was a youth, yet the high wooden beams, the worn hymnals, the way light streamed through the windows—it was all the same. He had sat here as a child, restless beside his mother. He had sat here as a boy, reciting prayers in a voice that had not yet deepened. He had stood here as a groom, watching Elise glide down the aisle.

And now, he stood here as a man alone.



Yet something in him felt settled. A peace he did not expect.

As he sat in the pew, absorbing the old familiarity, a movement in the opposite aisle caught his eye.

A woman, standing tall, her posture regal yet natural, her hands clasped in prayer. Her skin, tanned by the sun, made the high cut of her cheekbones even more striking. Dark brown hair fell in long waves over her shoulders, neatly tied back. She was older than he remembered, yet not diminished—*more* in some way. More refined. More woman than girl.

Severin recognized her at once.

### **Rosalie.**

She had been there on his wedding day. A guest among many. Someone he had known in passing for years but had never looked at twice. He had known her family—had spoken with them, had exchanged pleasantries at markets and gatherings. But that had been years ago.

And yet, as she turned slightly, their eyes met, and he saw it—the flicker of recognition, the small shift of unease at seeing him there.

He wasn't sure why, but that unease intrigued him.

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After the service, Severin lingered.

He was accustomed to the wary glances, the quiet murmurs of those who remembered him from boyhood. But rather

than feeling out of place, he welcomed it this time. He greeted those who came to him, shaking hands, answering questions, indulging in the pleasantries he had once despised.

He was caught in conversation when **she** approached.

Rosalie, with her mother at her side.

He recognized the family resemblance immediately. The same proud cheekbones, the same deep brown hair. But Rosalie's mother carried a warmth that Rosalie seemed to keep locked away.

"Ah, Monsieur de Derbois," her mother greeted first, her voice kind. "It has been *years*, has it not?"

Severin inclined his head politely. "It has, madame."

Rosalie hesitated for only a moment before offering her own greeting. Her voice was softer than he expected—**deeper than Bethania's, yet carrying a gentle clarity that surprised him.**

"Severin."

His name on her lips felt unfamiliar, but not unwelcome.

The conversation stretched longer than intended. Rosalie's mother carried most of it, speaking fondly of the past, of mutual acquaintances, of the years that had passed too quickly. Rosalie, however, said little. She was polite, engaged, but guarded.

It was only as they stepped outside, parting ways, that something shifted.

The sun had begun to lower, casting golden light over the church courtyard. And in that moment, Severin noticed something about Rosalie he had not seen before.

Her **eyes**.

Not brown, as he had assumed.

Forest green.

Vivid, deep, and piercing, as if carrying the wisdom of a place untouched by time.

Severin found himself studying them a moment longer than was proper, analyzing the way they caught the light, how they seemed to change in color depending on the shadows. *Had they always been that way?*

And yet, he did not remember them at all.

He left the church that evening with a thought he had not anticipated.

He thought of Rosalie.

## Chapter 47 – Musical Home

The cross felt heavier around her neck these days. Bethania held it often, the cool silver pressing against her palm as she sat in yet another courtroom, listening to voices that had long since turned into noise. Another legal proceeding, another debate of rights and responsibilities, another cold and sterile room where strangers decided the fate of her family.

She kept her gaze steady, watching as her mother spoke to the judge with poise and dignity. Madame Lenoir carried herself with quiet strength, her words measured, never faltering. Bethania admired her mother's resolve. It was a battle they never asked for, yet one they had to fight. And she would be by her mother's side until the bitter end.

But it was wearing on her.

Every time she stepped into the courthouse, she felt as though a layer of herself was being stripped away. **She was only eighteen**, yet she felt decades older. The weight of duty pressed heavily upon her, forcing her shoulders back, keeping her chin lifted, even as exhaustion clawed at her bones.

The holidays loomed in the near distance, a bitter reminder of what had been lost. **The first Christmas with a fractured family.** The thought unsettled her. The house would feel colder, even if the hearth burned bright. No father. No normalcy. No certainty about what the new year would bring.

But Bethania would be strong—for her mother, for her sisters.

And yet, as much as she tried to fortify herself against the aching emptiness, music kept creeping into the cracks.

Almost every night, after the day's burdens had been carried, after the chores had been done, Bethania would find herself seated at the piano. It was never a conscious decision, never a planned moment. But her fingers would drift to the keys, and the melodies would find her.

Severin's melodies.

She played them often now, tracing his notes like the edges of a memory she could not let go.

At first, she had resisted, unwilling to acknowledge how much she missed him. But his music felt like home.

Her siblings never mentioned it. They sensed how deep in thought she became when she played, how it calmed her and made her ache in equal measure. Hadeline would sometimes curl up on the rug nearby, listening with wide, wondering eyes. Faustina and Abeline would pause in the doorway, never interrupting. Her mother, Madame Lenoir, would often stop in the hallway, listening quietly from a distance.

Bethania knew what her mother wished for—that she would yield. That she would choose love over obligation. But duty was an unshakable chain, and Bethania could not betray the ones who needed her most.

Still, every time her fingers danced along the ivory keys, she felt Severin there.

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That evening, after another draining day, she found herself at the piano once more. The house had settled into its usual evening hush, save for the occasional crackle of the fire and the faint murmurs of conversation from the other rooms.

She was mid-piece, letting the music wash over her like a tide, when Abeline approached.

Bethania knew her sister's presence before she even spoke. Abeline, always composed, always watching, standing just behind her.

"Have you thought of writing to him?"

The question cut through the room like a sharp wind.

Bethania's fingers faltered slightly over the keys but did not stop. Her answer came slowly, softly, as though she had already rehearsed it a hundred times in her mind.

"I have often started writing," she admitted, the quiet hum of the piano filling the spaces between her words. "But I cannot bring myself to complete a letter for him."

Abeline stepped closer. Her voice, though gentle, held quiet insistence.

"But do you love him?"

The music stopped.

A silence stretched between them.

Bethania turned her head slightly, her eyes meeting Abeline's. The truth was already there, written plainly in her gaze, but still, her lips hesitated. She looked away, her

fingers lightly pressing against the silent keys, as if they could give her an answer she was too afraid to say aloud.

Her voice came as a whisper, a confession too fragile to be spoken loudly.

"Perhaps... we fight too much."

Abeline sighed, a small, knowing smile tugging at the corner of her lips. She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Bethania, embracing her in a way that only a sister could—without expectation, without judgment, just understanding.

And as they stood there, Abeline's eyes fell upon the sheet music spread out over the piano.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she noticed something—the small handwritten notes scrawled along the margins of Severin's composition.

One quote stood out, and without thinking, she traced her finger over the ink, reading it aloud:

*"Then one day in May, an absolutely divine lenoir girl made herself known to me at the base of that spiral staircase. She was there, waiting..."*

*"You are easily the most beautiful woman here. May I ask you your name?"*

*"The truth is, she was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, nor will I ever see."*

*"Bethania—this song undertook instant metamorphosis for me. Hopelessness into providence. Sorrow into*

*sanguinity. My long-dead, cold heart—bursting with uncontrollable adoration. It is impossible to express to you the importance of this song. Your beauty, your character, your nature, your essence—I've put so much thought into this movement."*

The room fell into stillness.

Bethania did not move.

Because she had read those words before. **Countless times.** In the quiet of the night, by candlelight, with her heart racing and her breath unsteady.

She had traced those very same words with trembling fingers, letting them sink into her soul. She had **memorized them**, carried them in her heart like a hidden treasure, unwilling to let them go.

But hearing them spoken aloud—by her own sister—made it real in a way she wasn't prepared for.

Abeline pulled away from the embrace and stepped back slightly, her green eyes studying Bethania carefully.

And then, with a voice so soft it was almost lost to the flickering firelight, she said,

*"Oh, sister... I know he loves you. I can hear it."*

Bethania swallowed hard, turning her face away, suddenly overwhelmed.

Abeline did not press further. She had already said enough.



Instead, she left her sister alone with her thoughts, with the music that still lingered in the air, with the silent weight of a love too vast to contain.

And Bethania, for the first time in weeks, let her hands rest in her lap, unable to bring herself to play another note.

## Chapter 48 – Christmas in Tours

The cold of winter had fully settled over Vendôme, creeping into its streets and slipping through the cracks of old stone buildings. Snow dusted the rooftops, turning the town into a quiet, frozen landscape of whites and grays. Despite the seasonal beauty, Severin felt an undeniable stillness in his chest—an emptiness that had not lifted in weeks.

Each Sunday, he found himself returning to **Église Protestante de Vendôme**, the same church he had attended as a boy but had long since abandoned. It was a strange thing, stepping back into the place that had once felt like a second home. The old pews still creaked in the same places, the ceiling beams stretched high, unchanged by time. The same voices rose in familiar hymns, their melodies a bridge to another life—one before war, before love and loss.

And then, there was **Rosalie Bonnet**.

At first, it had been a casual recognition. A polite greeting. A few words exchanged. But as December unfolded, those exchanges grew longer, warmer. Severin found himself drawn into conversation more each week, lingering after the service, listening to her speak, learning the rhythms of her voice. She was seven years younger than him, though she carried herself with the composure of someone much older. Mature, poised, intelligent. Yet beneath that lay a quiet warmth.

He could feel her observing him, as if she were weighing something in her mind. Testing the possibility of his presence in her life.

The **Sunday before Christmas**, Rosalie, accompanied by her mother, approached him after the service.

“Your Grace,” her mother greeted him kindly, her eyes bright with familiarity. “We are traveling to **Tours** for Christmas services and celebrations. The Bonnet family would be honored if you joined us.”

Severin hesitated.

It was not that he disliked their company—far from it. He had grown fond of their presence, even found comfort in Rosalie’s reserved yet inquisitive nature. But there was still something unsettled in his heart. He had spent every December alone since **Elise’s** death. Even after meeting Bethania, Christmas had remained a solitary occasion, filled with quiet prayers and memories he did not dare to revisit.

But before he could decline, Madame Bonnet placed a gentle hand on his forearm. “It would do you good, I think,” she said softly, knowingly. “And besides, Rosalie would love to show you the Christmas markets.”

Rosalie, standing beside her, smiled but said nothing.

Severin glanced between them, feeling the weight of their expectation. He swallowed. “Then I shall be honored to attend.”

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## The Journey to Tours

Severin traveled alone, taking a separate carriage. He needed the space—the quiet—to prepare himself for what

lay ahead. **Tours** was lively this time of year, its streets filled with the scent of roasted chestnuts and mulled wine. The city carried an old charm, its ancient buildings adorned with **holly, ribbons, and candles** that flickered in the dusk.

When he arrived, the **Bonnet family** greeted him warmly. **Monsieur Bonnet**, a sturdy man with a booming voice, clapped him on the shoulder, treating him as one of his own. Rosalie's **younger brothers** circled him curiously, eager to ask about his years in the war. And Rosalie herself...

She observed.

She studied him with those **forest-green eyes**, always seeming to search for something beneath the surface.

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## A Festive Evening

The **Christmas markets** in Tours were unlike anything Severin had seen in years. They moved through narrow streets, weaving past bustling stalls where merchants sold **candied nuts, fine chocolates, golden pears, and delicate pastries**. The scent of cinnamon and spiced wine curled in the cold air.

He walked alongside **Rosalie**, her presence calm and steady. Her mother and siblings wandered ahead, leaving them to their own conversation. It was not unwelcome, but it was... unfamiliar.

She suddenly turned to him, smirking. "Why do you only wear black?"

Severin blinked, caught off guard. It had been some time since anyone asked him something so simple, so direct. He tilted his head, considering a jest.

**Perhaps because my heart is burnt to a black crisp.**

Instead, he responded with a fleeting smirk, “Some of us aren’t blessed with such **colorful** eyes as yours, Mademoiselle.”

The words had already left his mouth before he could stop them. It was an **impulsive**, careless thing to say—one that bordered too closely on **charm**. Immediately, he cleared his throat and followed up hastily, “Ah, but I suppose I got tired of the **red and blue** of uniforms after too many years of war.”

Rosalie had stopped walking. She watched him, expression unreadable, the golden glow of the market lanterns reflecting in her gaze. Then she smiled—soft, knowing.

“Thank you for the compliment, **Monsieur**,” she said simply.

Severin nodded, awkwardly attempting to match her grace. “My pleasantries are out of practice. Forgive me.”

She took a step ahead of him but glanced back, the distance between them growing only slightly. “No offense taken, **Your Grace.**”

The way she said it—half-formal, half-teasing—unsettled him. Not in a bad way.

He continued walking, tossing an apple lightly into the air and catching it absentmindedly. He thought of **Bethania**, and how she might react to a moment like this.

And then, **for the first time**, he wondered **What if?**

## Chapter 49 – Midnight Mass

The **Cathedral of Saint-Gatien** loomed above them, its towering spires cutting into the night sky like stone fingers reaching toward heaven. The scene was **otherworldly**, almost unreal in its magnificence. Candles flickered in the windows, their light mingling with the pale glow of the stars. Inside, the **air was thick with incense**, the scent clinging to the warm breath of the hundreds gathered beneath the great vaulted ceiling.

Severin stood among them, tall and stately, his hyperformal attire ensuring he stood out even in a sea of finely dressed worshippers. Yet he barely noticed the gazes that drifted toward him, the whispers that trailed in his wake. His mind was elsewhere—caught between past and present. Between longing and resignation.

At his side stood **Rosalie**, her dark hair pinned elegantly, her modest dress adorned with a ribbon that complemented the warm hue of her skin. She stood with quiet poise, hands folded in front of her, her eyes catching the glow of candlelight like polished amber.

For any other man, **this would be a romantic scene**. The grandeur of the cathedral, the whispered Latin prayers, the shared glances in the flickering glow—it was the perfect setting for something profound to begin. And yet, for all the softness of Rosalie's gaze, for all the gentle ease of her presence, Severin's heart **ached for another**.

He closed his eyes, the choral voices rising in celestial harmony around him. In the darkness of his mind, **he saw Bethania standing there instead**. He could picture her so clearly—her dark curls falling in delicate waves, her feline eyes sharp yet soft in the glow of sacred light. Would

she have stood near him, her hand resting lightly on his arm as the choir sang? Would she have leaned toward him, whispered a teasing remark about their Protestant souls standing in the heart of Catholicism?

Would she have been here at all?

The thought sent a sharp pang through him. **He was being a fool.**

A loud, eager whisper behind him broke his reverie.

“But when will we eat?” came the impatient voice of **one of the Bonnet boys**, barely masked beneath the heavy choral notes.

“Shh,” another scolded. “After the mass! They’ll have hot cider and chestnuts—”

“And cakes, Pierre! Don’t forget the cakes—”

The boys continued their excited chatter, drawing quiet chuckles from their mother. Rosalie turned her head slightly toward Severin, and **their eyes met.**

For a moment, they simply **looked at each other**, the faintest trace of amusement playing between them. Neither spoke, but the moment stretched long enough to mean something. The flickering candlelight reflected in her eyes, making them seem even more alive.

Severin let out a breath—**a quiet, reluctant chuckle.**

Rosalie smiled, the kind of smile that knew patience.

**He was being selfish.**



It struck him suddenly, like a jolt of clarity in the hush of the cathedral. **He was holding her to an unfair standard—the standard of Bethania.** The woman who had refused him, the woman who had sent him into exile within his own heart. And here, beside him, stood a woman who had done nothing but offer him warmth and kindness. **Couldn't he at least allow himself to see her fully? To stop measuring her against the ghost of a love that never was?**

He did not know the answer. But he knew the question needed to be asked.

The mass continued, the **glow of faith and tradition filling the air** with something almost tangible. Severin tried to quiet his thoughts, to let the peace of the moment settle into his bones. Yet part of him felt restless—as if he stood at the edge of something, yet refused to step forward.

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### An Unwelcome Disruption

The service ended. The **great wooden doors** of the cathedral were thrown open, and the congregation **spilled into the crisp winter night.** The air outside was colder than before, the frost of deep December clinging to the stones beneath their feet. **Severin walked alongside Rosalie,** their families trailing behind them, the Bonnet boys already darting ahead in search of the promised feast.

The streets of Tours were alive with **holiday revelry**—lanterns flickered in shop windows, warm laughter carried on the wind, and the scent of mulled wine and roasting nuts curled through the air like an embrace.

But then—a **disturbance**.

Severin's trained ears caught the sound first. **Rowdy voices. Chanting.** A sharp contrast to the peaceful hum of the city.

**“Vive l'Empereur!”**

Severin's entire body tensed.

Ahead, **a group of men stood gathered near the street corner**, shouting **Napoleonic slogans** into the cold night. Some were **drunken revelers**, raising their cups in **hollow patriotism**. Others, however, bore **a more dangerous fervor**—eyes sharp, voices edged with defiance.

**Severin knew their kind well.**

His instincts flared to life before he could stop them. **His posture straightened, his senses sharpening.** His hand hovered near his side—not where a sword once hung, but where he still felt its absence.

Without thinking, **he moved closer to Rosalie, his arm naturally drawing her toward him.** His body positioned itself slightly ahead of hers, shielding her, assessing the street with an old soldier's gaze.

Rosalie **noticed immediately**—the subtle yet undeniable shift in him. The way his expression darkened, the way his muscles coiled like a predator ready to strike.

She did not **pull away** from his protective stance.

Instead, **she let him.**

For a long moment, **neither spoke.**

The chants grew louder, then faded into the distance as the men stumbled away down the street. But **Severin remained tense.** His mind still hummed with the echoes of war, of battlefields where such voices had once meant death.

Then, **a soft voice.**

**“Long live the Emperor,”** Rosalie murmured teasingly, her lips curling into a knowing smile as she glanced up at him.

Severin blinked.

Her words—**playful, ironic—broke his trance.**

He exhaled, realizing he had been **holding his breath.** His grip on her loosened, though he did not immediately step away. He **studied her,** noting the amused yet understanding glint in her eyes.

**“Careful what you wish for,”** he muttered back, his voice low.

Rosalie laughed softly—**a quiet, warm sound.** The tension in his chest **eased.**

## Chapter 50 – Christmas Cakes

The sky over Cellettes was a crisp shade of winter blue, the sun casting pale, silver light over the frost-dusted rooftops. The Lenoir estate, though simple, hummed with the warmth of the holiday. Smoke curled gently from the chimney, the scent of cinnamon, spiced wine, and roasting meats filling the halls. Christmas had arrived.

Bethania pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders as she stepped out into the courtyard. The morning air bit at her skin, but she welcomed it—it kept her awake after days of ceaseless work. She had spent the last week baking in preparation for the holiday, taking orders from neighbors, merchants, and even local clergy. Christmas cakes—intricate, delicately iced, topped with sugared holly leaves and gilded berries—filled the kitchen, waiting to be delivered. The entire village had come to appreciate Bethania's gift, and Severin's bakeware had made the process easier, smoother. She had even begun to see it as an extension of his presence in her life, each perfectly shaped cake a quiet echo of his generosity.

And she missed him.

More than ever.

As she stepped back inside, the home was full of life. Faustina was hanging festive garlands by the windows, her usual meticulousness evident in how she adjusted each decoration to perfection. Abeline, ever diligent, helped Madame Lenoir in the kitchen, her hands dusted with flour as she prepared the dough for bread. Hadeline, the youngest, darted between rooms with boundless energy, her dolls in hand, already lost in her own world of imagination.

Bethania, exhausted from the week, set a steaming cup of mint tea on the side table and eased herself into the armchair near the hearth. The fire crackled softly, casting warm light onto the room's wooden floors. She sighed, wrapping her fingers around the tea's warmth.

On the small table beside her, an unopened letter sat—one she had written in the quiet of last night, under the candlelight of her bedroom. A letter addressed to Severin.

Her heart had wrestled with it for days, but now, at last, she had made her decision. **She would send it after the holiday.**

She would reach out.

She would take the step she had been too afraid to take before.

She wasn't ready to confront the depth of her feelings, not entirely, but she was ready to at least—\*\*at last—\*\*bridge the distance between them.

A giggle broke her thoughts.

Hadeline had settled on the rug before the fireplace, her dolls in hand, engrossed in an elaborate story between the two.

Bethania listened, the child's voice bouncing up and down with dramatic flair.

*"And now, you must ask me the big question, Monsieur!"*  
Hadeline declared, lifting one doll—a well-dressed gentleman in a velvet coat. She positioned the other doll, a

delicate figurine in a gown, holding them in front of each other as if caught in a ballroom dance.

Bethania, amused, took a slow sip of tea. “Hadeline, what are their names?”

Hadeline grinned, never looking up.

“This is Severin,” she said matter-of-factly, holding up the male doll.

Bethania’s heart lurched.

Hadeline continued, lifting the other doll. “And this one is you, Bethy.”

Bethania froze, fingers tightening around her cup. The words were innocent, playful—but they struck with a force she had not expected.

Hadeline made her dolls bow to each other. “Severin loves Bethy,” she announced simply.

Bethania set her tea down, her throat suddenly dry. She wanted to tell Hadeline not to say things like that, but—**was it untrue?**

Before she could say anything, a sharp knock sounded at the door.

Bethania stood quickly, smoothing her dress, her pulse inexplicably quickening.

For a fleeting, foolish second, she thought—*Severin*.

She swallowed. It couldn’t be. And yet, some irrational part of her still hoped.

She opened the door.

It was Silvian.

Bethania blinked, trying to shake the ridiculous, misplaced disappointment in her chest.

Silvian gave her a warm smile, stamping the frost from his boots. “Merry Christmas, Bethania.”

Relief settled into her, though tinged with something else—something she couldn’t name. “Silvian,” she said, smiling. “You’re visiting for the holiday?”

“Of course. I couldn’t spend Christmas away from friends.”

Bethania stepped aside to let him in, suddenly aware of how cold the air had become.

Silvian studied her for a moment. “You look... surprised. Were you expecting someone else?”

Bethania hesitated for only a fraction of a second. “No, no. Just tired.”

Silvian didn’t press her. Instead, his gaze drifted toward the kitchen, where trays of cakes gleamed under candlelight.

“These are yours?” he asked, stepping closer.

Bethania nodded. “I’ve been baking all week.”

Silvian let out a low whistle, inspecting the delicate decorations. “These are impressive, Bethania. You’ve made quite the name for yourself.”

She offered a small, tired smile. “It’s... something I enjoy.”

Silvian nodded, but Bethania caught the slight narrowing of his eyes—the way he studied her **too closely**, as if he could see the truth she wasn’t saying.

She turned away, busying herself with tidying the table.  
“Would you like tea?”

“I’d love some.”

As Bethania busied herself, Silvian turned toward the kitchen, where Madame Lenoir had now appeared.

Their conversation was brief—**too brief for Bethania to catch the words**—but she caught something else instead.

Her mother’s expression.

The way her eyes widened, her lips parting in astonishment.

Then—relief.

A deep, profound relief that she had not seen in months.

Bethania watched as her mother pressed a hand over her heart, her shoulders sagging as if releasing a long-held breath. Then—she **hugged** Silvian.

Bethania frowned.

What had he told her?

She didn’t know. But she knew one thing: **it had been good news.**



Silvian soon rejoined Bethania, taking his tea with a nod of thanks. But something in his posture had shifted—something more **relaxed, more certain**.

Bethania didn't question him.

She only sipped her tea, glancing once more at the letter waiting beside her.

She had been so afraid. So hesitant.

But today, she had seen **relief** in her mother's face.

And in a few days, after the holiday, she would send the letter.

She would no longer run from the truth.

## Chapter 51 – Revolutionary Talks

The fire crackled in the grand hearth, its golden light flickering across the room and casting elongated shadows upon the walls. The Bonnet home, nestled within the heart of Tours, was warm with candlelight, the scent of cinnamon and roasted chestnuts lingering from the evening's feast. Outside, the winter wind howled softly against the windows, a reminder of the bitter cold beyond the safety of the walls.

Severin sat in the high-backed chair closest to the fire, his posture relaxed, yet his mind restless. He stared into the shifting flames, lost in thought. The fire, unpredictable and consuming, reminded him too much of war. His war. The echoes of revolutionary cries, the thunder of cannons, the hoarse commands shouted over the chaos of battle—these sounds had never truly left him. They had only dulled with time, buried beneath the layers of his present life. But all it took was a question, a certain phrase, or a fleeting memory to rip them back to the surface.

The scent of spiced chocolate wafted through the air, and then—softly—Rosalie's voice.

"Severin, please, have some hot chocolate," she murmured, her voice gentle, yet certain, as she extended a steaming cup toward him.

He blinked, pulled suddenly from his thoughts, and looked up at her. The warmth of the cup seeped into his fingertips as he took it from her, nodding in quiet gratitude. "Merci, mademoiselle," he said.

Her gaze lingered on him a moment longer, as if she had noticed the shadow that had momentarily crossed his face.

But she said nothing more, only returning to her seat beside her mother, listening to the idle chatter that filled the parlor.

The Bonnet family was gathered in their usual places by the fireplace. The two youngest Bonnet brothers sat close to the flames, whispering animatedly about whatever adventure played out in their young minds. Madam Bonnet and Rosalie spoke softly on the couch, discussing festive plans, winter pastries, and small town gossip. Their voices were a comforting hum beneath the crackling wood.

But then, breaking through the warmth of the moment, came a voice more measured. More deliberate.

"Capitaine Derbois," said Father Bonnet, his deep, contemplative voice cutting through the light conversation. "Tell me, if you would, about the Spanish campaign."

The room grew still.

Severin, mid-sip, lowered his cup slowly. He had not expected such a question—certainly not tonight, on Christmas evening, surrounded by lighthearted company. He glanced toward Father Bonnet, whose intelligent eyes studied him with quiet interest.

For a brief moment, Severin hesitated. It was not that he wished to conceal the past, but that he had not spoken of it in some time. And yet—he noticed the eager expressions of the Bonnet sons, their eyes alight with fascination at the mere mention of his military past.

Severin straightened slightly, setting his cup aside. If they wished to hear a story, then he would tell it.

"The war in Spain," he began, his voice steady but distant, "was unlike anything I had faced before."

The young men leaned in, their attention fully his.

He recounted the **Battle of Fuentes de Oñoro**—the brutal struggle against Wellington's forces. The bloodied streets, the relentless cavalry charges, the cunning maneuvers on both sides. He painted a vivid picture, neither glorifying nor lamenting, but describing the reality of war as only a soldier could. He spoke of how the French nearly claimed victory, only to be forced into retreat. He spoke of the exhaustion, the desperation, the brotherhood forged in fire.

Then, as if compelled by some unseen force, he spoke of Prussia. Poland. And finally—**Russia**.

The air in the room changed when he mentioned Moscow.

Even those unfamiliar with the details of war knew what had happened there. The retreat. The thousands lost to cold and starvation. The end of the Empire's greatest campaign.

Severin's voice grew quieter as he spoke of the frozen marches, the nights spent wading through knee-deep snow, the faces of men who did not wake come morning. He did not dwell on it long, nor did he need to. The weight of those memories spoke for themselves.

For a moment, silence settled over the parlor.

Then—Father Bonnet, his expression unreadable, posed a single, cutting question.

"Are you still loyal to Napoleon?"

The question was asked without malice, without provocation. And yet it changed everything.

The flickering warmth of the fire no longer felt as comforting. The room, filled with family and laughter mere moments ago, now felt like the interior of a courtroom, all eyes watching, waiting for a verdict.

Severin leaned back in his chair slowly, exhaling through his nose. He took his time before answering, gathering his thoughts, measuring his words.

He looked toward the flames as he spoke.

"I have looked Napoleon in the face," Severin said at last, his voice even, but weighted. "I have given him my word. I have given him my blood. He has given me—everything. Even after my wife passed, I received a letter from the Emperor himself. He spoke to me not as a general, not as a ruler, but as a man."

A long silence followed.

Rosalie was the first to break it.

"But France has suffered," she said softly, her brow furrowing. "For years, we have suffered."

Her mother nodded, her hands folded in her lap. "And perhaps we would have suffered more without Napoleon," Madam Bonnet added.

Severin did not disagree. He had never claimed to know the right answer. He had simply lived it.

The discussion shifted then, as the family debated, as they considered, as they pondered the fate of their country. But Severin sat quietly, absorbing it all, his mind turning.

Then, he spoke once more.

"Napoleon will always have my loyalty."

The words were simple. Steady. Irrevocable.

Father Bonnet regarded him with a lingering gaze, before finally nodding. "Well," he said, leaning back into his chair. "France lost. Perhaps this is a moot point now."

A faint smile touched Severin's lips as he mirrored the nod.

"Perhaps," he murmured.

The conversation moved on after that, flowing into lighter topics, into talk of the new year, of the future. The tension in the air faded, replaced once again by the warmth of the fire and the quiet joy of a gathered family.

## **Chapter 52 – Ms. Rosaline**

The morning air in Tours carried a sharp crispness, the remnants of winter clinging stubbornly to the city streets. The Bonnet household stirred with the quiet hum of departure—luggage being fastened, farewells exchanged, horses stamping their hooves in the cold. A small, comfortable chaos.

Severin, however, sat apart from it all.

He was outside, seated on a stone bench near the carriage yard, his gloved fingers wrapped around a steaming cup of

coffee. The scent of roasted beans curled into the winter air, mixing with the faint smokiness of chimney fires lingering from the night before. His book lay open in his lap, but his eyes did not move across the words. He was reading without reading—his thoughts elsewhere, his mind trapped in the same familiar places it always wandered.

Bethania.

He had tried to forget. He had tried to move forward, had tried to let himself be swept up in something—anything—else. Rosaline was an easy option. She was warm, intelligent, graceful. A woman who, by all accounts, could make a fine partner in life. He had watched her navigate social settings with charm, handle her younger brothers with patience, and discuss politics with her father with an eloquence most men lacked. And yet—

She was not Bethania.

Not the woman who had upended his world the moment she descended that spiral staircase. Not the woman whose absence haunted his music, whose rejection clung to him like an old wound that refused to heal.

A flicker of movement caught his eye, pulling him from his thoughts.

Rosaline.

She was approaching him, clad in a warm wool cloak, the sunlight catching in the deep green of her eyes. They were a remarkable color—forest green, bright yet soft, and for a moment, Severin found himself studying them as if searching for something he might have overlooked before.

She offered him a small smile. “May I sit with you?” she asked, voice light but edged with something curious.

He gestured to the space beside him, obliging her. “Of course.”

She settled into the bench, pulling her cloak closer around herself, and let out a breath that frosted in the morning air. “What are you reading?”

He glanced down at the book in his lap, suddenly aware he had not turned the page in several long minutes. “A work on Roman military tactics,” he admitted, though his voice lacked enthusiasm.

Rosaline gave a small, amused shake of her head. “Even in times of peace, you fill your mind with war.”

Severin exhaled a quiet laugh. “Perhaps I find comfort in certainty. War is brutal, but at least one always knows where they stand.”

Rosaline studied him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, out of nowhere, she asked, “What troubles you, Severin?”

Her bluntness caught him off guard.

He hesitated, uncertain how to answer. Rosaline watched him carefully, gauging his reaction.

She tilted her head slightly and fired off a series of probing questions. “Is it war?” She observed his lack of response, then tried again. “Business matters?” Still nothing. Her voice softened now, her gaze searching. “A woman?”



Severin's breath hitched just slightly—so slightly that most would not have noticed. But Rosaline was not most.

She did notice.

A knowing smile flickered across her lips. “Ah,” she murmured, a light laugh escaping her. “I see now. Your eyes give you away.”

Severin sighed, realizing his silence had given her all the confirmation she needed. He closed the book in his lap, conceding to her discovery. There was no use pretending.

“Yes,” he finally admitted.

A beat of quiet passed between them. Severin felt an odd guilt in confessing it. Rosaline had been nothing but kind to him, her family welcoming, her company warm. And yet, she had never truly stood a chance against the ghost that still held his heart captive.

Rosaline's expression, however, was not one of disappointment. Rather, there was something almost playful in the way she regarded him, a flicker of fond amusement in her eyes.

“Severin,” she mused, “you are not a man I would imagine to be infatuated by beauty alone.” She leaned forward just slightly, her voice lowering into something gentle, almost wistful. “Her qualities must be otherworldly to capture the heart of the Duke.”

He smiled awkwardly, though there was sincerity in it. “She is... unlike anyone I have ever known.”

Rosaline nodded, as if she already understood. “Tell me about her.”

Severin hesitated at first, but then, for reasons he could not fully explain, he did.

Not everything, but enough.

He told Rosaline of Bethania’s strength, of her sharp mind, of her stubbornness and fire. He spoke of their quarrels, their misunderstandings, but also of the way she had looked at him—of the rare moments when she had softened, when she had let him see glimpses of something more.

Rosaline listened, truly listened, her hands folded neatly in her lap, her expression thoughtful.

When he had finished, she was silent for a moment, as if carefully choosing her words.

Then, she simply said, **“Severin, if you love her this much, don’t let her go.”**

Severin blinked, taken aback.

Rosaline turned fully toward him, her face illuminated in the morning light. “I would much rather you live in a future of certainty rather than one of regret,” she said, her voice quiet but firm. “If she is in your heart, if she still holds that place, then you must see it through. Even if it does not end how you hope, at least you will know.”

He stared at her, uncertain what to say. He had not expected this response. Not from her.

A part of him had almost wanted her to be angry, to scold him for wasting her time. It would have been easier, in a way. But instead, she offered him clarity.

He exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair, letting the weight of her words settle into him.

Perhaps she was right.

No—he knew she was right.

Bethania had remained in his heart not because he was a fool, but because he had never been given closure. Because he had never truly stopped loving her.

And what kind of man was he, if he abandoned love out of mere fear?

Rosaline, sensing that her words had done their work, rose gracefully from the bench. “Come,” she said lightly. “We have a long journey home.”.

Severin nodded, standing with her.

For the first time in months, he knew exactly what he had to do.

But as they rode away in their carriages, her look lingering on Severin in the distance. Rosaline, melancholically, for the second time in her life witnesses Severin riding away in a carriage with another woman in mind.

## Chapter 53 – Moonlight Music

New Year's Eve in Meslay was a quiet affair. The grand halls of the Derbois estate, often the site of lively gatherings, sat in eerie stillness. No voices echoed in the corridors, no laughter spilled through the rooms. The only sounds were the faint crackling of embers in the distant fireplace and the whisper of winter winds against the windowpanes.

Severin had chosen solitude tonight.

The town of Meslay was alight with celebration; in the distance, faint cheers and the occasional burst of song drifted through the cold night air. Families gathered, couples danced, revelers toasted the end of one year and the hopeful beginning of another. Yet Severin sat alone in his music room, his fingers resting lightly on the piano keys, the flickering candlelight casting elongated shadows across the floor.

Tonight, it was just him and his music. **Him and Bethania.**

He exhaled slowly, placing his hands on the cool ivory keys. He had been composing since his return from Tours, but tonight—**tonight was different.**

There was no longer hesitation in his movements. No longer the doubt that had plagued him for months. His heart, though still burdened, now had direction. **He would write to Bethania again.** He would reach out—not in desperation, not in pleading, but in music.

**Something softer, something more intimate.**

A new suite, written just for her.

His fingers began to move, the first hesitant notes filling the room. They floated through the air like delicate specters, weaving between the shadows, curling against the cold. The melody was soft, tender—a lullaby of longing, a whispered confession. It was not a song of regret, nor of mourning.

**It was a song of devotion.**

It was the sound of **him waiting**.

He closed his eyes, letting the music guide him, letting his memories shape each note. The steam from the tea that morning at the Lenoir estate. The hesitant glance she had given him over the chapel pews in Blois. The way she had leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder as the sun set over Cellettes. **How soft she had been. How fragile, yet strong.**

His fingers pressed more firmly, the melody swelling.

Had she ever known? Truly known **how much she meant to him?**

For all his grand gestures, for all the letters and flowers and melodies written in her name, he wondered if Bethania had ever understood the depths of it. That she had not simply *captured* his heart—**she had shaped it.**

The music slowed again, his hands moving delicately, reverently. The final notes hung in the air, lingering, reluctant to fade.

And then, silence.

Severin let out a slow breath, his hands resting motionless on the keys. He sat there for a long time, the flickering candle beside him his only companion.

Outside, the **moonlight poured through the window, silver and endless.**

And if one had been walking near the Derbois estate that night—wandering through the fields, or standing beneath the vast expanse of stars—they might have heard it.

A melody drifting through the winter air.

A man serenading the moon.

Or perhaps, **serenading the woman who held his heart.**

## Chapter 54 – New Year’s Revelation

The first day of the year arrived in Cellettes with a rare and gentle warmth, the kind that made one believe spring had come early, even though winter still reigned. Sunlight streamed through the bare branches of the trees, casting long golden beams across the fields. It was a good omen, or so Bethania liked to think.

She had stayed home with her mother and younger sisters for the holiday, keeping the season intimate, unlike Faustina and Angelica, who had made a short trip to Amboise to visit friends. They were expected back today, though Bethania had been too preoccupied to think much about their return.

For the past several days, she had spent long hours discussing with her mother and Abeline the contents of the letter she would send to **Severin**. Madam Lenoir and Abeline had been *invested*—more than just casual advisors, they had become partners in her mission, **helping to craft each word, ensuring it carried the weight of her sincerity, her longing, her love.**

It was time.

She loved him.

She had no doubts anymore.

Her mother, watching her with quiet relief, knew how difficult these past months had been. She had seen Bethania struggle—seen the walls of her own making keep her from the one man who had always been willing to reach her. And though Madam Lenoir had tried to help before, she had learned **not to push, only to guide.**

Bethania had changed since the summer, grown into her own decisions, and for the first time, **this choice was truly hers.**

**“I was too forceful before,”** Madam Lenoir admitted softly as they sat together in the quiet of the morning, Bethania reading over her letter one last time.

Bethania looked up, surprised by the confession.

“I only wanted you to find happiness,” her mother continued, eyes warm with regret. “I thought... perhaps I knew best.”

Bethania placed a hand over hers. “You were never wrong about him, Maman.”

Madam Lenoir’s face softened with relief, and they shared a knowing smile.

Beside her letter, Bethania had also written something more—a **poem**. A piece of her heart, her soul, her longing **set in ink**. She wanted him to have more than just words of explanation. She wanted him to *feel* what she felt.

She was ready.

**Upstairs, in her room, she lay on her bed, holding the letter gently between her fingers.**

Her cross necklace, the one she had clutched through so many moments of indecision, lay cool against her skin. She sighed, staring at the ceiling, **imagining her future with Severin**. She could almost taste it—the **warmth of him, the safety of his arms, the way his voice sounded when he spoke her name.**



For the first time, **she could picture it clearly**—not just a possibility, but a reality. She smiled to herself, **whispering his name under her breath like a secret.**

Then she saw it.

### **A carriage approaching the house.**

She sat up, curiosity flickering across her face as she peered out the window. **Faustina and Angelica.** They had returned from Amboise, though something about the speed of their approach unsettled her. They were moving **too fast**, as if urgency spurred them forward.

Still, she lay back down, clutching the letter to her chest. **It didn't matter.**

She had made her choice. And tomorrow, she would send it.

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### **Downstairs, the door swung open with force.**

Faustina entered first, her expression **flushed, unsettled**—as if she had been carrying something heavy all the way from Amboise.

Madam Lenoir frowned, stepping forward. “Faustina, what is it?”

But Faustina barely acknowledged her. **She was already moving toward the staircase.**

“I need to speak with Bethania,” she said quickly, brushing past her mother.

Madam Lenoir turned in confusion. Before she could press further, **Angelica leaned in, whispering something into her ear.**

Madam Lenoir stilled.

Her lips parted slightly, then **all color drained from her face.**

She sat down heavily in the nearest chair, fingers pressing lightly to her temple, her breath coming **slow, uncertain.**

She did not call after Faustina.

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**Upstairs, Bethania heard the knock.**

It was too **light**, too hesitant.

“Come in,” she said unassumingly.

Faustina stepped inside. **Her expression gave her away immediately.**

Something was wrong.

Bethania **sat up quickly**, her heart suddenly unsteady.  
“Faustina? What is it?”

Her sister didn’t speak right away. She moved toward the bed, **slowly, carefully.**

“Faustina,” Bethania pressed, **fear creeping into her voice.** “Tell me what troubles you.”

Faustina sat beside her now, eyes darting over Bethania's face, as if gauging how much of the truth she could bear.

And then, after a deep, slow breath—

**She said it.**

“The Duke of Derbois... Severin...” she began carefully. “He was seen with another woman in Tours over Christmas.”

**Silence.**

Bethania did not move.

The letter was still in her hands. **Her fingers curled tightly around it.**

For a moment, the words didn't register. **She had to replay them in her mind.**

Another woman.

Severin.

Bethania's breath came **shakily**.

“I—” she started, then stopped, the sound of her own voice breaking her.

Her entire body **went cold**.

The warmth, the love, the hope she had felt only moments before—**shattered**.

Her eyes **welled up uncontrollably**.

Her hands **tightened around the letter**, the very letter she had spent days perfecting. The letter she was going to send. The letter that, **only moments ago, she believed would change everything.**

Now it felt **like an object from another life.**

Another woman.

She clung desperately to the last thread of hope, her voice almost **pleading** as she turned toward Faustina.

“How sure are you?” she whispered, voice breaking.

“Faustina, how sure are you?”

Faustina hesitated. **It was the hesitation that undid her.**

Bethania gasped—a **strangled, broken sound.**

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head, as if she could will it to be false. **“No. That can’t be true.”**

Faustina opened her mouth, **but she had no words.**

**Bethania crumbled.**

The letter slipped from her hands, **falling to the floor.**

Faustina, shaken by the sight of her sister **breaking in front of her**, pulled her into a tight embrace.

Bethania **clung to her**, tears **falling freely now**, her breath coming in gasps. **All the waiting. All the time she spent hoping, believing, choosing to see the best in him.**

**And it had all been for nothing.**

Faustina said nothing. She only held her.

Because **there were no words** that could take this pain away.

## Chapter 55 – Homecoming

The carriage rocked steadily along the dirt path, the sound of wheels crunching gravel filling the otherwise quiet morning air. Severin sat in the back, his gaze lost to the passing scenery. The closer he got to Volnay, the heavier his thoughts became. The vineyards stretched endlessly before him, their familiar, dormant rows blanketed in the winter frost. Even in its slumber, the land looked the same as it had when he was a boy—when his hands were calloused from working the soil, when his father's voice commanded every inch of it.

Home.

It was not the grand halls of Meslay. It was not the polished floors of the Lenoir estate. It was this—the rough, honest place where he had been raised, where the smell of fermenting wine clung to the air, where his past still lived in the dirt and stone.

As the carriage drew nearer to the great white stone gates of the Derbois estate, he caught sight of a lone figure waiting at the entrance.

His mother.

Her long dark hair, streaked with silver, was tucked beneath her usual headscarf, the fabric catching in the winter breeze. Even from a distance, he could see the warmth in her face, the anticipation in the way she stood. The moment the carriage halted, he barely had time to step down before she wrapped him in a familiar, comforting embrace.

"Mon fils," Laura Derbois murmured against his shoulder, her voice thick with emotion. "Finally, you are home."

Severin allowed himself to sink into the moment, breathing in the scent of her—a mix of lavender, flour, and something uniquely maternal.

"It has been too long," he admitted, his voice softer than usual.

She pulled back, studying his face, her dark eyes perceptive. "Too long indeed," she agreed, then took his hands. "Come inside. You must be freezing."

Severin followed her through the courtyard, past the familiar stone archways, and into the warmth of the great house.

The smell of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air. It was a scent that instantly transported him back in time—long evenings spent at this very table, his brothers joking, his father brooding, his mother humming softly in the kitchen.

But tonight, only his parents remained.

As he stepped into the dining room, his father was already seated at the long wooden table, staring into the crackling fire with an expression that was neither welcoming nor unkind.

"Father," Severin greeted, inclining his head respectfully.

"Severin," his father replied gruffly. His eyes, sharp and unreadable, flickered toward him briefly before returning

to the fire. No embrace. No true warmth. Just an acknowledgment.

Severin had expected nothing else.

They ate in near silence at first, the tension hanging over the table as thick as the winter air outside. His mother, ever the peacekeeper, tried to ease the moment with simple conversation—asking about his travels, about Meslay, about his fencing pursuits. But even she could not fully dissolve the weight that always seemed to exist between father and son.

It was only when the meal was finished, and Severin and his mother sat by the fire with cups of warm cider, that the real conversation began.

He spoke of Bethania.

Of the months of longing, the silence, the music. The letters left unanswered, the gifts received but never returned. The pain of waiting. The fear that he had lost her completely.

His mother listened intently, her hands wrapped around her cup, her dark eyes watching him the way she always had—as if she could see straight through to his soul.

When he was finished, she sighed. "My son, I do not wish to see you chase a woman who does not wish to be caught."

Severin's jaw tightened, but before he could protest, she shook her head gently. "That is not to say she does not love you. That is not to say she is not worthy of your pursuit. But you are my son, and I have seen too many men with



beautiful hearts destroy themselves over women who cannot decide where they belong."

He swallowed hard. He had expected his mother to support him, to encourage him to wait for Bethania no matter what. But this... this was different.

"But—"

"But you are stubborn," she continued, smiling slightly. "And I have seen that look in your eyes before."

Severin exhaled. "Elise," he murmured.

His mother nodded, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "I remember when you first set your sights on her. It was not easy, was it?"

"No," Severin admitted. "She... resisted at first. She thought I was too serious. Too... severe."

Laura chuckled softly. "And yet you won her."

He looked down at his cup, his fingers tightening around it. "Yes. But this is different."

His mother studied him for a long moment before saying, "Different, yes. But not impossible."

Before he could respond, heavy footfalls echoed in the doorway.

His father.

The elder Derbois crossed his arms, leaning against the frame, his expression unreadable. "You waste your time," he said bluntly.

Severin stiffened. "Pardon?"

His father stepped forward, picking up his own cup of cider and taking a slow sip. "Bethania Lenoir. You waste your time on a girl who cannot even make up her mind about you."

Severin bristled. "She is not—"

"She is not Elise," his father cut in. "Elise was a woman when you met her. She knew her mind, she chose you." He shook his head. "This one? This Bethania? She makes you weak."

Severin's fists clenched at his sides. "She does not make me weak."

His father scoffed. "Then why are you here, in my house, spilling your heart like a boy instead of securing your future like a man?"

Silence.

His mother sighed, but did not interrupt.

Severin forced himself to remain calm. "And what, exactly, would you have me do?"

His father shrugged. "You had a good woman right in front of you in Tours. Rosaline Bonnet." He smirked slightly. "I even heard the gossip about you two. Seemed like a fine match to me."

Severin felt a sharp sting of irritation. The gossip. So it had reached even Volnay. He hated that.

"Rosaline is a good woman," Severin admitted. "But she is not the one I love."

His father made a noise of disapproval. "Love," he muttered. "Love is a fool's dream, boy. A man builds a home. He builds a life. He does not wait around hoping some woman decides she wants to be part of it."

Severin stood, his chair scraping loudly against the wooden floor. "Then it is a good thing I am no longer a boy."

His father arched a brow, but said nothing.

Laura, ever the mediator, placed a hand on Severin's arm, her voice gentle. "Go rest, mon fils. You have had a long journey."

Severin looked down at her, his anger softening at her kindness.

"Goodnight, Mother," he murmured.

As he left the room, his father's final words followed him.

"You chase ghosts, Severin."

Severin did not respond.

But as he lay awake that night, staring at the wooden beams above his childhood bed, he could not shake the feeling that somewhere, Bethania was just as restless as he was. He plans to stay here for 3 weeks- what better place than to finish Bethania's moonlight suite than on his childhood piano.

## Chapter 56 – A Mother's Plea

The last of winter still clung to Meslay, though the world was slowly thawing. Late February, and Severin had finally returned home. The long stay in Volnay had done him some good—time spent with his mother, his father's terse but predictable presence, the quiet labor in the vineyards that had once been his entire world. It had allowed him to breathe, to reflect. And more importantly, it had allowed him to finish his *Moonlight Suite*—five movements, composed on the very piano he had learned on as a child.

He had written for Bethania with a heart clearer than before. This time, it was not written in anguish, nor in desperation. It was an offering—not an entreaty, but a simple truth.

Now, back in Meslay, he exhaled as he unpacked. The familiar solitude of his estate welcomed him like an old friend. He placed his belongings where they belonged—his travel bag beside the armoire, his boots neatly by the door. Then, he carefully stacked his finished compositions on the polished wood of his writing desk. He would send them to Bethania soon.

He would send a letter. A real letter.

He reached for a clean sheet of parchment, ready to compose something deliberate and meaningful. But as he did, his gaze fell upon a small pile of letters stacked neatly by the inkstand—correspondence that had accumulated in his absence.

Severin tilted his head, absently thumbing through them. Business matters—one from a wine merchant in Vendôme, another from a Protestant minister he had met in Tours,

inquiries about land and estate matters. A few dull political musings from acquaintances who sought his opinion. He sighed. None of it pressing.

But then—

His fingers stilled.

At the very bottom of the pile, beneath invoices and business missives, he saw it.

A seal.

Familiar.

His heart slammed against his ribs.

He snatched it up as if it might vanish before his eyes. The Lenoir family crest was unmistakable. The wax seal was still intact, its stamp pressed firmly in place. The date—nearly a month ago.

For a brief moment, he hesitated. He had not seen that name, not held a letter from them, in what felt like ages. His breath was shallow, his hands unusually unsteady as he broke the seal and unfolded the parchment.

Then, he read.

Madame Lenoir's Letter

*"Monsieur de Derbois,  
I had hoped I would not need to write this letter, but I  
find myself left with no choice.*

*You are an intelligent man, so I will not waste words.*

*What have you done? What have you done to my daughter?*

*You disappear, you leave her in silence, and now—now I hear from whispers in the streets that you have taken up with another woman? That you have moved on?*

*Is that what all of this was? Was Bethania merely another fleeting fancy, another conquest to win and discard? I have defended you, Severin. Even when my daughter refused to speak of you, even when her eyes carried a grief that she would not name—I defended you.*

*You should know this: she has not forgotten you. She has spoken of you, played your music when she thought no one was listening, carried you in her heart even when she swore she would not. And now, I hear that you have been seen in Tours, in the company of another woman.*

*If you have abandoned her, say it plainly. If there is no love left in you for my daughter, then I will hear it from you, and you will never hear from me again.*

*But if there is even a fraction of truth left in what you once wrote to her—if even a single note of your compositions was genuine—then you must answer me.*

*What is your heart, Severin? Tell me now.*

*—Madame Lenoir*

---

Severin's breath left him in a rush.

He gripped the parchment, his knuckles white.

He read the words again. And again.

“She has not forgotten you.”

A sharp pang tore through his chest.

The very idea that Bethania had believed the gossip—had thought him unfaithful—made his stomach churn. Had she suffered because of him? Had she spent these weeks thinking he had replaced her, that he had discarded her like a careless man?

No. No, that was unbearable.

How had this happened?

How had things unraveled so disastrously that the one woman he loved now thought him lost to another?

He should have written sooner. He should have sent word. He should have fought harder.

Madame Lenoir’s words burned into his mind. Bethania still played his music. She still spoke of him. That truth settled into his soul like a fire that could not be extinguished.

There was no time to waste.

With quick, decisive movements, he reached for his ink and parchment. His heart hammered as he dipped his quill into the inkwell, his hand steady with renewed purpose.

If Bethania doubted him, he would correct it immediately.

He did not waste another moment.

He folded his letter, sealed it, and stamped it with his own crest.

But a courier would not do.

Not this time.

This letter needed to reach Bethania immediately.

Severin grabbed his coat, his gloves, and his sword. Within moments, he was in the stable, saddling his horse with quick, practiced movements.

He rode out into the February cold, the wind biting at his face, but he did not care.

He would take the letter to Blois himself.

He would put an end to this misunderstanding.

Because if Bethania thought, even for a moment, that he had stopped loving her—

She was terribly, terribly wrong.



## Chapter 57 – Blood and Honor

The sound of hooves pounded against the frozen dirt, rhythmic and relentless, matching the wild cadence of Severin's heart. His horse breathed heavily beneath him, each exhale a visible cloud in the crisp February air. His long dark coat billowed behind him, the wind tugging at its edges as if trying to hold him back.

But nothing could stop him now.

Not the cold. Not the whispers in the streets. Not the burden of the past.

He had a letter to deliver.

The city of Blois loomed ahead, its rooftops glistening under a weak winter sun. The closer he rode to the town center, the denser the crowds became. Market stalls bustled with merchants and customers alike, their voices mingling in a chaotic symphony of commerce and gossip.

Severin barely registered any of it. He had **tunnel vision**, his mind fixed only on reaching the mail courier's office. His gloved fingers tightened around the reins, his pulse hammering. **Bethania needed to see this letter.** Whatever had gone wrong, whatever had been misunderstood—he would set it right.

But something in the air was wrong.

It was a feeling, an instinct, a shift in the weight of silence around him.

Severin's fists clenched, his patience worn too thin for games. But before he could answer, he noticed

something—the **crowd**. They were watching him, but not just him. They were watching something behind him.

And then—a **tap on his shoulder**.

A tap from a blade.

Severin froze. Every muscle in his body coiled with tension, his jaw locking as his mind caught up to the sensation. The crowded square, the market noise, the vendors shouting their prices—it all seemed to **dull** as he turned slowly on his heel.

Behind him stood **Godrey Rousseau**.

Sharp-featured, his smirk dripping with mockery, his grip tight around the hilt of his **drawn rapier**. The same arrogant sneer Severin had loathed since their first encounter. The man reeked of misplaced pride and **cheap cologne**.

"Well, well," Godrey mused, his voice oozing insincerity. "What has the Duke of Derbois in such a **terrible** rush?"

Godrey's blade flicked forward slightly, gesturing toward the bag at Severin's side where the **sealed envelope** peeked through.

"You've no agency to ask me anything," Severin snapped, adjusting his stance, subtly shifting his weight to prepare for whatever might come next.

But Godrey wasn't finished.

He smirked, his blade barely tilting in the direction of the letter.

"Is that for the little **Lenoir whore?**" he sneered, his voice loud enough for the nearby **crowd to hear.**

The market **went silent.**

Severin **stilled.** His pulse, which had been a storm of urgency before, now became a **cold, lethal calm.**

Somewhere in the growing crowd, **Faustina and Abeline** stood frozen, **having overheard everything.** They had been **making a market run,** but now they had stumbled into **a moment neither of them could have ever anticipated.**

Severin's grip tightened around the **hilt of his sword.**

"Of course," he said, his voice low and edged with razor-sharp menace. "A man of **your caliber**—a man of **unquestionable** honor—has the right to throw the first stone, my dear **friend** Godrey."

There was **loose laughter** from the crowd.

Godrey's smirk faltered. **He had not expected to be mocked.**

His face darkened, anger flashing in his sharp blue eyes. Without warning, he lunged—**his blade a silver blur.**

**A CLASH.**

Steel met steel, the sound **ringing** through the market square like a church bell. **Gasps** erupted from the crowd as the two men became locked in a **sudden and violent duel.**

Severin moved **instinctively**, parrying Godrey's attacks with a **calm precision** that only years of war and discipline could teach.

Godrey, **rushed and reckless**, pressed forward, each attack **sloppier than the last**. His wounded pride getting the better of his technique.

Severin saw **the opening** before it even happened.

With one **calculated step**, he sidestepped Godrey's advance and, with a **swift and decisive thrust**, his blade **pierced** the man's **right shoulder**. **Followed by a quick backhand**.

—Immediately collapsing to the ground, Godrey gasped as he clutched his shoulder. His sword **clattering** to the cobblestone.

The crowd **roared**, some in shock, others in delight.

Severin, standing tall, **flicked his sword downward**, sending droplets of blood scattering onto the stone.

He exhaled slowly, looking down at the **disgraced man before him**.

"**Godrey Rousseau**," Severin declared, his voice **booming with confidence**. "You have no right. The **Lenoir family**, I hold in the **utmost** respect. **Even above my own**." His gaze was **searing**. "How dare you, **coward**."

With that, **he turned away**.

But as Severin faced the crowd, **Godrey was not finished.**

With a **snarl**, he lunged for his fallen sword, ready to **stab Severin in the back.**

**A hand shot out from the crowd.**

**A man—a stranger—grabbed Godrey's arm, holding him back.**

Severin turned, his blade flashing **once more**, now **pointed directly at Godrey's throat.**

Godrey froze, his **chest heaving.**

The **crowd held its breath.**

And then, in a murmur that **rippled** through the market square—

"Napoleon is in France."

**Severin's blood ran cold.**

The words hung in the air like **a storm cloud** on the verge of breaking.

**"What did you say?"** Severin demanded, not lowering his blade.

The murmurs **spread**, swelling in volume.

A man in the crowd—a **mail courier**—stepped forward hesitantly.

**"It's true, Your Grace,"** he said. "The Emperor escaped Elba nearly a **week ago**. He marches toward **Paris**."

Severin's grip on his sword **tightened**.

A choice **stood before him**.

**Bethania**.

**France**.

The woman who held his heart.

The nation that owned his soul.

Godrey, forgotten, **slipped away into the crowd**, humiliated and seething. **Faustina and Abeline**, still frozen, looked at each other in **disbelief**.

But Severin **never noticed** them.

His focus was now on **the horizon**.

He turned sharply toward the courier.

"Take this letter," Severin ordered, handing over **his letter to Bethania**. "Ensure it is **delivered to Cellettes immediately**."

The courier, sensing the gravity of the moment, **nodded hastily** and rushed off.

Severin stood there for a moment, his **heart a warzone**.

And then, finally, he exhaled.

He turned toward his **horse**, mounting swiftly.

Faustina and Abeline, still watching in **shock**, knew they needed to **tell Bethania everything.**

Severin, spurring his horse forward, he **rode north.**

Back to Meslay.

## **Chapter 58 – True North**

The scent of warm chamomile and honey clung to the air, rising in soft tendrils from the delicate porcelain cups in Bethania and her mother's hands. The fire crackled low in the hearth, casting its golden light across the modest parlor, making the evening feel almost tranquil—almost.

Bethania stirred her tea absently, her thoughts elsewhere. Nearly three weeks had passed since her mother had written to Severin. Three weeks, and not a single reply.

It gnawed at her, even if she pretended otherwise.

She had tried to push it away, to bury it under household duties and the distractions of daily life. But in truth, she had not been the same since the day Faustina had returned with those awful rumors from Amboise. Since she had sealed away Severin's letters and compositions in the bottom of her drawer, unable to look at them without feeling the sting of regret.

### **Why hadn't he written back?**

Madam Lenoir watched her daughter carefully, her perceptive eyes catching every flicker of emotion Bethania tried to conceal.

"You know," her mother said gently, setting down her cup, "you speak of him more often than you realize."

Bethania's lips pressed together. "I hardly speak of him at all."

Madam Lenoir smiled knowingly. "Then it is your silence that speaks for you."



Bethania sighed, gripping her teacup tightly. She wanted to be angry with Severin. She wanted to feel nothing at all. But the truth was, she still **hoped**.

Even after all this time, she had never once taken off the silver cross necklace he had given her. And despite shutting away his letters, she had not burned them, nor had she thrown them away.

She **understood** now, in a way she had not before.

The silence she had endured from him these past weeks—it was the same silence she had once inflicted upon him after her birthday. **Perhaps she had made him feel just as abandoned.**

The thought was unbearable.

Bethania set down her tea and stood abruptly. “I need some air.”

Madam Lenoir did not protest. She simply nodded, understanding without words.

## The Letter

The evening was crisp, the air carrying the faintest trace of the winter that had not yet fully released its hold on the land. Bethania walked through the open field behind the estate, past the patches of buttercups and barley stalks that still clung stubbornly to the earth.

The sky stretched out before her, painted in the fading hues of a dying sunset—soft oranges, deep reds, and dusky violets blending into the dark embrace of night.

She thought of **another sunset**. The one she had shared with Severin, where they had sat in quiet understanding, where his warmth had been so near, so familiar.

Her heart ached with the memory.

Then, through the flowers, a figure came running.  
**Abeline.**

Bethania turned, confused at first by the urgency in her sister's sprint. Abeline was breathless, her cheeks flushed from the exertion. She tried to speak, but the words came out in gasps.

"Sev—Sev—"

Bethania's stomach dropped. "What? What about Severin?"

Still bent over, trying to catch her breath, Abeline shoved something into Bethania's hands. A **letter**.

Bethania's hazel eyes widened as she looked down at the familiar seal. **Severin.**

Her fingers trembled as she tore open the envelope, her heart pounding violently in her chest.

His handwriting—elegant yet urgent—met her gaze.

---

**Mademoiselle Lenoir,**

I write to you with urgency, as I only now have read your mother's letter. I do not know what you have heard, but I

must say this plainly—there is no other woman in my heart. There has never been.

The past three weeks—my lack of reply to your mother's letter—was not out of apathy, indifference, or hate. I was at my parents' home, taking refuge in solitude, unaware that a letter awaited me.

You are the only one, and that has not changed. I never meant to cause you pain. If you have suffered because of something you believed about me, then let me take that burden from you now.

I had every intention of writing to you. Of sending you the music I have written—written only for you. I will send it still.

Bethania, I have never forgotten you. If you still think of me, if you still listen to my music, then know that I still think of you too.

Write to me.

**Yours Only,**  
S. de Derbois

---

Bethania gasped, pressing a hand over her mouth.

Her eyes blurred with tears as she clutched the letter to her chest, her breath coming in short, uneven bursts.

“Mother—” she whispered. “Mother!”

She turned and **ran.**

The door flew open as Bethania burst inside, **holding the letter as if it were the best news of her life.** Madam Lenoir, startled, stood quickly. Faustina and Abeline rushed in after her.

Bethania nearly shoved the letter into her mother's hands, unable to form words, her lips quivering with emotion. Madam Lenoir took it carefully, her eyes scanning the words, her expression shifting from curiosity to **deep relief.**

Faustina, however, remained solemn. She stepped forward.

"Bethania," she said carefully, her tone serious.

Bethania blinked, still overwhelmed.

Faustina reached for her sister's hands, holding them firmly.

Bethania frowned, her chest rising and falling rapidly.  
"What is it?"

Faustina hesitated, glancing briefly at Abeline, who nodded in confirmation.

"We saw Severin in Blois," Faustina said softly. "Today in the marketplace"

Bethania stilled. "You... saw him?"

Faustina nodded. "He was **dueling Godfrey Rousseau.** Over you."

Bethania's heart seized in her chest. "W-what?"

Abeline chimed in, her voice hurried, excited. “He defended you, Bethy! He defended our family. Godrey insulted you—horribly—called you names, insulted our mother. Severin **fought him in the streets**. And he won.”

Bethania’s breath hitched.

Faustina added, her voice softer, “He could have killed Godrey. But he didn’t. He spared him. And after that, he made sure this letter would be sent. He left Blois right after.”

Bethania shook her head in disbelief. “Left for where?”

Faustina hesitated.

“He was seen riding north,” she admitted. “Right after hearing the news.”

Bethania’s hands clenched. “What news?”

Faustina’s lips parted, as if bracing for the weight of the words she was about to say.

“Napoleon has returned. He marches toward Paris. And Severin was seen riding north.”

The world seemed to stop.

Bethania’s pulse roared in her ears.

Severin was leaving. **He was leaving for war.**

She couldn’t let this happen.

She **wouldn’t**.

Without hesitation, Bethania turned to her mother.

“I’m going to Meslay.”

Madam Lenoir’s face paled, her breath catching as she took in her daughter’s expression—fierce, resolute, unwavering. The same determination she had seen in Severin’s letters now burned in Bethania’s hazel eyes.

“Bethania—” she started, reaching out as if she could stop her.

“I have to go,” Bethania said, her voice breaking slightly, but her resolve never wavering. “I have to see him before he leaves.”

Madam Lenoir’s throat tightened. She had waited so long for Bethania to *choose*. For months, she had watched her daughter hesitate, waver between love and duty, caught in an unspoken torment. But now, at this moment, she knew—*Bethania had finally chosen*.

Hadeline, watching the flurry of emotion unfold, clutched at her mother’s skirts, her small face scrunched in confusion.

“What is happening?” Hadeline asked, eyes darting between her sisters. “Why are you all talking about Severin? Is he coming?”

Bethania’s heart clenched. She knelt down swiftly, cupping her youngest sister’s face in her hands. “No, my love,” she said softly. “I’m going to him.”

Hadeline gasped, bouncing on her toes, her tiny hands clasped together. “Really? Will you bring him back? Will he stay with us forever?”

Bethania forced a smile, smoothing Hadeline’s curls. “I don’t know, mon trésor. But I will try.”

Hadeline’s joy faltered at the uncertainty in her sister’s voice, but before she could speak again, Madam Lenoir swept her into her arms, holding her tightly. “Come, ma douce,” she murmured, stroking her daughter’s hair to calm her. “Let your sister go.”

Bethania met her mother’s gaze once more. This time, Madam Lenoir said nothing at first. She simply stepped forward, pressing her hands gently against Bethania’s arms, as if memorizing the strength she had found within herself.

“You are certain?” Madam Lenoir whispered, her voice just for Bethania.

“Yes.”

A long pause. Then, a slow nod. A silent blessing.

“Then go,” Madam Lenoir said, her voice thick with emotion. “May God be with you, my daughter.”

Bethania exhaled confidently as her mother pulled her into a firm embrace. It smelled of lavender and warm linen, of childhood and safety. And yet, Bethania knew—this was not a farewell of a mother guiding a child. This was one woman *letting another go*.

Bethania turned to Faustina, gripping her sister's hands tightly. "Come with me".

Faustina nodded immediately, understanding without words.

The house erupted into motion. A carriage was prepared. Bethania threw on her warmest cloak, her hands steady as she tucked Severin's letter into her bodice, pressing it close to her heart.

As she stepped outside, the final light of day stretched across the horizon, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson.

The carriage doors shut behind them.

As the horses galloped forward, Bethania could only think of one thing—

She had to reach Severin before it was too late.



## **Chapter 59 – Band of Brothers**

The cold night air bit at Severin's skin, but he barely felt it. He stood at the front of his estate, the great lake stretching before him like a silver mirror, reflecting the endless expanse of stars. It was well past sundown, and in the distance, he could hear them coming—the faint rhythm of approaching hoofbeats, the steady drum of fate pulling them northward.

His mind swirled with conflicting thoughts.

The letter was sent.

Bethania would receive it.

He had done all he could, yet uncertainty gnawed at him. Would she understand? Would she believe him? Or was it already too late?

But there was no time to dwell. War never yielded to matters of the heart.

Napoleon had returned.

France called for her sons.

And Severin had given his word.

His fingers curled into fists at his sides as the first rider came into view.

### **Marcel Arrives**

Marcel rode in fast, his horse kicking up loose dirt as it slowed. In true fashion, he grinned despite the solemnity of the night, his war gear strapped haphazardly to his saddle.

“Well, well, I see you’ve not yet ridden off to glory without me,” Marcel said as he dismounted, stretching his arms as though preparing for some grand performance.

Severin smirked despite himself. “I’d hate to steal all the heroism for myself.”

Marcel clapped a hand against Severin’s back, the warmth of camaraderie cutting through the cold. “The rumors are true then? The Emperor is in France?”

Severin nodded. “Yes. And we go to him.”

Marcel’s smirk faded slightly. He had never questioned his loyalty before—none of them had. The bond they shared, the oath they took, it was unshakable. But as he glanced toward Meslay’s grand windows, catching a flicker of candlelight inside, he exhaled heavily.

“I suppose that means she must wait,” Marcel said quietly.

Severin’s jaw tightened. **Bethania.**

“I suppose so.”

Cristian Arrives

Another horse approached, its rider less boisterous, more measured. Cristian.

He dismounted with practiced ease, his movements efficient, deliberate. He was not a man for idle conversation, nor grand entrances. His eyes, sharp and knowing, met Severin’s. They needed no words.

Cristian, like Severin, was a man torn between two worlds—**duty and love**. His thoughts were undoubtedly with his wife, Tabitha, just as Severin's were with Bethania. But there was no hesitation in his resolve.

"Just like we planned. We ride south," was all Cristian said.

Severin nodded. "At first light."

Cristian's gaze flickered toward Marcel before settling back on Severin. "We'll make it in time."

For Napoleon.

For France.

For the only life they had ever known.

Beaumont Arrives

The final rider approached at a slower pace. Beaumont.

The newlywed.

The man with the most to lose.

As he dismounted, Severin could see the weight in his eyes. He knew why Beaumont had come—because **he must**. Because a man who once swore loyalty to the Empire did not abandon his brothers, even when his heart was bound to home.

Beaumont ran a hand over his horse's mane before meeting Severin's gaze.

"You'll need a man to stay behind."

Severin exhaled sharply. “Yes.”

Beaumont nodded, already knowing. “If she writes back, I’ll make sure you know of it.”

The unspoken words hung between them. **If she writes back.**

Severin turned toward the house, then back to Beaumont. “Come inside. There’s something else.”

Inside Meslay – The Plan & The Farewell

The four men gathered around a wooden table, candlelight flickering across their faces. Maps lay sprawled before them, ink marks detailing the best route north.

“We leave immediately,” Cristian said, tracing a path toward the Emperor’s advancing forces. “Every day lost is another advantage for the enemy.”

Marcel leaned back, stretching his arms behind his head. “Then we make haste. Napoleon will need every loyal man.”

Beaumont, however, remained silent, his gaze flicking toward Severin. “You said there was something else.”

Severin nodded, rising from his seat. “Come.”

He led Beaumont toward the music room.

The grand piano sat untouched, the **Moonlight Suite** he had composed for Bethania resting upon it. The parchment was crisp, each note meticulously penned.

Severin touched the sheets lightly. “If she writes back... if she comes...” He turned to Beaumont, his expression grave. “Give this to her.”

Beaumont studied him. “You’re expecting her to come?”

Severin exhaled. “I don’t know what to expect.” He hesitated. “But if she does... she needs to know.”

Beaumont lifted the music, flipping through the pages. He saw the dedication written at the top.

*“For B.L., who once turned my sorrow into song.”*

Beaumont’s expression softened. “She will know, Severin. I promise.”

Severin handed him another envelope—his **second** letter to Bethania.

“If she does not come,” Severin said, “send this to Cellettes.”

Silence stretched between them.

At last, Beaumont tucked the letter into his coat. “Godspeed, Severin.”

Severin placed a hand on Beaumont’s shoulder. “You as well, my friend.”

## Departure

The men gathered in the courtyard once more, their horses saddled, their packs secured.

Severin mounted his steed, glancing back at Meslay one last time. A part of him whispered to stay. To wait. But he knew better.

Bethania, if she still held love for him, would find him.

And if she did not...

Then war would claim him before heartache could.

Beaumont stood by the gates, his figure illuminated by the glow of the lanterns.

“Long live the Emperor,” Beaumont called. “And Godspeed, my brothers.”

With a sharp tug on the reins, Severin turned his horse toward the road- solemnly glancing back at Meslay. Picturing Bethania standing at the entrance. Once again feeling as if he is leaving her.

Cristian and Marcel followed, their silhouettes swallowed by the night.

## Chapter 60 – Meslay Estate

The cold air of early morning bit at Bethania's exposed skin as she stepped down from the carriage. The sky was still dark, the first hints of dawn barely kissing the horizon. She clutched the edges of her cloak tightly, trying to suppress the exhaustion that gnawed at her bones. They had been riding through the night, chasing a hope that felt as fleeting as the stars overhead.

Beside her, Faustina rubbed her hands together for warmth, her breath coming out in white puffs. Their journey had been long and grueling, but neither had spoken much of it. There was no need—both understood what was at stake.

They needed to reach Severin. Before it was too late.

### A Stop in Vendôme

Their horses slowed as they entered the outskirts of Vendôme. The town was still asleep, save for the glow of lanterns in a few shop windows. A faint aroma of bread and butter hung in the air, drawing them toward a small bakery on the corner. The warmth spilling from inside was a welcome contrast to the bitter morning air.

Bethania hesitated for only a moment before stepping in, the bell above the door chiming softly. The baker, a stout older man with flour dusting his apron, turned to them with mild surprise.

"You're traveling early, mesdemoiselles," he noted, wiping his hands on a cloth. "What can I do for you?"

Bethania took a step forward, her voice laced with urgency. “We’re looking for the Meslay estate—do you know the way?”

The baker raised an eyebrow. “The Meslay estate?”

“Yes,” Bethania said, more desperately now. “We are looking for the Duke of Derbois.”

The baker’s eyes widened slightly at the mention of Severin’s name. Then, his face softened with recognition. “Ah... so you are *her*.”

Bethania blinked, caught off guard. “I—what?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I knew you looked familiar. Severin has spoken of you before. He has been a loyal patron of mine for years. Always ordering the same bread, the same pastries. But last year, he came in with a different light in his eyes. He told me about a woman—a *Mademoiselle Lenoir*.”

Bethania’s breath hitched.

“He told me she had the hands of an artist. That she could turn flour and sugar into something divine. And that for the first time in his life... he found himself buying bakeware for someone else.” The baker smiled, eyes twinkling. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Bethania swallowed hard, nodding.

“He was here yesterday,” the baker continued, moving to the counter to scribble something on a piece of parchment. “Rushed through town like a man possessed, headed



straight for Meslay. If you ride fast, you may still find him there.”

Bethania felt her heart stutter in her chest. She turned to Faustina, hope sparking like fire in her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered, taking the directions he handed her.

She was close now.

### Approaching Meslay

The path to Meslay was breathtaking. The cobblestone road curved gently around an expansive lake, its still waters reflecting the pale light of dawn. Apple trees lined the way, their bare branches standing in stark contrast against the white frost coating the ground.

Faustina, despite the urgency of their arrival, couldn’t help but murmur, “What a beautiful home.”

Bethania barely registered the words. Her pulse quickened as the chateau came into view—large, elegant, its white stone walls bathed in the soft glow of the rising sun. It was a home befitting a man of Severin’s stature, yet there was something undeniably inviting about it.

Her breath caught. *He’s here.*

She clutched the silver cross at her throat, willing herself forward. *Just a few more steps. Just a few more moments, and I will see him again.*

The carriage slowed, coming to a stop before the grand entrance. Bethania all but threw the door open, her boots crunching against the gravel as she stepped down.

The doors to the estate swung open.

Bethania took a sharp breath, heart leaping—

But it wasn't Severin who stepped out.

It was Beaumont.

Too Late

Bethania faltered mid-step, her chest tightening. The moment her cousin's face came into view, she knew.

She was too late.

Beaumont descended the steps quickly, his expression one of both relief and regret. Bethania barely heard Faustina behind her, shifting uneasily.

"Cousin?" Bethania's voice was weak. "Is... is Severin here?"

The look Beaumont gave her said everything.

Bethania's shoulders dropped. Her hands, which had been clenched in anticipation, went slack at her sides. She felt the weight of exhaustion settle into her limbs.

Beaumont reached out, pulling her into a firm embrace. She let him, pressing her face into his shoulder, allowing the sorrow to seep through her bones.

“He left, didn’t he?” she murmured, barely able to find her voice.

Beaumont sighed, rubbing her back in comfort. “Yes. Just last night. He rode out with Marcel and Cristian.”

Bethania squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to cry.

Faustina stepped forward now, clearing her throat. “Did he leave anything behind?”

Beaumont nodded, stepping back. “Come inside. You both must be freezing.”

## Chapter 61 – Memorial

The grand iron gates of Meslay creaked open, revealing the long path ahead. The estate loomed in the distance, bathed in the soft glow of morning light. Bethania took in the sight—two great **bronze lions** flanked the entrance, their expressions fierce, their stance regal. She could not help but wonder if Severin had these commissioned as a tribute to his eastern campaigns, where he had once fought in lands so far from home. It was unmistakable—this place was Severin, every inch of it marked by his history, his tastes, his silent reverence for the past.

As the carriage rolled forward, she drew a steadying breath, her heart thrumming with quiet anticipation. *I am stepping into his world now.*

### The Chateau of Meslay

Stepping inside, the entrance hall swallowed her in its towering gothic architecture. The **dark stone pillars** stretched upward, their edges carved with intricate patterns. A grand **chandelier of wrought iron and crystal** loomed above, casting shifting shadows across the black-and-white checkered floor. The air smelled of aged wood, candle wax, and something faintly spiced—clove or cinnamon, perhaps, lingering from the last time Severin had been here.

Bethania walked softly, her breath still carrying the cold from outside. **To her right, an open doorway led into a vast library.** She paused, momentarily drawn to the towering bookshelves lining the walls, their countless tomes standing in patient silence. The room seemed untouched yet lived in at once. *How many nights had he*

*spent here, lost in thought, a book open in his lap yet his mind elsewhere?*

As they continued forward, the hallway widened into a **grand atrium**. In its center stood a large **marble fountain, its basin encircling an angelic statue**. The angel's delicate hands reached for the heavens, her expression solemn, as though caught between hope and sorrow. Above her, a **glass dome ceiling** let in the soft winter light, illuminating the statue in an ethereal glow.

Bethania hesitated, stepping around the fountain with quiet reverence. **The craftsmanship was exquisite, yet there was something intimate about it**. This was not merely decoration—it was *mourning*. A relic of something lost.

Then, something else caught her eye.

A **corner room**, its entrance veiled by a curtain of heavy fabric. The dark material fluttered slightly from a draft, offering only a glimpse of the space beyond.

Beaumont, sensing her curiosity, spoke softly.  
*"That is a memorial room."*

Bethania's breath stilled.

For a long moment, she simply looked at the curtain, her fingers brushing over the silver cross necklace she had worn so faithfully. *Did Severin ever come here?* Did he stand in the dim light of that room, remembering what he had lost?

She stepped forward, parting the curtain delicately, as if she were intruding upon something sacred.

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## The Memorial Room

The space was dark, the air thick with stillness. A lone **oil lamp flickered atop a wooden table**, casting elongated shadows along the walls.

At the center of the table rested a **rectangular box**, its lid slightly aged, as though it had been opened many times before.

Bethania's gaze lifted to the figure above it. **A statue of a woman in prayer.** Her hands were clasped, her head bowed, her expression carved with the softness of eternal devotion.

She knew who this was.

Elise.

Bethania took a slow, steady breath and stepped closer.

The room was filled with **trinkets carefully placed**, not haphazardly strewn but arranged with **intention**. A dried flower pressed beneath glass. A single glove, preserved but gently worn. A book, its pages marked with small notes in the margins. Pieces of a life frozen in time.

Her fingers hesitated over the **wooden box**.

Then, with quiet reverence, she opened it.

Inside lay **an old letter**, its parchment delicate with age. The ink had slightly faded, but the words remained, beautifully scrawled in an elegant hand.

Bethania lifted it, unfolding the pages carefully.

*My Love,*

*I pray this letter finds you in good health and steady spirit, though I know war leaves little room for such things. Every night, I look at the moon and wonder if you see the same light shining over Prussia. I miss you more than words can say, but I will not let longing weaken me—I will be strong for you, as you have always been for me.*

*Poem 279 - October 2, 1806*

*"I do not love you for your medals, nor for the weight of your name.*

*Not for the steel in your hands, nor the battles you claim.*

*I love you in silence, in moments unseen—  
The pause in your hazel eyes before words  
intervene.*

*The laughter you steal when anger should stay,  
The distant gaze where your thoughts drift away.*

*Not for your titles, nor for your might—  
But for the soul I glimpse in the quietest light."*

*Come back to me, you know I worry, mon  
amour.*

*I shall be waiting, in our home smelling of  
freshly baked chocolate cake.*

*—E.*

Bethania's breath caught.

She could see it—Elise sitting at a writing desk, pouring herself into these words. She could see Severin **opening this letter on some distant battlefield**, his war-worn hands tracing the ink.

A deep ache settled in Bethania's chest.

She carefully folded the letter back into place, her fingers trembling slightly.

For the first time, she truly understood.

Elise had been his world.

Bethania had always known Severin had loved his late wife—but reading this, **truly feeling it**, made that love tangible. Elise had spoken to him in poetry, in whispered affection, in quiet devotion.

And now, Bethania felt like a trespasser in a love story she had no right to witness.

She exhaled, stepping back.

For a long moment, she simply **looked at the statue of Elise**.

Then, without hesitation, she brought her hands together in silent parallel prayer.

*"Keep him safe," she whispered. "Wherever he is, let him return home."*

She **would not be jealous of Elise**. She would not let insecurity taint what she felt for Severin.



Love did not lessen with time.

It simply changed shape.

Footsteps. Voices.

Bethania turned slightly, hearing **Beaumont speaking with Faustina in the next room.** Their voices were hushed, but she did not listen.

Instead, she gave one last lingering glance at the prayer statue.

Then, she stepped away, parting the curtain once more.

## Chapter 62 – Aubade Atelier

The sun was beginning its slow rise over the horizon, casting a soft, golden light over the Meslay estate. Inside, the warmth of the grand hall contrasted with the crisp morning air that still clung to Bethania's skin. She entered quietly, her exhaustion evident in her slowed steps, yet her senses remained heightened, drinking in the surroundings.

Beaumont and Faustina stood near the tall, arched windows, their figures outlined against the vast landscape beyond. Snow blanketed the rolling vineyards in the distance, an expanse of white stretching toward the tree line, the sun's first rays igniting the frost-covered horizon in muted gold and amber.

Bethania paused, watching the scene unfold before her.

*"Severin grew up on a vineyard in Volnay,"* she recalled, his voice drifting back to her from the past. He had spoken of it in passing, but there had been something unspoken in his words—a reverence for the land, for the discipline it demanded, for the life it had carved out of him.

Now, she was seeing it all.

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### Conversations & Contemplation

"Napoleon's return will change everything," Beaumont said, his voice measured but edged with quiet apprehension. "There's no telling how long the peace will last now."

Faustina, arms crossed, tilted her head slightly. "France has been in turmoil for as long as I can remember. It's almost as if we don't know how to exist without war."

Bethania listened absently, her mind drifting as their conversation continued. She could hear Faustina teasing Beaumont about his new marriage, and in response, he only smiled—a quiet, knowing smile.

"Marriage has been the best thing to happen to me," Beaumont admitted. "Rachelle is a joy. If war comes, I know what I'm fighting to protect."

The sentiment lingered in the air, and Bethania found herself gripping the edges of her cloak just a little tighter.

She sank into a couch near the end table, her fingers absentmindedly trailing over the spine of a book resting there. She picked it up, flipping through its pages. A **music composition study book**.

Bethania traced her fingers over the notes and annotations, a strange pang rising in her chest. The thought of Severin sitting here, pouring over the same pages, studying the movement of melodies and the science behind sound—it made her feel closer to him, yet impossibly distant.

Beaumont's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

"You must be exhausted," he said, turning toward both sisters now. "Stay as long as you like—Severin himself insisted you would always be welcome here."

There was a brief pause before he added, "And there's something I need to show you, Bethania."

She glanced up, the weight of those words settling over her.

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## The Walk to the Music Room

Beaumont led her through the quiet halls of the chateau, Faustina remaining behind in the main hall, engaging with the light meal Beaumont had set out—brioche bread with oil, a platter of cheese, and dried fruit.

The hallway they traversed was dimly lit, the flickering glow of wall sconces casting warm light against the stone. Bethania's eyes trailed over the decor—Severin's history mapped out along these walls.

**Fencing medals gleamed from their displays.** Trophies from tournaments, honors and maps from campaigns. **Swords of varying styles hung beneath them**—sleek, French rapiers beside heavier cavalry sabers, alongside **curved, exotic blades** that must have been collected during his time in the East.

Each item felt like a piece of his story, an echo of the man she was only beginning to understand fully.

As they approached the music room, an open doorway caught her eye. Beyond it, a spacious chamber with dark wooden furniture and tall windows. **His bedroom.**

For a fleeting moment, Bethania wondered what it would be like to step inside—to see how he lived, to feel his presence in the remnants of his daily routine. But before she could dwell on the thought, Beaumont's voice broke through.

"Severin left something for you," he said, gesturing toward the piano. "He meant to send it before the news of Napoleon."

Her breath hitched.

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## The Music Room

Bethania approached the piano, her fingers grazing the polished wood as she took in the sight before her. Beside the instrument, in a neat and intentional pile, were all the letters Severin had ever received from her. She hesitated, swallowing down the ache that rose in her throat. He had kept them all.

But it was the sheet music that truly held her. Wrapped in a delicate ribbon, the first page bore his unmistakable handwriting:

### **"Suite au clair de lune"**

Her breath hitched as she traced the ink with the pad of her finger. This was for her. He had been thinking of her, composing for her, even through all the silence.

She picked up the pages carefully, holding them close as she walked, her eyes scanning the notes, the markings, the delicate phrases he had written in the margins. She followed the melody in her mind, imagining the rise and fall of the music, the emotion woven into every movement.

Step by step, she drifted further into the room, not even realizing where her feet were carrying her until she felt the

plushness of a thick rug beneath her. Lifting her gaze briefly, she froze.

She had wandered into **his bedroom**.

The air here was different—warmer, private. A space lived in but orderly. A half-burned candle rested on the bedside table, its wick dark with the memory of a recent flame. A chair sat by the window, a discarded book resting open as if he had left it there in the middle of a thought. And the bed—wide, neatly kept, yet inviting in a way that made her stomach turn with something she couldn't name.

Exhaustion pressed down on her shoulders. Without thinking, she lowered herself onto the edge of the bed, still clutching the sheet music. She told herself she would only rest for a moment—just long enough to read through more of the suite properly.

Lying back against the covers, she let the pages fall onto her chest, her fingers still loosely grasping them as her breath slowed. She read the notes, tracing over the careful way he had shaped them, how each phrase seemed to **speak** in a way only he could.

Her eyelids grew heavy.

The world blurred.

And before she could stop herself, she drifted into sleep.

In Severin's bed. With his music still pressed against her heart.

## Chapter 63 – Paris

The hooves of their horses drummed against the earth, kicking up the last remnants of winter dust as they rode. The journey from **Meslay to Lyon** had been grueling—long hours in the saddle, stolen moments of rest beneath the open sky, the gnawing uncertainty of what lay ahead. But none of them had faltered. Not Severin, not Cristian, not Marcel.

They were **Bonapartists**. They had bled for Napoleon before, and they would do so again. Their reasons were their own—different, perhaps—but in this, they were united.

By the time they reached **Lyon on March 8th**, the city was already **Napoleon's**. The Emperor had taken the city without a fight, and his march northward was gaining unstoppable momentum. They were not alone in their fervor. **Soldiers, officers, entire regiments** had defected from the Bourbons and joined Napoleon's cause. The energy in Lyon was **electric**—a tide of men surging toward Paris, toward destiny.

They did not stop to celebrate. There was no time.

With Lyon secured, Napoleon's **Imperial Army** pushed toward Paris, **and Severin, Cristian, and Marcel rode with them**.

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### On the Road to Paris

The road stretched endlessly before them, winding through the French countryside. Spring was beginning to stir

beneath the chill of early March, the frost retreating under the growing warmth of the sun. They moved with **urgency**, knowing each day brought them closer to either **victory or ruin**.

**In Auxerre**, one of the last major stops before Paris, Severin found a moment to breathe. Not for himself—but for those he had left behind.

He secured a **courier** and penned two letters:

Letter to the Lenoir Family (Cellettes)

To **Madam Lenoir** and her daughters,

I do not know what you have heard, but I write to tell you **not to take sides** in the days ahead. The path I have chosen is mine alone, and I would not see your family suffer the consequences of my loyalty. **If we fail, the royalists will not be kind to those seen as sympathizers**. Do not speak of me. Do not defend me. Let me be forgotten in Cellettes, if that is what keeps you safe.

I pray you will forgive me for this absence, but war does not yield to personal wishes. It never has. Tell your daughter Bethania- I think of her fondly everstill.

Severin,  
Duke of Derbois

Severin hesitated before sealing it, his heart heavy. He had **no idea where Bethania was**—if she was still at home, if she had received his last letter, if she had already forgotten him.



## Letter to Beaumont (Meslay)

Beaumont,

We ride for Paris. **Napoleon's army swells by the day.** The Emperor is no longer a man reclaiming power—he is a storm rolling toward the throne. **Louis XVIII flees even as I write this.**

I will not ask you to support this cause—only to watch over what I have left behind. If a letter arrives from Cellettes, you will know what to do. My dear brother Beaumont, please watch over Bethania. I don't know where she may be at this time- do your due diligence to protect her. Despite this coming war and whatever the result might be - her well being and happiness is my biggest desire.

Severin

---

## Paris on the Horizon

By the time they rode within sight of **Paris**, the sun was dipping low in the sky, painting the horizon in **gold and fire**. The city unfurled before them like a promise—rooftops gleaming in the waning light, the distant silhouette of the Seine weaving through its heart.

They reined in their horses at the crest of a hill, pausing just long enough to take it in.

**Marcel** was the first to speak, his ever-present smirk curling at the corner of his lips.

"Paris... you can almost hear the fat politicians already scheming from here."

**Cristian**, ever the stoic, merely exhaled, his eyes dark with contemplation.

"We have fought for this city before. And now, we return to fight for it again."

Severin did not respond immediately. His gaze lingered on the skyline, his heart caught between **duty and longing**.

Bethania.

She was somewhere far from here. Did she even know where he was? Did she still think of him? Or had she already accepted the possibility that he would not return?

He tightened his grip on the reins. **There was no turning back now.**

His voice, when it came, was quiet but firm.

"Then let us see what fate has in store for us."

With that, they spurred their horses forward, descending into the city—into history.

## Chapter 64 – Wistfulness

The air inside Meslay had taken on a different weight in the past twelve days. The cold stone walls had once felt empty and foreign, but now, Bethania had come to know every corner of this estate, every shift in light through the grand windows, every lingering note of Severin's presence.

She sat near the fireplace in the main hall, a letter clenched in her hands—**Severin's latest letter from Auxerre, delivered to Beaumont just the day before.**

Across from her, Faustina sipped a cup of warm cider, watching her sister carefully.

Bethania exhaled slowly, her fingers grazing the parchment. "He says he thinks of me fondly." Her voice was soft, contemplative. "And yet, he tells me to forget him."

Faustina set her cup down on the table with a small clink. "He's trying to protect you."

Bethania nodded, but her expression remained troubled. "I know. But... what if I never see him again? What if this war takes him away forever?"

Faustina reached across the space between them, squeezing Bethania's hand. "Severin is a survivor. He has been through worse. He will manage."

Bethania gave a weak smile, but deep in her chest, fear gnawed at her ribs.

She didn't just want Severin to *manage*. She wanted him *home*.

## Breakfast at Meslay

Beaumont entered the room, dressed in a crisp white shirt with his sleeves rolled to his forearms. His usual warmth was evident, though the stress of the political climate lingered in his eyes. Beside him, **his wife, Rachelle**, moved gracefully, carrying a tray of fresh bread and preserves.

Rachelle was a woman of quiet elegance. She had a **soft voice but sharp intelligence**, and though she had been polite during Bethania and Faustina's stay, she had largely kept to herself.

"Bethania," Rachelle said, offering a plate of brioche and sliced pears. "You've hardly eaten."

Bethania looked up, surprised by Rachelle's sudden attention. "Oh. Thank you, Madame Clairmont."

"Rachelle," the woman corrected gently with a smile. "Please."

Beaumont took his seat beside his wife, nodding toward Bethania. "You've been holed up in that music room for days. If Severin were here, he'd scold you for neglecting your meals."

Bethania let out a soft laugh. "I doubt that. If Severin were here, I think he would be *practicing* alongside me."

Beaumont chuckled. "You may be right."

As they settled into breakfast, the conversation turned toward **the shifting political climate in France**.

“So it’s true, then,” Faustina said, stirring her tea.  
“Napoleon took back the throne without firing a single shot?”

“Not a single one,” Beaumont confirmed, his tone carrying both admiration and concern. “The king fled before a battle could even be fought. Paris was his the moment he arrived.”

“The people welcomed him?” Bethania asked.

“They did,” Rachelle answered. “With open arms. They always saw him as a hero. But that does not mean France is at peace.”

Beaumont nodded, leaning back in his chair. “There will be war. The coalition will not allow Napoleon to keep his throne. The question now is—how long before the fighting begins?”

A silence settled over the table, the weight of it pressing against Bethania’s chest.

Severin was out there, in the middle of it all.

Her fingers clenched around the edge of the table.

She needed to see him.

Bethania’s Days in Meslay

Later that afternoon, Bethania found herself drawn once again to the **music room**.

It had become her sanctuary—her solace in the absence of Severin. Here, she could **pretend he was only in**

**another room**, just beyond reach, instead of in the heart of a war.

She traced her fingers over the keys of the piano, the **Moonlight Suite** laid open before her. The notes were **his**, the emotions embedded in each phrase **undeniably Severin's**.

She had spent the past twelve days perfecting every movement.

But it wasn't enough.

She had **read his books, sat in his chair**, even **studied his handwriting** in the letters he had saved from her.

She had spent these days in **his world**—as he had once spent a week in hers.

Was this what Elise had endured? The waiting? The longing?

Bethania shuddered at the thought.

She didn't want to live a life filled with nothing but waiting.

She wanted Severin *home*.

### Bethania's Decision

That evening, as the fire crackled in the main hall, Bethania sat beside Beaumont, her face set with quiet determination.

"I want to go to Paris," she announced.

Beaumont's expression hardened instantly. "Bethania—"

“I *must* see Severin.”

“Paris is dangerous,” he argued. “The city is in chaos. Royalists, Bonapartists, foreign spies—there are too many moving parts.”

“I don’t care.” Bethania’s voice did not waver. “Severin has risked everything for Napoleon. What if I never get another chance?”

Beaumont sighed, rubbing a hand over his jaw. “And what will you do if war breaks out tomorrow? You’ll be trapped in a city that is soon to be a battleground.”

Bethania met his gaze, **unflinching**. “Then I will be where I need to be.”

Rachelle, who had remained silent for most of the conversation, finally spoke. “Let her go.”

Beaumont turned to his wife, eyes narrowing. “You think this is wise?”

“I think she has made up her mind,” Rachelle replied simply. “And I think we both know that Bethania will find her way to Severin, with or without our help.”

A beat of silence.

Bethania turned to Beaumont once more, her hazel eyes unwavering. “Please.”

Beaumont exhaled, finally conceding.

“I will take you as far as the outskirts of the city,” he said at last. “But from there, you’ll be on your own.”

Bethania's heart **soared and clenched at once.**

She was going to Paris.

She was going to find him.

And this time, she would not leave without him.



## Chapter 65 – A Mother’s Worry

The wind had turned in Cellettes. Late March carried the scent of unsettled ground—mud, smoke, early blossoms forced into bloom by the premature spring. But inside the Lenoir estate, the air remained heavy. Too still.

Madam Lenoir sat at the window, watching the trees sway gently outside, her teacup long gone cold. A stack of letters lay beside her on the table—one from Bethania, one from Faustina, dated nearly a week apart. Though the letters were warm and full of reassurances, she could sense what was unwritten between the lines: a mounting tension. Restlessness. Fear.

The country was stirring again. And once more, it was the young who were eager to run toward the storm.

Across the room, Silvian crouched on the carpet, letting Hadeline braid small clumsy knots into his hair. She was speaking in half-sentences and fairy tale logic, her dolls arrayed beside her like small sentinels. One was a soldier. The other wore a ribbon around its neck—their version of Bethania.

“Where are they now?” Hadeline asked, not looking up. “Faustina and Bethy? Are they with Severin?”

Madam Lenoir turned slowly from the window, folding her hands in her lap.

“They’re still in Meslay, dear,” she answered softly, trying to calm the trembling in her own voice before it escaped into the room. “They’re safe. And they’ll write again soon.”

Hadeline nodded solemnly, then returned to her dolls.

Silvian gave Madam Lenoir a long look. “She’s sharper than she lets on.”

“She always has been,” Madam Lenoir replied, standing and crossing the room. Her eyes drifted toward the fireplace, where embers still glowed faintly. “They all are. My daughters know more of the world than I’d hoped they’d need to.”

She paused.

“Silvian... I need to ask something of you.”

He stood, brushing a curl of Hadeline’s discarded ribbon from his coat. “Of course.”

“I want you to go to Meslay,” she said, voice clear now. “Stay with them. See that they’re protected. If things worsen in Paris—if Severin’s cause fails—then I want someone there to ensure they’re not caught in the middle.”

Silvian folded his arms, brow furrowed. “You believe they’ll go to Paris.”

“I know Bethania,” she said simply. “She’ll go. The moment she believes it’s right. That’s who she is.”

He said nothing at first. Then: “You think it’s right—her being with Severin?”

“I think it’s hers to decide.” She moved to the mantel, tracing the edge of a candlestick. “And I know he’s a man who keeps his promises. Perhaps too much so.”

Silvian nodded slowly, absorbing this. “And what if the fighting reaches Meslay before I get them out?”

“Then you do what your blood demands,” Madam Lenoir said, her voice sharpening. “You defend them.”

The room fell still.

After a beat, Silvian exhaled. “Then I’ll go.”

Behind them, the faint sound of piano notes floated in—delicate and hesitant. Abeline had sat herself down at the piano bench in the adjoining room, her fingers searching the keys, trying to recreate the melodies Bethania often played.

“I know it was Severin who helped with the case, I suppose I owe him” Silvian said, voice low.

Madam Lenoir nodded. “His influence helped sway the ruling. Quietly. Discreetly. But he intervened for us. Without asking for anything in return. He is a good man”

Silvian’s gaze darkened with thought.

Abeline’s voice piped up from the piano room: “Tell him thank you. When you see him.”

Silvian looked over and offered a rare smile. “I will.”

Just then, Angelica entered the foyer, fastening her gloves. “I’m coming with you.”

Silvian looked surprised. “To Meslay?”

“I’ll return with Faustina. She is my best friend afterall.” Angelica said. “She’s done enough watching over Bethania. Let someone else bring her home.”

Madam Lenoir nodded approvingly. “Thank you, my dear.”

Outside, the carriage was being prepared. Horses shifting in the misty dawn, their breaths curling like smoke into the air.

Silvian fastened his coat and sword belt. Angelica kissed Madam Lenoir on both cheeks. Hadeline, now watching from the stairwell, waved silently.

“Send word when you arrive,” Madam Lenoir said firmly. “And tell Bethania she’s still my daughter, even if the whole world says otherwise.”

“I will.”

The carriage creaked forward. The house fell quiet once more.

And Madame Lenoir, standing at the window again, whispered a prayer not for victory or politics, but simply for her daughters to be returned to her whole.

## Chapter 66 – Fat Politicians

The sun had barely crested the rooftops of Paris when the courtyard of Chercell Military Academy echoed with grunts and the thud of fists against dirt. Severin, Cristian, and Marcel were on the ground, sweating through sets of pushups, their breath rising in puffs into the cool morning air. Soldiers passed in and out of formation around them, but the three men remained focused, grounded in their routine.

"You're thinking of her again," Marcel said between reps, eyeing Severin.

Severin didn't look up. "I hope she's safe."

Marcel rolled to his side and pushed himself into a seated position. "You love her, don't you?"

Severin paused mid-pushup. Then nodded. "More than anything."

Cristian, still working through his pushups, lowered his voice. "Then you'd better hope we win this. Because if we lose, it won't just be you the royalists come for. It'll be her too."

Severin stopped, lifting his eyes to Cristian's. "Then we must do our best to ensure victory for France."

Marcel barked a laugh, trying to lighten the mood. "I'd rather be under a competent emperor's boot than under some fat Bourbon's belly."

The others chuckled, if grimly. It was the kind of humor that came from knowing what losing looked like. But deep

down Severin knows what losing feels like- losing Elise and now potentially losing Bethania too- the thought is too painful to even entertain for more than a moment..

--

An hour later, the troops were assembled.

The courtyard of Chercell bristled with discipline. Hundreds of elite soldiers stood at attention, their polished boots glinting in the morning sun, uniforms sharp, bayonets gleaming. At the center stood Severin, Cristian, and Marcel, all in full regalia. Rumors had spread through the ranks like fire through dry grass: the Emperor himself was coming.

When Napoleon arrived, the air changed.

He rode in slowly, astride a white horse, surrounded by aides and generals. His coat was buttoned tight, his hand tucked in the familiar pose beneath his chest. The murmurs died instantly as he dismounted, boots hitting the cobblestones with quiet authority.

Napoleon paced slowly in front of the line of troops, eyes scanning the ranks. His voice, when he spoke, was calm but thunderous in its weight.

"Soldiers of France," he said. "You have not come to serve a man. You have come to serve an idea—France. Glory, unity, dignity. The chains laid upon this nation by the Bourbons will not hold."

He continued, walking among them, the fervor in his voice building. "They said I was finished. That the eagle would not fly again. And yet here we are. Paris has opened its

gates without a shot. The people believe. Now the world will believe again."

As he passed Severin, he slowed. Their eyes met.

Napoleon gave a brief but clear nod of recognition.

"You," he said, voice lower, eyes sharp. "Derbois. Do you still fight with the same fire I remember in Spain? I knew you would not abandon France my son."

Severin saluted crisply, standing tall.

Napoleon smiled faintly, then turned back to the troops.

--

That night, the academy was quiet. The celebrations had simmered down, and the city beyond was restless but hushed.

Severin sat at his desk in the officer's quarters, a dim lamp casting flickering shadows across his face. He was writing to Beaumont.

Marcel lounged in a chair nearby, smoking a cigar, boots kicked up on a crate.

"Another love letter to the vineyard?"

"A report," Severin muttered, not looking up. "And instructions. In case anything arrives from Cellettes."

Marcel blew a lazy smoke ring. "Instructions? You think you'll live long enough to read the reply?"

Severin looked up finally, setting the pen down.

"I have to... Besides Beaumont will need a stable return address now that we are stationed at Cherchill"

He reached into his coat instinctively, fingertips brushing against cloth.

But the necklace wasn't there.

He exhaled slowly, then smiled. Bethania had it.

The moonlight poured in through the window, washing the room in silver. Severin turned to it, gazing over the rooftops of Paris. The same moonlight that once touched the fields of Cellettes. That inspired his moonlight suite- he imagined watching Bethania, with her long dark hair draping majestically behind her back- playing the suite under this same moon.

But she had his lucky charm now.

Maybe that meant he wouldn't need it.



## Chapter 67 – Path of Ruth

The gravel path crunched beneath the carriage wheels as it slowed before the grand entrance of Meslay. Silvian leaned forward slightly, taking in the sight of the estate. The air smelled of damp earth and early spring, though winter had yet to fully loosen its grasp.

To the left, just beyond the wrought iron gates, the hedge gardens stretched in well-kept labyrinths, where three figures strolled—Beaumont, Rachelle, and Faustina. Their voices were too distant to be heard, but their movement was slow, their conversation seemingly reflective.

Closer to the estate, sitting alone on the front steps, was Bethania. A book rested open in her lap, though it was clear she had not turned a page in some time. Her posture was relaxed, yet her fingers gripped the edges of the book absently, as if her mind were elsewhere entirely.

As the carriage halted, Angelica stepped down first, offering only a quick glance toward Bethania before making her way toward the group in the gardens. Silvian, however, strode straight to Bethania, stopping just at the base of the stairs.

She lifted her gaze.

"Tell me you aren't going to Paris," Silvian said without preamble.

Bethania held his stare. Then, without answering, she closed the book in her lap, brushing dust off its worn cover.

Silvian exhaled sharply. "Bethy—"

"I've already made up my mind," she interrupted softly.

The determination in her voice wasn't fierce, but it was unwavering. There was no need for argument—she was not asking for permission.

Silvian sighed, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. "Then I suppose I've made up mine too."

Bethania arched a brow.

"I'll take you to Paris," he clarified. "If you're going, I'm not letting you do this alone."

She exhaled, something like relief flashing through her expression before she hid it away. "Thank you, Silvian."

### The Others Arrive

From the gardens, the voices of the others grew louder as they approached, their presence breaking the charged moment between Bethania and Silvian.

Faustina was the first to reach them, her gaze flickering between her brother and sister. "How is Mother?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Silvian turned to her. "She asks for your return home," he said simply.

Faustina pressed her lips together but nodded. She had expected as much.

Then Silvian looked to the group as a whole, shifting the conversation with his next words. "I will take Bethania to Paris."

Beaumont, who had been listening quietly, said nothing at first. He only nodded once before turning toward the carriage. He disappeared inside for a moment, then returned carrying a musket and a sheathed sword—both well-worn but well-kept.

"They belonged to Severin," Beaumont said, offering them to Silvian. "I don't think he would mind them being used for Bethania's protection."

Silvian took the weapons without hesitation, testing the weight of the musket before securing it against his side. Meanwhile, Beaumont gathered his own weapons, loading them into the carriage before straightening.

He met Bethania's gaze, his voice steady. "I made a promise to him—to keep you safe. I intend to keep it."

Bethania swallowed, nodding. "I know."

Rachelle stepped forward then, wrapping her arms around Beaumont in a tight embrace. "Come back to me safely," she whispered, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. Then, pulling back slightly, she handed him a small satchel filled with food and water. "You'll need this."

Then, turning to Bethania, Rachelle hesitated before offering a small, knowing smile. "Follow your heart, but don't let it blind you. Men like Severin don't love lightly—but neither do they forget lightly."

Bethania nodded, touched by the words.

A Sister's Farewell

Angelica and Faustina approached Bethania together, each giving her a parting look of both concern and support.

Faustina was the first to speak. "You have my blessing, but be smart, Bethy."

Bethania huffed a soft laugh. "I am always smart."

"Debatable," Faustina replied dryly. But then, without further teasing, she reached up to her ear and unclasped one of her earrings—a delicate, intricate piece Severin had gifted her the previous summer, a Russian design with a deep blue stone. She pressed it into Bethania's hand.

"I will be needing that back," she said.

Bethania curled her fingers around it, her throat tight.

"I won't lose it," she promised.

### The Departure

The trio—Beaumont, Silvian, and Bethania—climbed into the carriage, the air thick with unspoken words and quiet resolve.

As the horses pulled them forward, Bethania cast one last glance at the estate, watching as Faustina, Angelica, and Rachelle stood together, their figures growing smaller with each passing second.

Then, turning forward, she exhaled.

Paris awaited.

## Chapter 68 – Mind and Sword

The road to Paris was long and uneasy.

It had taken two days, their carriage rattling over uneven roads, through the wind-swept emptiness of rural France and the churning anxiety of towns caught between loyalties. With Napoleon's return becoming more real by the hour, every village square, every tavern, every roadside checkpoint throbbed with tension. They rode in shifts—Beaumont and Silvian alert, Bethania huddled under a dark cloak, silent but resolute.

They barely spoke. The hours passed with the weight of what lay ahead.

By the time they reached Chartres, the rain had begun.

It was a thin, persistent drizzle, coating the stones in slick sheen as their wheels clattered through the outer streets of the city. Lanterns flickered dimly in the gray. Soldiers stood beneath overhangs, watching every passerby like a hawk circling for prey.

A contingent of Royalist troops flagged them down. Ten men, maybe more. Musket-bearing, cloaked in Bourbon insignia. Their leader stepped forward, demanding to know their business.

Beaumont began the dialogue, hands up in cautious diplomacy. “We’re en route to Paris—on delivery for a military contact,” he said smoothly, gesturing toward the back of the carriage. “Sensitive correspondence.”

Silvian added quickly, “Loyal to His Majesty, of course.”

The Royalists narrowed their eyes. One stepped closer.  
“Then let us see what you carry.”

It was a test. A trap, perhaps.

Silvian subtly shifted his stance, his hand drifting toward his sword. But before steel could flash, Bethania stepped down from the carriage.

The rain caught the soft fall of her cloak, dark against the pale clarity of her face. Her presence alone stunned them—the contrast of elegance and purpose, her feline eyes sharp with intellect and control.

“Messieurs,” she said with a calm lilt, stepping forward.  
“Surely you wouldn’t detain a lady on business beneath the rain.”

The commanding officer blinked. “And who might you be?”

“A courier’s daughter,” she lied effortlessly, “entrusted with a message by a dying officer whose name I’m not at liberty to speak. Delay me, and it’s his family who will pay for your politics.”

There was a pause. Then a breath. Her stare did not waver.

The man cleared his throat and stepped back. “Let them through.”

As they pulled away from Chartres, the carriage wheels splashing through puddles, they all exhaled.

Beaumont looked over his shoulder. “Well,” he muttered, “if anyone still doubted your Lenoir blood, that should clear it up.”

Bethania didn't smile, but her grip on her cloak loosened.

---

By the time they reached Palaiseau, the edge of the Parisian outskirts, night had begun to fall.

Beaumont pulled the reins and turned to them both. "I'll head back south through Étampes. It's safer, and I'd rather not give Rachelle reason to kill me."

Silvian nodded. "Thank you for everything, cousin."

Bethania leaned forward, touching Beaumont's arm briefly. "Tell her I said thank you."

He offered a wink. "For what it's worth... I hope he's worth it." as Bethania gives him a farewell hug.

And then he turned, disappearing down the road.

---

Silvian and Bethania continued into Paris under cloak and darkness.

The city teemed with a strange mix of energy—chaotic and electric. The streets were swollen with rumors and ragged banners. Some sang revolutionary hymns. Others whispered of betrayal and assassins. It felt like the city was holding its breath.

Silvian, now in his full military uniform, led confidently. Bethania, hood drawn low, moved quietly behind him. He knew a safe place in Créteil—an old comrade's home. They just had to make it there.

As they passed through a familiar marketplace lit by flickering torches and nervous stall vendors, Silvian stopped to speak to the merchant, François, about the state of the city. Bethania lingered behind, stepping out to look at the skyline. Even in its unrest, Paris was beautiful.

Tomorrow, she thought. I might see him tomorrow. Her throat tightened. The hope was almost too much to hold. She could've cried from the anticipation.

A hand clamped around her wrist.

She spun, startled, as a man pulled her close. Reeking of sweat and wine, wearing a tattered coat marked faintly with a Bourbon pin.

"Well, aren't you pretty," he sneered. "Out here all alone?"

Bethania struggled, twisting her arm. "Let go."

He laughed, pressing closer. "Where's your little lover—left you out here to play?"

She spat in his face. Her hand flew, striking him hard across the cheek.

He reeled back, laughing, then drew a blade.

"You little bi—"

Steel met steel.

Silvian's sword was already unsheathed, the blade gleaming in the firelight.

"Touch her again," Silvian said coldly, "and I'll spill you like wine."



The thug turned sneered, blade raised. The duel was swift.

Silvian moved with the precision of a soldier long seasoned—parrying, slashing, cutting. Small wounds opened across the thug’s arms, neck, and ribs. Blood mixed with the rain.

In desperation, the man lunged—straight at Bethania.

Too slow.

Silvian’s sword pierced him cleanly through the back, erupting through his chest. The man gasped, eyes wide. The man’s feet gave out immediately.

Bethania stood still, watching the man’s body twitch once, then go still.

The vendor stepped outside, silent but unsurprised.

“Silvian, I’ll take care of this,” he said. “You’d best move along.”

Silvian didn’t speak. He wiped the blade, sheathed it, and turned to Bethania.

She looked at the corpse. She felt nothing for the man. Only a distant sadness. For what made him. Her wrist just now felt the pain from his grasp. As she massaged her pulsing wrist- Severin falling in battle came to her mind but she put away that thought as soon as it arrived, breathing out the tension in her body.

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They walked on.

Paris darkened around them.

And tomorrow, they would find him.

## **Chapter 69 – Mademoiselle Lenoir**

The morning in Paris broke with a brightness that betrayed the tension lingering in its streets. The city, for all its splendor, moved like a beast unsure of its next step—trembling under the weight of uncertainty and anticipation.

Bethania and Silvian stood across the avenue from the grand military complex of Chercshell, the heart of Napoleon's reorganized war machine in Paris. The building stood tall and austere, its towering stone columns like silent sentinels. The steps leading up to the entrance were wide and long, flanked by two bronze statues of eagles mid-flight, talons poised, wings caught in cold defiance.

"This is it," Silvian said, tightening the straps of his military coat. "If he's in the city, he'll be here."

Bethania nodded once, too tense to speak.

They crossed the street, boots echoing off the quiet cobbles, and ascended the stone stairs. At the main entrance, two guards stepped forward, rifles lowered slightly—not in threat, but in strict formality.

"I'm reporting for enlistment," Silvian said, presenting his papers.

The guards nodded, ushering him inside. But when Bethania moved to follow, one of the men raised a gloved hand.

"Civilians are not permitted in the officer's quarters," he said flatly.

Bethania raised a brow. Her voice, cool as frost, replied, "I am not just a civilian. I am here to see the Duke of Derbois."

The guards blinked. One frowned. The other said, "He's not to be disturbed without—"

"I suggest you let me in," Bethania said, folding her arms. "Unless you'd like to explain to your superiors why you turned away his fiancée."

The guards looked at each other, clearly unsure.

Then, from just inside the gates, a familiar voice called out: "Is that Bethania Lenoir?"

Marcel.

He appeared in full uniform, grinning with disbelief as he approached. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "You brought her to Paris, Silvian? You magnificent bastard."

Bethania tried to suppress her smile, and failed.

"I'll take her from here," Marcel said to the guards, waving them off. "Come on. He's out back running the courtyard."

They entered together. The interior of Charchell was cathedral-like, its ceilings curved high above, lined with flags and banners from Napoleon's campaigns. Arched windows threw streaks of light across polished floors and aged maps. The walls whispered of war, of plans drawn and redrawn, of futures wagered and rewritten.

Bethania walked in silence beside Marcel, her footsteps echoing against the marble as they wound through

corridors. Soldiers slowed as they passed, not just at the sight of Marcel, but at Bethania—her presence electric, haunting. She wore the same dark blue dress from the wedding last summer, its fabric clinging to her as if remembering better days. Her long hair trailed behind her like a banner, soft but sure.

Marcel leaned in as they neared the open archway that led to the courtyard. “He’s out there training new officers. Been barking orders since dawn. Same old Severin.”

Bethania paused under the stone arch, staying just in the shadows. From her vantage point, she saw the courtyard beyond—lined with men standing in neat formations, the sound of boots striking earth, barked commands, and the sharp rhythm of discipline.

And there he was.

Severin.

He stood near the center of the courtyard, one gloved hand on his sword hilt, the other gesturing as he spoke with command and clarity. His uniform was crisp, his coat dark, and though distance lay between them, Bethania could still see the slight furrow of his brow, the way his lips moved when he spoke, the familiar tilt of his head when listening to an officer.

Cristian stood beside him, silent but alert, his arms crossed.

Bethania felt her breath catch in her throat.

Six months.

It had been six months since she last saw him. Since he left Cellettes with nothing but a bowed head and a promise in his eyes.

She had crossed half of France to get here.

Marcel looked at her, noted her sudden stillness. "You nervous?" he asked.

Bethania smirked. "Terrified."

"Well," he said, adjusting his coat, "you do look terrifying. In a good way."

She chuckled once, then nodded. "Tell him... tell him someone's come to collect a letter."

Marcel gave a theatrical bow and strode into the courtyard. She watched as he approached Severin, who turned toward him with a small frown, listening. When Marcel gestured to the archway, Severin looked up.

His body stilled.

Their eyes met.

For a moment, time stopped. The noise of the courtyard dulled. The world shrank.

Bethania stepped out from the shadows.

Severin's breath left him.

She was here.

## **Chapter 70 – Mirror Moment**

Severin didn't move.

The courtyard fell into an awkward silence.

Cristian muttered under his breath, "I don't believe it..." Immediately the other officers followed Cristian's sharp order to clear the space.

They all left—boots echoing, glances cast back, whispers barely restrained. Cristian lingered a second longer, his eyes flicking from Bethania to Severin.

A hand rested on Severin's shoulder. "She came for you," Cristian said quietly, almost like a benediction.

Then he, too, vanished.

And the courtyard was still. Still—except for the sun bleeding gently over the high stone walls, catching dust motes in gold. Still—except for the two of them, staring.

Severin stood at the center of the stone floor like a statue carved in disbelief.

And Bethania... Bethania took a step forward.

It felt like she was walking through water.

Her legs moved—but her breath faltered, her mind spinning with everything he had done, everything he had written, everything he had endured in silence for her. The letters. The music. The poems. The sacrifice. The duel.

The weight of months fell across her shoulders in slow motion.

Severin watched her, stunned, hand briefly flicking down to check the neatness of his uniform jacket, straightening a button without realizing it.

He had pictured this moment for weeks. Then for months. Then had forced himself to stop picturing it.

Now here she was. Not in ink. Not in dreams.

Real.

Her dark blue dress—the same one she wore the night they met—clung to her form like memory itself. Her hair glinted in the morning sun, cascading like midnight silk. And her eyes. Those impossible eyes.

They pierced through him. Proud. Feral. Lenoir.

She stood now only feet away, close enough that he could see the tension in her shoulders, the rise and fall of her breath.

Then—

“Bethania,” he said, and it came out half-broken. As if her name itself hurt to say aloud.

She swallowed. “Severin.”

The sound of his name on her lips unraveled something inside him.

Bethania stepped closer. With the back of her finger, she touched his cheek—tentative, reverent, like she was waking herself from a long dream.



Then, without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in.

She folded into him like she had always belonged there.

Her head found the curve beneath his collarbone. Her hands resting on his breastplate, pressed against his dangling medals. His chin rested on the top of her head, and he inhaled.

Her scent. That mix of lavender and something uniquely her. Nostalgia. It hit him like memory, like music, like a battlefield charge.

They held each other as if they'd never get the chance again.

When Severin finally pulled back, it was slow—almost reluctant. He searched her eyes, needing to know if she was real.

"You shouldn't have come," he said softly, voice thick. "It's not safe for you here—"

But she silenced him with a kiss to his cheek.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't hesitant.

It lingered, warm and still, a quiet declaration.

As she pulled back, her lips unsticking from his cheek—Severin smiled slightly.

"That's it?" he asked, voice low, teasing but gentle.

Bethania smiled, bashful and bold all at once.

But that was not enough.

He slipped one arm around her waist, the other to her lower back, and drew her in. This was his second mirror moment, he will not hesitate this time.

Bethania softly gasped— Their lips met.

It wasn't fireworks—it was something slower. He kissed her the way a soldier touches home again after war. The way a man kisses a woman he never expected to see again. Citrus, gunpowder, sandlewood.

And she melted into it. Her hands curled against his chest. She leaned into him fully, as if finally able to exhale. Months of ache evaporated in the space between breaths.

"You're here," Severin whispered.

She nodded.

"And I'm not letting you leave again," she answered.

He believed her. And for moments, they said nothing.

## Chapter 71 – Les Lovers

"Darling, how many kisses is enough for you?" Severin teased, his voice a low murmur against the candlelight.

Bethania, perched in his lap with her arms wrapped snugly around his neck, tilted her head and narrowed her eyes—those wild Lenoir eyes. The moonlight caught the flecks of amber in them, making them gleam like gold laced with fire.

"More than yesterday I must presume," she whispered back.

She sealed her answer with a kiss—soft, lingering, and deliberate. His hands moved gently along her back, memorizing her all over again. It had been like this for weeks now. And every night, it felt new.

They were living just outside Paris, in a quiet villa Severin had secured through one of his comrades in the army. The rooms were simple but elegant—heavy drapes, carved wood, high ceilings, and wide balconies that opened to the stars. It was not a palace, but to Severin, it may as well have been the Elysian Fields. Not for the walls—but for the woman who walked them barefoot.

She had turned it into a home.

And he had never been more at peace.

But peace, he knew, was on borrowed time.

Severin stood now, his arms still warm from her embrace, facing the open window. The night was cool. From the

distance, the muffled sound of marching drums could be heard. Mobilization. Always more mobilization.

Bethania came behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek into his back.

"You're quiet again," she said.

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes scanned the skyline of Paris, the city's edges glowing faintly in the dark. Soldiers were arriving by the hour. Officers in uniform filled the cafés. Maps changed daily.

"The drums don't stop anymore," he finally said. "It's like they're counting down something I can't see yet. Every hour, the lines get drawn deeper. The Austrians. The Prussians. The British. All of them sharpening their swords."

"And you?" Bethania asked, voice soft.

"I worry," he said. "Not about fighting. That part I've made peace with. I worry about *what comes after*. If I'll see it. If I'll still be...me."

Bethania circled around him until they stood face to face. She reached up and placed her hands gently on either side of his face.

"I know there's no convincing you to abandon your post," she said. "Nor would I ask you to. Just know—I am with you. Wherever you go. You have my heart. I will not abandon you, just as you will not abandon France."

He took in her words slowly. Then kissed her forehead, pulling her close again. The moment was still, heavy with feeling. And then—

*Voices on the stairs.*

A woman's laughter—light, amused, familiar. And then a knock at the door.

"Open up, you tragic little war hero!" came Marcel's voice.

Bethania rolled her eyes with a smile. Severin smirked and stepped toward the door.

Marcel entered first, grinning like a fox, Faustina close behind, her eyes already sparkling. Marcel said, with mock seriousness, "I came to make sure you weren't defecting to Bethania's bedroom again. France needs you sharp."

Faustina laughed, playfully swatting Marcel's arm before letting her fingers linger there a moment longer than expected.

Bethania raised an eyebrow. Severin caught the look. Marcel gave a mock shrug of innocence.

"Don't start," he said. "She asked *me* to accompany her here."

"Liar," Faustina said sweetly. "He begged to see you, Bethy. I had to bribe him with wine."

They all laughed—one of those rare, good, real laughs that only happen when life feels light.

But the moment began to close.

Faustina turned to her sister. "Come on. It's late. We should let these war dogs sleep. Besides, Maman and the girls are arriving in a few days. I want us rested before the circus begins."

Bethania nodded. She turned to Severin, and he leaned down to place a kiss on her cheek—lingering a heartbeat longer than necessary.

"Sleep well, my lion," she whispered.

Marcel bowed dramatically and kissed Faustina's hand. "Until morning, mademoiselle."

Faustina rolled her eyes but didn't pull away.

Once the women had gone, Severin and Marcel found themselves alone in the flickering candlelight. The humor faded gently into silence.

"She's something," Marcel said, settling in the chair Bethania had just vacated.

"So is yours," Severin replied.

Marcel raised an eyebrow. "She's not mine. Yet."

Severin gave a knowing look.

Then Marcel's smile dimmed slightly. He looked toward the balcony. "You feel it too, don't you?"

Severin nodded. "The weight of what's coming."

"I've seen too many campaigns to mistake this for posturing," Marcel said quietly. "If we lose this one, it's not just a battle. It's the end of the story."

They sat with that for a moment. Two men on the edge of history, with too much to lose.

“And if we win?” Severin asked.

“Then maybe,” Marcel said, “we live long enough to figure out what to do with the rest of our lives.”

Severin looked toward the closed door, where the scent of Bethania still lingered.

"I know what I'll do," he said.

Marcel smiled.

"Then you'd better make sure you survive to do it."

## Chapter 72 – Second Home

Late breakfast filled the sunlit kitchen with the clinking of dishes, the soft scraping of chairs, and the scent of warm bread and honey. Outside the windows, spring had taken hold in Paris—birds nesting under rooftops, flowers straining toward the light—but inside Severin’s home, it was a different kind of season altogether.

It was the season of waiting.

The Lenoir family had arrived that morning.

Madam Lenoir stepped into the dining room first, her travel cloak draped neatly over one arm. Her poise was as sharp as ever, chin lifted, her eyes scanning the interior of the house with a kind of careful approval. Behind her, Abeline clutched her usual headscarf, her eyes wide with excitement. And little Hadeline—growing taller every week—ran straight into the arms of the first familiar figure she saw.

“Severin!” she squealed.

He caught her easily, lifting her with a smile that softened the sharper edges of his military bearing.

“There you are,” he said, holding her tightly. “Did you get taller just to make me feel old?”

Hadeline giggled as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Maman says we’re here because of war. Is that true?”

Severin glanced over her shoulder at Madam Lenoir, who offered a tight nod. “Yes,” he said gently. “But more importantly, you’re here because we’re family now.”



Hadeline seemed satisfied with that, though her brow furrowed in her little girl way. “Don’t die.”

“I’ll do my best.”

By then, Faustina had appeared in the doorway with Marcel in tow, and the room shifted to something warmer. Marcel stepped forward, offering Madam Lenoir a dramatic, theatrical bow.

“Madame Lenoir, I am at your service,” he said, grinning. “And please don’t blame me for anything Faustina does. I am but her humble follower.”

Madam Lenoir arched an eyebrow, but her expression didn’t fully hide her surprise—or her amusement—at the way Faustina looked at the soldier beside her.

Faustina swatted Marcel playfully. “Stop talking.”

“No promises,” he replied.

Abeline crossed the room next and launched herself into Bethania’s arms with a rush of laughter. “I brought your headscarf,” she whispered. “The one he gave me to give to you. And also—I can’t believe you’re really in love with a general.”

Bethania blushed. “Not just a general.”

The mood was light, but Severin could feel the heaviness underneath it. The stakes were too high to ignore. Even Silvian, leaning against the far wall with his arms crossed, seemed to sense the undercurrent. It was good to have them all together. But it wasn’t for peace. It was for shelter. For proximity to one another before the storm.

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## Later That Night

By candlelight, Severin sat at his desk and wrote.

*Beaumont,*

If this campaign does not end in our favor,  
burn all the correspondence in my study. Do  
not let the Lenoir family be tied to me publicly.  
Whatever inheritance you can hide from  
seizure, give to them. Protect Bethania. Protect  
her always.

*S.*

He sealed the letter and somberly stared at the wax as it cooled.

A knock on his study door.

“Come in,” Severin said, expecting Bethania.

But it was Madam Lenoir.

She entered calmly, a folder of correspondence in one hand, her expression unreadable. Severin stood, offering her a seat, but she waved it off.

“I won’t be long,” she said. “I wanted to speak plainly. While I still can.”

He raised an eyebrow. “About the campaign?”

“About my daughters.” Her voice was firm, but not cold. “You know we stand behind you. Hadelaine may not fully understand the consequences, but the rest of us do. And we stand behind you still.”

He sat again, slowly. "I would never ask that of you."

"You didn't have to," she replied. "And that's why we're here."

There was a pause. She stepped forward.

"I know how this ends, Severin. If the Bourbons win, your name will not be safe. And neither will ours. So I ask you plainly—what preparations have you made?"

He hesitated. "I've written to Beaumont. Instructions. If I don't return—"

"Severin- I have no interest in seeing my daughter suffer from widowhood. I know how much she loves you, how much this bond means for her, for this family- you must ensure you do what you do all you can to survive in Belgium. Heroics at my daughter's expense are not an option. You have done enough for France."

Severin pauses. He has seen this same lenoir fire from Bethania before.

Without breaking eye contact Severin responds.

"Madam.. You have my word." concedes Severin grasping her hands.

Her mouth was a thin line, but her eyes were misting.

"Severin, I must thank you- you helped us," she whispered. "When my husband tried to undo me in court, you used your influence quietly. You saved our name, our home. You saved us without ever asking for credit."

"And I would do it again."

As she left the room, Bethania was there, lingering in the doorway. Mother and daughter exchanged a glance—something deep, unspoken—before Madam Lenoir disappeared down the hall.

Bethania entered, shutting the door behind her.

“You knew,” she said. “About the trial.”

He nodded slowly.

“And you never told me.”

“I didn’t want you to love me for that,” he admitted.

Bethania crossed the room in two steps and wrapped her arms around him.

“I don’t,” she whispered. “But I do love you more for it.”

He said nothing. He just held her as the night gathered at the windows, his hand gently resting on her back like a man memorizing the only warmth he ever wanted.

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## Chapter 73 – Double Date

The velvet hush of the evening settled over Paris like a glove. Lanterns flickered down narrow streets, and the air carried the scent of wet stone and early blossoms. In the heart of the city, nestled discreetly behind ivy-covered walls, a quiet salon pulsed with the low rhythm of strings and candlelight.

Severin entered with Bethania on his arm—her in a wine-colored silk gown, simple but devastating, her hair twisted up with a few loose strands brushing her cheeks. Severin’s military coat was buttoned, medals gleaming softly in the amber light.

Cristian and Tabitha were already waiting at the table near the small stage. Tabitha—tall, with bright blonde hair, elegant but always a little amused by the world—wore sapphire blue. Cristian, standing beside her, looked just as he always had: measured, solid, clean-shaven and alert, the sharpness in his eyes softened only by the way he looked at his wife.

They had been married three years, but their closeness made it feel like less.

“Duke Derbois,” Tabitha greeted, mock-formal, standing to kiss Bethania’s cheek. “And this must be the elusive Mademoiselle Lenoir. I was starting to suspect he invented you.”

Bethania laughed. “I suppose there isn’t a soul who Severin hasn’t made my existence known to.”

The four took their seats as a small quartet began to play near the piano. Waiters floated by with glasses of wine and

small plates of soft cheese and fruit. The music was slow and moody—a waltz that seemed to rise from the walls themselves.

Cristian poured Severin a drink, then one for himself. “How long are you two staying in the city?” he asked.

“As long as we can,” Bethania answered before Severin could.

Tabitha smiled knowingly. “There’s no better time than spring for a romance.”

Some time later, Bethania stood and approached the piano.

The room hushed gently as she sat down at the keys.

She glanced back once at Severin—he nodded—and her fingers found the notes of a familiar piece. One of his. A movement from the *Moonlight Suite*. She played slowly, delicately, her hands steady even as her heart beat hard.

It was intimate. Painful. Beautiful.

Cristian said nothing. Tabitha, visibly moved, reached for her husband’s hand.

Severin leaned forward, elbows on the table, and listened like a man reading a letter written only for him.

Severin glanced at Bethania still playing, then leaned in slightly toward the couple. “I plan to propose.”

Cristian blinked. “Soon?”

Severin nodded.

Tabitha clapped her hands once, quietly. “Oh, finally.”

Cristian, ever the realist, frowned slightly. “Are you sure this is the time, with what’s coming?”

“I am,” Severin said. “If I’m marching north, I’m not doing it with unfinished business behind me.”

Tabitha laid a gentle hand on Cristian’s wrist. “Let them have their joy,” she said. “The world will do what it does.”

Severin turned to Bethania, as if just watching her breathe was enough to make his point.

As her fingers moved across the keys, Bethania tried to stay in the notes—tried to let the prettiness of the melody carry her. Severin’s compositions always had that softness beneath the structure, like something deeply personal hiding just under the surface. Playing them felt like reading his mind in front of a crowd. It thrilled her. It unnerved her.

She could feel his eyes on her. It made her chest warm. And nervous.

Her heart fluttered when she glanced at him between movements—*the way he looked at her, like she was some secret he still couldn’t believe he got to keep*. But now, as her hands moved through the familiar patterns, she couldn’t help but wonder what he was whispering to Cristian and Tabitha. Tabitha had smiled just now. Cristian had tilted his head slightly. Were they talking about her? About him? About war?

Bethania forced herself back into the music. This wasn't the time to spiral. Not now. Not when things were, finally, so beautiful—if only for a moment.

She let her eyes fall closed for a bar or two, just to feel it differently. To believe this version of their life might actually hold. Even as anxiety tugged at the back of her mind, she played with grace. She was with him. She was safe. At least, for tonight.

When she finished, no one clapped. The silence afterward was reverent.

She returned to her seat, cheeks slightly flushed.

Severin took her hand under the table.

And for that moment, there was no war. No armies. No goodbyes.

Just four souls, bound by friendship, music, and a love that refused to wait.



## Chapter 74 – Mobilization

The clang of steel on steel echoed through the courtyard at Chercell. Morning mist still hovered low over the flagstones as Severin, Cristian, Marcel, and Silvian moved through drills with practiced intensity. Their blades flashed in rhythmic arcs, not for spectacle but for precision. For readiness.

A lieutenant passed through the courtyard, a folded dispatch in hand. Cristian paused first, catching sight of the seal.

“We march north,” he said, voice quiet but certain. “The Prussians have crossed the Meuse. English troops are gathering.”

The others stopped.

“That’s it, then,” Silvian muttered. “No more waiting.”

Severin said nothing, but his jaw tightened. Marcel, wiping sweat from his brow, let out a short, dry laugh.

“Well,” he said, “looks like I’ll have to explain all this to Faustina tonight. Wish me luck. She nearly bit my head off last week for forgetting her tea.”

Despite the tension, the men chuckled.

They stood in a loose circle, still holding swords, suddenly boys again beneath their hardened shells—brothers tied not just by oaths or uniforms, but by knowing that this might be the last time they trained together in peace.

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That night, the villa was warm with candlelight, but the air inside was anything but easy.

Bethania stood near the hearth, arms crossed, her silhouette flickering in the fire's glow. Severin leaned against the mantle, jacket unbuttoned, hands clenched at his sides.

"You're leaving," she said plainly.

Severin nodded. "In six days."

She turned to face him fully. "Then I'm going with you."

"No," he said, too quickly.

"You don't get to decide that."

"It's not safe, Bethania—"

"It's not safe anywhere!" she snapped. "But at least if I'm with you, I'll know. I won't be sitting here waiting for a letter that might never come."

He stepped toward her, trying to reach her hands, but she pulled away.

"I'm not a child, Severin. I'm not something you pack away before war like a keepsake. I've lived through absence. I've survived silence. I'm not doing it again."

Her voice broke. She turned from him, walking into the adjacent room, her breath shallow. She sat on the edge of the bed, shoulders trembling.

He didn't follow right away.

Instead, he stood in the doorway, watching her. The woman who had defied her mother, defied armies, crossed cities and risked royalist interrogation just to find him.

And here he was, trying to shield her again. Trying to keep her out of harm's way when he knew—truly knew—that her love was a force of its own.

Downstairs, muffled voices broke the silence.

Faustina and Marcel.

"I don't care if it's Belgium or the moon, Marcel," Faustina's voice carried up the staircase, fierce and unfiltered. "You don't go out there thinking you have to be a hero. You come back to me. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Marcel replied, softer, with none of his usual swagger. "I love you."

Bethania turned slightly, hearing it. Her eyes met Severin's across the room.

He stepped toward her, gently sitting beside her on the bed. He reached for her hand, not forcing it, just waiting.

She let him take it.

"You scare me, you know," she said after a beat.

"I scare myself," he admitted. "Every time I think about leaving you again."

She looked down. He tilted her chin up.

"I need you to stay," he said. "Here, in Paris. If something happens to me, you'll be safer—"

“If something happens to you,” she whispered, “I don’t want to be anywhere.”

They sat there, the world outside humming with the distant sound of marching boots and wagons being loaded, of drums beating in the distance like war’s slow heartbeat.

Then Bethania exhaled a small laugh.

“What?”

“I’m just imagining Faustina dragging Marcel by the collar out of the barracks.”

Severin laughed softly too. He wrapped his arms around her.

And there, with the night pressing against the windows, they held each other like people trying to memorize a moment they feared might be their last.

In the streets beyond, Paris was beginning to move. The march to Belgium had begun.

And time, once again, was running out.

## Chapter 75 – Bridge at Belvédore

Severin had prepared the night with care.

It was a vision he once thought would never come—this stillness, this peace, this woman beside him. After a warm dinner shared with her family, filled with laughter and teasing glances, he had slipped away from the table, whispering something to Bethania about one last place he wanted to show her before the night ended.

Madam Lenoir, already guessing more than he had said aloud, offered Severin a soft, steady look—one of approval, not indulgence. Silvian nodded as well, subtle and watchful. Marcel gave him a wink when no one was looking. Even Faustina caught his eye with a knowing smirk, her hand gently resting on Marcel's arm. The entire Lenoir household had played their part over the past few days, collecting every white rose they could find across the city. Hundreds now adorned the private grove, set deep in a forgotten corner of Paris.

Bethania was wearing a dark red dress, the color of ripened wine and unspoken promise. Her hair fell in loose waves down her back, glowing silver under the touch of moonlight.

She held Severin's arm as they walked slowly through the quiet streets. He told her, poorly feigning nonchalance, that there was a little venue down this way—a concert hall he'd wanted to show her. She didn't press him, only gave him a sideways glance and let him lie.

When they reached the edge of the garden, she hesitated. Before them stood an overgrown archway of ivy and climbing jasmine. Vines curled along the iron, forming a

natural veil. Severin lifted the hanging leaves and gestured forward.

“I think it’s just through here.”

They stepped into the grove.

Candlelight flickered in every direction. Dozens of lanterns nestled in the grass, on low stone walls, in the trees overhead. And everywhere—roses. White, soft, uncountable. They spread like snow, covering every visible surface with their bloom. At the center of it all, a small arched bridge stretched over a narrow stream, its reflection rippling like spilled starlight.

Severin said nothing, letting the garden speak for him.

Bethania stopped. Her hand slipped from his.

He turned toward her. “Is something wrong?”

Her voice caught. “You... you can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

She looked down, shook her head slightly, her breath uneven. “You can’t do this,” she whispered. “Not now. Not days before...”

He took her hand gently, guiding her toward the bridge. She didn’t resist.

They stepped onto the center of it, alone, the air rich with the scent of flowers and flickering flame.

“Bethania—” he started.

She cut him off.

“Severin,” she said, reaching up to the silver cross around her neck. Her fingers unclasped it with care, and she placed it in his palm. “You gave this to me when I needed it most. But now... now you’ll need it more than I will.”

Severin stared at the necklace in his hand, confused.

“I chose this life, Severin. I chose *you*. That means the worry. And the waiting. And the unknown. All of it.” as her eyes began watering.

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, she beat him to it.

“I do.”

He blinked.

“Yes,” she said again, her voice cracking into a smile. “The answer is yes.”

A sheepish, stunned laugh broke from him. “Wait—hold on—”

He dropped to one knee.

Or tried to.

Bethania sank with him before he could finish the motion, folding into him in a tight embrace, tears already slipping down her cheeks.

They were both kneeling on the bridge, arms around each other like they were anchoring against a storm.

Severin whispered into her hair, his voice breaking, his eyes flooding.

“Bethania... will you be my dawn, my noon, my dusk, my moonlight?”

She didn’t answer right away—just a soft sound, a whimper of fear and love tangled in one.

“I don’t want to lose you,” she said, voice muffled against his chest.

He tilted her chin up with care, eyes searching hers. They sparkled—lit not only with candlelight and moonlight, but with *every* moment they had shared since the beginning.

“I love you, Bethania. I knew it the day I left you too early at that wedding. I’ve loved you through silence, through war, through every damn note of every damn song. I will not leave you. Not again.”

And then, he kissed her.

Above them, the moon shone like a quiet witness.

Below them, the stream hummed its quiet tune.

And around them, the world waited—briefly—while two people claimed what peace they could before the storm.



## **Chapter 76 – Coalition**

The sound never changed.

Tens of thousands of boots in rhythm. Horses clopping alongside wagons. Sabers clinking against scabbards. The steady murmur of marching men—part prayer, part fatalism, part ghost.

The French army moved north, pressing toward the rising horizon of Belgium.

Toward destiny.

Toward death.

### **Severin**

He rode near the front, his thoughts unquiet beneath his composed expression. The air was thick with humidity, but he felt cold. The silver cross Bethania had returned to him lay heavy beneath his tunic—he touched it often, as though checking that it was real.

He was a hero once, and that terrified him.

Because heroes didn't usually make it out of second chances.

Madam Lenoir's words came back to him. You have done enough for France. And yet here he was. He told himself it was duty, but it wasn't. It was guilt. Guilt for the lives he'd taken. Guilt for the life he'd been given back. Guilt for what might happen if he didn't fight.

But it was love that scared him most. Love was what made him vulnerable.

Bethania. Her fierce devotion. Her fragile stubbornness.  
Her scent in the sheets, her lips still fresh on his.

He promised her he'd come back.

He had to make that true.

## **Cristian**

A few ranks behind, Cristian marched with his chin lifted  
and his mind elsewhere. He was a quiet man, always  
was—but in his silence now, there was thunder.

Tabitha.

He still remembered her kiss that morning, soft but urgent.  
Her fingers in his coat lapels. Their whispered talk of  
children, of futures not yet built.

He fought for the world he promised her.

Not glory. Not empire. Just a home. A warm hearth. A  
name they'd give their firstborn, a middle name stolen  
from her father. He could see the face of a son not yet  
conceived.

That was why he marched.

Not because he loved war.

Because he loved peace—and he needed to earn it.

## **Marcel**

Normally, he'd be telling a joke.

But not today.

The road was too quiet. His stomach too tight. Faustina too real.

He'd always told himself he was made for chaos. A blunt instrument with a crooked smile. He joined Napoleon's wars not for the cause, but for the coin and the chance to cheat death. He survived every campaign, learned to laugh through the blood.

But Faustina had changed something. That blunt, fierce woman with the sharp tongue and soft soul. The way she touched his hand when no one was looking. The way she held her ground in every conversation, like she was born of granite and stardust.

He hadn't known he needed a reason to come home—until now.

## **Silvian**

He didn't wear his uniform like the others. He wore it like armor.

Silvian had never picked sides. He always found the winning team and made himself useful. His allegiance was to survival. He was not made for ideology.

But this time, things were different.

He thought of Paris. The Lenoir household. The way Hadeline waved from the window. The way Madam Lenoir kissed his forehead before he left. The way Angelica told him, simply, "Make it count."

He had always lived in between lines. Now, he walked a straight one.

Legacy. That was new for him.

He wanted to earn the name he never cared about before.

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As they approached the low hills beyond which Ligny awaited, the wind shifted.

The sky was gray. The fields green and trembling. The enemy was near.

The Seventh Coalition waited—Wellington, Blücher, and the gods of war.

Marcel finally broke the silence, his voice unusually somber.

“Well... someone’s going to have to explain this shit to our women if we die.”

No one laughed.

They just marched.

Forward.

## Chapter 77 – Gunpowder Girl

It had been four days since Severin and the others had marched north.

Paris no longer felt like a city of romance—it felt like a waiting room for doom. The streets buzzed with rumors. Café windows were plastered with reports, half-true dispatches, and desperate hopes. Every hour brought news from the front, and none of it sounded good.

That morning, Bethania sat in the parlor with her mother and sisters. The light through the window was weak. Clouds hung over the city like a curtain refusing to rise.

“The English are pushing from the west,” Angelica said, holding a newspaper, her tone tight.

“And the Austrians through Italy,” Faustina added, arms crossed.

Madam Lenoir stood by the hearth, watching the flames rather than her daughters. Her voice was even, though her eyes betrayed her. “Panic won’t help them. It won’t help us.”

Hadeline sat at her feet, asking quietly, “When will they be back?”

Abeline coped by playing a few soft notes on the out-of-tune piano in the foyer. It was the same tune Bethania used to play. She barely hit the right keys, but no one corrected her.

Angelica and Faustina retreated into a side room, their voices carrying low and tight through the walls. Bethania

caught just enough: Faustina, on the edge of breaking. Angelica, soothing her. Marcel was out there. And last year, there had been someone else—a man Faustina never spoke of anymore. And now, this war has a grip on the man she loves.

Bethania couldn't take it.

She climbed the stairs in silence, retreating to Severin's room. The scent still lingered in the air—clove, cedar, something faintly metallic. She lay on the bed, hugging one of his pillows, burying her face in it. Her chest ached with missing him, but it wasn't just that—it was the helplessness.

She glanced at the sword on the wall.

Then turned away.

Then looked back.

A ridiculous thought bloomed quietly in the back of her mind. She shook her head.

Then she heard it—outside the window, down in the alley near the stables.

A group of vivandières were chatting, their skirts muddied from travel. Camp followers, yes, but brave ones. Some were wives of soldiers. Others were cooks, nurses, messengers. All of them bound for the front lines.

Bethania pressed her ear closer to the cracked window.

“...stationed near Charleroi first, then Ligny,” one woman said. “They’re sending supply carts in waves.”

Bethania's pulse began to race.

She didn't sleep that night. Instead, she moved like a ghost through the halls.

She wrote a letter—no name, no location—only a promise to return.

She packed light: trousers, a cloak, water, dried meat, flint. She left behind her dresses. Her gloves. Her reputation.

In the stables, the mare Severin had gifted her stood tall and quiet, as if it had known this moment would come.

As the moon climbed high, Bethania rode out of Paris, her dark cloak trailing behind her like a flag of war.

The roads ahead were treacherous. The odds, absurd.

But no beast of the night nor drunkard of the day could stop Mademoiselle Lenoir now.

Not when her heart was already at the front.

## Chapter 78 – Smoke and Thunder

The air was thick with smoke, ash, and the acrid sting of black powder. Ligny burned on all sides, its stone walls and timber frames reduced to splinters beneath the relentless thunder of cannon fire. The 12th Infantry Division was cornered—attacked from three directions by Prussian forces under Jagow’s command, whose counterattack had torn through the village like a knife through linen.

Severin stood at the front, boots slick with blood and soot. His voice, sharp and cutting, cut through the chaos like a drumbeat.

“Third company, hold that wall! Bring up the second battery! Marcel—left flank, reinforce the southern breach!”

Cannonballs slammed into nearby buildings. Windows exploded in showers of glass. The cries of dying men echoed in all directions. And still, Severin didn’t flinch. His face was cold, unreadable. The eye of the storm.

They moved as one through the burning alleys, ducking between crumbling buildings and upturned carts. Marcel kicked through a smashed bakery, powder smoke curling up from the floor.

“We’re going to need more bread if we live through this,” he shouted, grinning through the soot.

Cristian, crouched behind a wagon, actually cracked a grin. “Shut up and keep moving.”

Jagow’s men pushed harder. A mortar landed nearby, flinging Silvian into a wall. He groaned, reaching for his thigh—blood already soaking through his pants.



“Shit—Silvian!” Severin barked.

“I’ve got him!” Cristian lunged forward, dragging Silvian to his feet just as musket balls screamed past.

Pinned against a courtyard wall, the squad took cover. Marcel leaned against the stone, panting.

“Well,” he said dryly, “I’ve had worse dates.”

Even Severin chuckled once under his breath. Then he snapped back into command.

“On my mark—move! I’ll cover!”

As the others bolted across the open square, Severin raised his musket, unleashing a rapid volley with terrifying precision. His movements were fluid, almost detached. Only when he was the last to move did he finally turn and run.

They escaped the burning village by the skin of their teeth—retreating to the rally point just beyond the eastern ridge. There, panting and bruised, they mounted their horses. Silvian’s leg was hastily wrapped, his face pale, but he nodded when Severin checked him.

“I’m not dead,” he grunted. “Don’t look so disappointed.”

\*\*

Later that night, they joined the forces of the **Grenadiers à Cheval de la Garde Impériale**—Napoleon’s elite cavalry. A fresh order had come down: pursue the Prussians retreating north toward Wavre. Blücher was on the run, and Severin’s division was now part of the chase.

The moon hung low, a pale sentinel above the ruins of Ligny. The cavalry thundered across the damp fields, hooves shaking the ground. Severin rode at the front, saber drawn, uniform ripped at the shoulder, his mind clear.

**Do not be reckless**, he reminded himself. **Don't give the enemy a victory they haven't earned.**

But even caution had its limits.

Cristian broke rank—his stallion surging ahead, rifle raised.

“Cristian, hold!” Severin shouted.

Too late.

Cristian charged alone, the mad glint of conviction in his eyes. The others were forced to follow, Marcel muttering a curse as he spurred his horse. Severin cursed under his breath and kicked his mount forward.

“Charge you dogs! Cover him!” Severin bellowed.

As the cavalry collided with the Prussian rear guard, a storm of bullets met them. Severin's voice roared above the clash, directing fire and formations even as chaos reigned.

Cristian raised his rifle mid-gallop, steadied it, and fired once.

Blücher's horse buckled and crashed to the ground.

Another volley of bullets spraying in post.

The Prussians faltered—panicked—and began to fall back in disarray. The charge had worked.

They had won Ligny.

Observing the retreating prussians.. Severin doesn't feel pride or victory- he feels an uneasiness. How many times will he test the devil?

\*\*

Bethania arrived too late for the battle, but not too late for its ghosts.

The fields beyond Ligny were choked with smoke and flame. The sun had dipped low, smothered by clouds of ash, and the once-green land was scorched in black and red. She rode in with the **vivandières**, women trailing supply carts, bandages, wine, and food—healers and survivors alike.

Among them was **Madame Sophie**, a stout, graying woman with soot under her fingernails and a firm grip on every soldier she patched.

"You see that hill?" she said to Bethania, pointing toward a field of broken bodies. "That was all Prussian flank. We've been working through the dead for hours. You squeamish?"

Bethania shook her head, eyes wide.

"Good. You'll learn not to cry until later."

They moved together through the devastation. Bethania knelt beside man after man—some crying, some silent, some already gone. She cleaned wounds, handed water to shattered lips, and held hands that would never hold again.

But always, she searched.

She scanned every bloodied face. Every coat, every regiment patch.

Her fingers trembled as she worked, her mind buzzing with one singular prayer: *Don't let me find him here.*

It was then that Madam Sophie knelt beside her. The older woman worked swiftly, efficiently—wrapping a crushed arm with soaked linen, barking soft orders to another vivandière who scrambled to assist. Her face was lined, not with vanity's creases but with years of wind, smoke, and grief. Her eyes—gray as ash—carried none of the panic Bethania saw in the others. Only resolve.

"You're wasting thread on the dead," Sophie muttered gently, glancing at a soldier nearby whose breath had already left him. "Over here instead."

Bethania obeyed without a word.

As they moved between the wounded, Sophie spoke—never ceasing in her work. "You're new."

Bethania nodded. "Yes, madam."

"And not a soldier's wife."

"No. Well not exactly."

A quiet hum of acknowledgment passed through the woman's throat. "You came anyway. That makes you braver than most."

They fell into rhythm—binding, cleaning, lifting.

After some time, Bethania dared to ask, "How long have you been doing this?"

Sophie didn't look up from the gash she was closing. "Since Ulm," she said. "That was my first field. My husband was a dragoon. Bourbon loyalist, like his father before him. Died in '05 under Murat's command. I followed his regiment to Austria and brought him home in pieces."

Bethania said nothing. Sophie's voice had no bitterness, only worn edges.

"Stayed on after that," Sophie continued. "Can't bring the dead back, but you can stop others from joining them." She finally looked over at Bethania. "You learn fast in this work. You don't ask what side a man fought for—only whether he'll live through the night."

Bethania hesitated. "You still support the Bourbons?"

A flicker of a smile. "I support France," Sophie said. "Whichever France survives this war, I'll serve her. I've poured wine for Bonaparte's men and bandaged the wounds of Royalist rebels. The dead don't care about kings."

Bethania looked down, her hands bloodied, her dress ruined.

Sophie added, quieter now, "You're looking for someone."

"Yes. My fiancé"

"Officer?"

Bethania nodded. "Severin. Duke of Derbois."

Recognition sparked in Sophie's eyes. "Ah. That one's not likely to die quietly."

“What do you mean?”

“He’s cavalry now. Old Guard. Last I heard, he helped break the Prussians at Ligny earlier today. If he’s still breathing, he’s headed to Wavre or Quatre Bras. Either way...” Sophie exhaled. “You’ve picked a lion.”

Bethania smiled faintly, the kind that held both pride and dread.

Sophie squeezed her shoulder with a hand that had steadied more men than any general.

“Keep helping,” she said. “And pray the war ends before love does.”

Bethania turning away from the chorus of dying men all around her- closes her eyes, whispers a quiet prayer.

## **Chapter 79 – Aubade Anxieuse**

*June 17th, 1815 – Morning, south of Wavre*

The morning was cold, despite the lateness of the season. Not the biting cold of winter, but the kind that slid under armor and settled into the bones—damp, heavy, and prophetic. Mist hung over the grasslands like breath not yet exhaled.

Four men sat around a makeshift table outside a canvas tent, steam rising from their tin cups. The breakfast was little more than hard bread, boiled potatoes, and bitter coffee. Still, they chewed with the discipline of soldiers who knew it might be the last real meal for days.

Marcel tore off a chunk of bread with his teeth. “Cristian,” he said with a mouthful, “when you charged Blücher’s line, did you *plan* on getting us all killed, or was that just a bonus?”

Cristian didn’t look up from his paper. “It worked.”

“You’re welcome,” Marcel added, raising his cup like a toast. “Next time, let me know first so I can at least write my will. I’ve got some debts in Paris that I’d rather *not* have haunting me from the grave.”

Silvian smirked. He had his leg stretched out on a spare crate, the bandage freshly rewrapped. “Leg’s better today. Guess the Prussians were just flirting with me.”

Severin gave him a glance. “Try not to flirt back next time.”

Cristian, stoic as ever, folded the letter he’d been writing and sealed it with a bit of wax. He tapped it twice against

the table before tucking it into a small leather pouch marked with his wife's name.

Severin had written his letter the night before—when the stars were high and sleep impossible. It sat folded in his coat, addressed simply to *Mademoiselle Bethania Lenoir, Rue Saint-Antoine, Paris*.

There wasn't much to say. Not much he dared to say.

A moment later, the mail courier—a young corporal with tired eyes and a soot-streaked uniform—passed by their unit. Each of the four men stood, almost ceremonially, and handed off their letters to Paris. Words wrapped in paper. Words meant for love. For peace. For memory.

Cristian's hand lingered on the pouch a moment longer before letting it go.

When the courier disappeared down the slope with his sack of hopes and goodbyes, Severin quietly stepped away and entered his tent.

It was cool inside, the flap gently rustling in the early breeze. A thin stripe of sunlight filtered through the canvas, painting a glowing path across his cot. He lowered himself to the bed, boots still on, arms crossed behind his head.

His body was tired. His heart was something worse.

He closed his eyes.

Bethania's voice danced behind his eyelids—her laugh, quick and sharp like wind chimes; her whisper when she told him she loved him; her defiant eyes, soft and steel in



equal measure. He could picture her reading by the window, or sitting at his piano barefoot in the early morning. The way her hair moved when she turned too fast. The way she kissed him like it meant something. Like it meant *everything*.

Then, something caught his eye.

A glint—silver, tucked into the corner of his open pack.

He sat up.

It was a letter.

Carefully folded. Sealed with a wax stamp that bore the Lenoir insignia in miniature—subtle, deliberate. He hadn't packed it. She had. Slipped it into his things, unseen, before he rode away.

His hands shook only slightly as he opened it.

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### **My Lion,**

*You sleep like you fight—tense, stubborn, refusing to surrender even to dreams. I watched you that last night, when you thought I had gone to bed. I watched your hands still stained with ink, your eyes trying to memorize the shape of my silhouette before dawn could take it away.*

*This is not a letter of fear. You already carry too much of that.*

*This is a letter of love.*

*I will not say “come back to me.” You already promised that. I believe you.*

*I will not say “be careful.” You were born careful, and cursed with valor.*

*I will say only this:*

*If you see the moonlight on your sword—  
If you hear the piano in the silence—  
If you feel my voice when no one is speaking—  
It’s not your imagination.*

*It’s me. Always.*

*— B.*

---

Severin folded the letter with slow reverence, placing it over his heart. He sat still for a long moment, the edges of the paper pressing softly into his chest like a pulse.

Then—

A voice bellowed from outside the tent. “Officers to formation! Orders incoming—march begins at midday!”

Another shouted call, boots pounding, men shouting in motion.

Outside, Marcel’s voice rose above the chaos. “Well, that’s it then. No more bread, no more wine, no more peace. Time to meet the English!”

Laughter followed—strained, nervous—but it helped.

Severin rose to his feet. Tucked the letter inside his coat.  
Buckled his saber.

He stepped out into the pale morning, a line of men  
already assembling on the rise beyond camp. A haze of  
smoke lingered low on the horizon. The wind had shifted  
west.

Waterloo was calling.

And Severin, with Bethania's words against his heart,  
would answer.

## Chapter 80 – La Guerrière

The June air was thick and restless. Clouds rolled low across the sky, smudging out the sun in a haze of silver and smoke. Bethania rode beside Madame Sophie, their cart jostling along the uneven road that led toward the French rear encampments. All around them, columns of men moved in formation, the roadways choked with artillery, horses, and the grumbling wheels of supply wagons. Soldiers whistled, shouted, prayed. No one looked at the women twice.

Bethania sat straight-backed, her face calm, but her hands trembled slightly in her lap. Sophie noticed. She reached over and covered Bethania's hand with her own callused fingers.

"You've never followed an army this far before," Sophie said without looking at her.

"No," Bethania admitted. "But I'm not afraid."

"That's not bravery," Sophie said. "That's love. Different thing entirely. Makes you reckless."

Bethania didn't argue. She didn't have to. Her mind was already ahead—picturing the camp, imagining Severin's face, wondering if he'd look the same as he had in Paris, or if war had already started to carve at him again.

As they reached the perimeter of the camp, two sentries stepped forward, rifles in hand.

"Halt," one of them said. "State your business."

Sophie pulled the cart to a stop and stood up with practiced confidence. “We’re with the aid corps. Vivandières, dispatched from Ligny. We’ve come to prepare for the wounded.”

The guards exchanged a look.

“There’s no wounded yet.”

“There will be,” Sophie said bluntly. “You’ll want us here when they start pouring in.”

Bethania stood beside her, quiet and composed in her brown riding cloak, hood thrown back to reveal her braid, which curled slightly in the humidity. She kept her eyes low, saying nothing about Severin.

The younger of the two guards hesitated.

Sophie reached into her satchel and pulled out a folded letter with a seal.

“My assignment papers,” she said. “From General Reille himself. You want to be the man who sends me back?”

The guard squinted at the paper, then handed it back.

“You can pass. But stay near the medical tents.”

Sophie gave a curt nod. “We’re not tourists.”

They passed into the encampment. It was massive—tents stretched out in rows, officers barking orders, troops polishing bayonets, horses being fed and watered. There was an eerie calm in the air, like the lull before a thunderclap.

Bethania scanned the space around her. She could see men from different regiments, artillery units, cavalry. But no sign of the 12th Infantry Division. No sign of Severin.

As they unloaded the first of their supplies, Bethania turned to Sophie.

“He’s not here.”

Sophie didn’t ask who. She simply nodded. “Go ask the quartermaster.”

Bethania found a harried lieutenant at the central command tent. He looked up from a stack of deployment logs.

“Duke Derbois?” he repeated. “He and his detachment rode out just after dawn. Part of the Old Guard reconnaissance. They’ll be forming at Mont-Saint-Jean before tomorrow’s push.”

“Waterloo,” Bethania said under her breath.

The lieutenant nodded.

Bethania returned to Sophie, her cloak flapping in the breeze.

“I have to go,” she said. “To Waterloo.”

Sophie sighed, her face creased with worry. “That’s not a battlefield. It’ll be a meat grinder.”

“I know.”

“I’ve seen what it does to women like you.”

Bethania's jaw tightened. "You've also seen what happens to the ones who wait too long."

Sophie studied her for a long moment. Then she stepped forward and touched the side of Bethania's face.

"If you're going to do this, you'll need a name. You can't keep giving yours to every checkpoint."

Bethania blinked. "What?"

Sophie smiled faintly. "You'll go as one of mine. Bethania Sophie. My daughter, for now."

Bethania's throat tightened. "Thank you."

The older woman pulled her into a brief hug. "You'll find him. And if you don't—" she paused, sighing. "Then at least you'll know you fought for him."

Bethania nodded, eyes wet but steady.

Sophie pulled back and adjusted Bethania's collar. "Listen to me now. Men say love is soft. That it stays in parlors and perfumes. But real love? It rides into gunfire. It buries its hands in blood. It burns."

Bethania mounted her horse, clutching a necklace that isn't there.

"Stay alive, Bethania Sophie," Sophie called after her. "I expect to see you again."

"You will," Bethania called back, voice clear.

And then she turned the horse toward the north, toward Waterloo.

## Chapter 81 – Doomsday

Bethania's breath came in shallow bursts as her horse pounded across the muddy, torn hills of Belgium. The rain from the night before had turned the terrain into a soup of clay and blood. Her cloak clung to her like wet skin, her hair tangled and wild beneath the hood. She had been riding hard toward the sound of cannons for over thirty minutes.

On the horizon, the battlefield unfurled—massive and apocalyptic. Thousands upon thousands of men moved in formation, appearing from this distance like streams of ants pouring into one another. The flashes of cannonfire glinted like distant lightning, always followed by the belated, stomach-twisting *boom* that shook the ribs. Each blast seemed to crack the world a little further open.

Bethania slowed her mount at the crest of a low ridge. Her eyes scanned the disarray of soldiers and flags and smoke, trying to make sense of it. Her knowledge of military formations was limited, but she recognized the cavalry detachments by the rhythm of hooves and glint of sabers. Her heart quickened. *Where are you, Severin?*

The battle had begun.

---

Severin stood with Cristian, Marcel, and Silvian atop a rise behind the French front lines. Around them, the artillery batteries of the Grande Armée roared into life, raining death upon the English positions. Smoke clouded the air, acrid and heavy. The sky, low and brooding, gave the light a yellow tint—like the world had been dipped in oil.



"This is it," Severin muttered, scanning the field. "The last chance we've got."

Cristian said nothing. He lifted Tabitha's handkerchief to his lips, kissed it once, and tucked it into his coat over his heart. His eyes were narrow and still.

Silvian leaned on the saddle horn of his horse, shifting the weight off his bandaged leg. "Pain's gone. Or the fear's stronger," he said dryly, then looked to the others. "You all better die with style. I'm not limping my way through a funeral march for anyone."

Marcel laughed once, tossing Faustina's earring into the air and catching it. "She said she wants this back. No excuses. That woman would haunt me if I didn't come home."

The banter didn't ease the tension. They were still waiting. The Old Guard had yet to be deployed—held in reserve, as always. But they could see the French infantry pressing the English lines with some success.

"Too late," Severin said suddenly, watching the left flank. "The Prussians will be here any minute."

---

From the opposite ridge, Bethania's eyes caught it too.

To the far right, beyond the curve of a wooded hill, she saw it—a single black-and-white flag rising like a ghost.

The Prussians.

Her stomach dropped. *They'll be surrounded. Oh God—Severin...*

She circled her horse along the outer edge of the French position, keeping her distance from officers, always moving. The smoke and fog obscured much of the chaos, but she pressed on, scanning every line of cavalry she passed, desperate to find the flash of a familiar face or a flash of Severin's silver cross.

---

Back near the center, Severin received word: **Plancenot had fallen.**

The Prussians have an opportunity to outflank them.

He and his men were ordered to support the Young Guard and retake the village. Severin swung onto his horse, eyes steel. "Mount up!"

Marcel gave a grin as he pulled his saber. "Let's go teach these bastards what happens when you interrupt a good lunch."

Cristian raised his rifle in silent readiness. Silvian grunted and winced but refused to be left behind. "Let's make this count."

They rode.

A tide of thunder followed as the Old Guard cavalry surged forward. The horses were slick with sweat and mud, their nostrils flaring, their riders locked in tight formation. At Severin's signal, the wave broke—riders fanned out, sabers lifted to the heavens like silver lightning.

Plancenot exploded into chaos.

They tore into the Prussian ranks with brutal efficiency. Severin's blade sliced down like judgment itself. Marcel was a blur of violence and laughter, Silvian cutting down two men before stumbling off his horse. Cristian fought like a ghost—quiet, fast, deadly. The fighting was too close for muskets—this was steel and bone and blind fury.

Severin dismounted as the fray thickened. He found Silvian pressed against a broken wall, defending their flank. Severin moved in beside him. Back to back, they fought off the oncoming wave.

Elsewhere, Cristian and Marcel held a side street, their boots slipping in blood and mud. The Prussians screamed in every direction.

Minutes passed like hours.

Then finally—the enemy broke. What was left of Jagow's forces retreated back toward the forest.

Plancenot was theirs again.

---

From the hill behind the village, Bethania saw it all. The smoke, the fire, the shape of the charge like a story etched in blood and iron. She couldn't see his face—couldn't know for sure—but something in her soul said he was there.

She knelt on the damp grass and pressed her palms together.

“Please, let him live through this.”

## Chapter 82 – For Love or Country

The sun bled into the low sky, painting the battlefield in fire and blood. From her vantage on the left ridge, Bethania sat atop her horse, heart hammering, breath ragged from the hard ride. She turned to wheel her horse away when a sharp voice rang out—**German**, clipped and commanding.

Two Prussian scouts had emerged from the edge of the woods behind her, mud-streaked and grim, rifles ready though not yet raised. Their eyes narrowed as they approached.

“Halt! Was tun Sie hier, Fräulein? Dies ist militärisches Gebiet.”

“(Stop! What are you doing here, miss? This is a military zone.”)

Bethania pulled her horse to a stop and faced them squarely, pushing back her hood so they could see her eyes. She didn’t flinch.

“Ich bin Belgierin, auf dem Weg zu Verwandten. Haben Sie nichts Besseres zu tun, als ein junges Mädchen zu verhören, während ein Krieg tobt? Sollten Sie zwei nicht kämpfen?”

“(I’m Belgian, on my way to family. Don’t you have better things to do than interrogate a young girl while a war rages? Shouldn’t you two be fighting?”)

The tone—sharp, eloquent, and dismissive—hit its mark. One of the scouts blinked, caught off guard. The other grunted something under his breath, clearly irritated but unsure how to press further without looking like a fool.

After a tense pause, they turned their horses and rode off, muttering about “störrische Belgier.”

Bethania didn't spare them a second glance. She dug in her heels and rode on. There was no time to waste. Wellington's forces surged forward from the west. The Prussians, like wolves on the scent, now threatened the French from the east.

The encirclement had begun.

Her stomach twisted. Somewhere in that mass of chaos, Severin rode. And if the line collapsed—when it collapsed—he would be among the last to fall.

\*\*

Below, Severin sat astride his horse near the rear line with Marcel, Cristian, and Silvian beside him. Around them, officers barked final orders to rally the retreat.

The end had come.

“Derbois,” a young courier called breathlessly, galloping up. “You're to cover the retreat. Old Guard. You'll drive into the English center. Delay their advance.”

Delay. It was a polite way of saying suicide.

Cristian looked to Severin. Marcel frowned but said nothing. Silvian's jaw was tight as he adjusted the bandage on his leg, refusing to acknowledge its pain.

They waited for the order.

Severin said nothing at first. He stared out over the field. The French were breaking. The Prussians had reached the

rear flank. A final cavalry charge into the center would be glorious, yes—but meaningless. A legend written in blood.

He thought of Bethania. Her voice. Her lips. The curve of her sleeping form curled against him in the quiet of their shared nights.

He reached up and touched the silver cross hanging around his neck. Blood had dried around its chain, matted into the collar of his coat.

Madam Lenoir's voice echoed in his mind: *Heroics at my daughter's expense are not an option.*

Severin drew in a long breath.

Then, quietly: "We fall back."

Cristian looked up sharply. "What?"

"We fall back," Severin said again, louder this time. "Order the men. South route. Cover the right and keep the formation. We protect the survivors."

The others didn't argue. Not this time.

Severin turned his horse. "For love, not country," he whispered under his breath.

\*\*

Bethania watched the Old Guard move. Her heart lurched as a unit broke from formation and charged headlong into the center. Her stomach dropped. *No.* That was supposed to be Severin's unit.

She spurred her horse forward in panic—but then—movement to the east. A smaller regiment pulling away, riding against the tide of battle. Their banner caught the smoky wind: a faded crest, silver and blue.

The Loire Valley.

Severin.

She pulled hard on the reins, turning to pursue. Seeing a perpendicular cavalry unit approaching the loire division. Reinforcements?

\*\*

The four men rode hard along the battered path, heading south toward the hills. Their unit—reduced now to barely a hundred—held formation in silence, each man knowing the retreat was not a reprieve, but a postponement of judgment.

And then—gunfire.

Cristian saw them first.

“Left flank! Incoming!”

From the haze rode a fast cavalry detachment—uniforms familiar, but off. Not English. Not Prussian.

French.

But not theirs.

The Bourbon insignia gleamed on the breastplates.

“Royalists,” Marcel snarled. “Of course.”

There was no time to react. A volley of musket fire exploded across the path. Horses screamed. Men shouted. The Bourbons rode through like wolves into sheep.

Severin was struck in the shoulder and thigh. The force of it ripped him from the saddle, and he hit the ground hard, his body limp.

Cristian roared, slicing down a rider before attempting to wheel back toward Severin- but barricaded by more royalists.

Marcel was in a duel with two men at once, barely fending them off. Silvian, still mounted, took out three with quick, clean shots from his pistol.

It was chaos.

Severin lay bleeding in the dust, his hand pressed weakly to his shoulder. Blood pooling under his thigh. His cross glinting through the ashy dust.

And then—footsteps.

Godrey.

Marcel and Cristian were too far—thirty paces, maybe more. Neither had time to reload.

They both saw him.

Godrey, pacing toward Severin's collapsed form, pistol at his side, the glint of a sneer on his face.

Cristian's hand found his spare pistol, nearly forgotten, tucked beneath his coat. Marcel, frantic, breathing heavy, fingers slick with sweat and dirt, pulled the flintlock from



his belt. Their eyes met across the carnage—no words needed. Wind stirred the dust just enough to blur their vision, but not enough to hide the figure moving forward with lethal intent.

Cristian narrowed one eye, focused through the shifting veil.

Marcel exhaled once, steadying his hand.

Godrey now approached slowly, savoring the moment, his pistol already raised. “Hello Derbois,” he said. “Finally. You get the dishonorable death you deserve, traitor.”

Severin coughed, blood spraying from his lips. “Still can’t best me with the blade I see.”

Godrey laughed, leveling the pistol. “Now, my dear old Severin, rest assured- that Lenoir bi-”

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

THUD.

Godrey’s head snapped sideways as Cristian’s bullet tore through his skull. He dropped like a puppet with cut strings.

Severin, eyes watering- grabbing at his chest. Gaspd for air.

Cristian and Marcel raced to his side.

“No—no, no,” Marcel muttered, ripping open Severin’s coat. His hands trembled.

And then—

There it was.

The cross. Bent. Cracked. Blackened by impact.

The bullet had struck it dead center. The force had shattered Severin’s ribs, knocked him breathless—but not dead.

Marcel threw his head back and howled with laughter.

“You’re too damn lucky to die, you idiot!”

Cristian looking at Marcel, grinned through clenched teeth. “You’re still the worst shot in the Guard.”

They hoisted Severin up, half-conscious and groaning, and laid him over a horse.

“Ride,” Marcel ordered. “Now.”

\*\*

From the ridge, Bethania watched in horror as the ambush unfolded. Then—movement. The Loire Valley banner. The gunfire. The flashes of red.

Her breath caught as two silhouettes raising another onto a horse.

It had to be Severin- injured or worse.

Without thought, she kicked her horse into a gallop, riding hard after them.

## Chapter 83 – Labor of Love

Bethania entered the outskirts of Nivelles just as the horizon began to pale with the promise of dawn. Her body ached, her hands blistered from the reins, her back tight from hours of relentless riding. But she didn't stop. Not yet.

The town was quiet but tense—an odd stillness broken only by the occasional echo of footsteps or a cart's rattle over cobblestone. French troops straggled in from the north, some wounded, others dazed and silent. Nivelles had been spared the destruction of the campaign, its medieval architecture still intact, its narrow lanes and ivy-covered façades almost romantic—if not for the air of retreat.

Bethania's cloak billowed behind her as she rode through the winding streets, eyes scanning for any sign of the Loire Valley division. She called out names to anyone who would listen. "Severin de Derbois? Cristian Duval? Marcel Fournier?" Most gave her confused looks. Some turned away.

Then—a voice.

"You're looking for the man with the cavalry?" a soft voice asked. Bethania turned to find a middle-aged nun standing by a convent gate.

"Yes," she said, breath catching. "Please, do you know where?"

The nun nodded slowly. "A group of four came through less than an hour ago. One was injured. They stopped at the convent to ask for aid. We directed them to the house behind the church."

Bethania didn't even thank her. She kicked her horse forward, mud splashing underhoof as she galloped through the square, turned behind the old stone church, and dismounted with a clumsy urgency.

She heard voices first. Tired voices. Familiar ones.

"...and then he says, 'Is this your idea of a tactical withdrawal or just bad aim?'" Marcel's unmistakable voice rang out, followed by a chorus of tired laughter.

Bethania's heart leapt.

"Marcel!" she shouted, her voice cracking.

The sound of boots scuffing stone. Cristian turned first, Silvian beside him, both wide-eyed. Marcel spun with a grin that quickly shifted to stunned disbelief.

"Bethania?" Marcel breathed. "What in the hell..."

"Is he here?" she asked, voice fierce and shaking all at once. "Where is he?!"

The three men exchanged glances—there was no argument in them, no hesitation. They simply stepped aside and pointed toward the cracked door of a small cottage nearby.

Bethania crossed the threshold, heart in her throat.

There he was.

Severin lay in a modest bed, slumped against a pile of pillows. His arm was in a brace, his leg bandaged heavily. He looked pale, bruised, but not broken. His chest rose and fell with slow, even breaths. A basin of water sat nearby,

half-clouded and pink. The soft light from the window framed him in delicate gold.

She stood there a long moment, barely able to breathe.

Then she stepped forward, and her boot crunched on a piece of parchment near the door.

Severin stirred.

He blinked, groggy. His hand twitched at his side, and he squinted toward the sound.

“Bethania?” he rasped.

She pulled down her hood, and her tear-lined face caught the light.

He blinked again as if she were a dream, then whispered, “Is it really you?”

She didn’t answer. She crossed the room, sat gently on the edge of the bed, and curled beside him, her arms wrapping around his chest with care. Her scent—smoke and earth and lavender—washed over him.

“I love you,” she murmured into his neck. “Don’t you ever do this to me again.”

“I’m retired,” he said, voice hoarse but warm.

They both laughed—a shaky, half-broken sound that turned to tears in seconds.

They held each other there, in the quiet after the storm, wrapped in war and love and everything they almost lost.

## Chapter 84 – The Derbois

The church was small—humble by the standards of nobility—but it was chosen not for its grandeur, but for its quiet beauty. Nestled in the countryside near Vendôme, surrounded by rolling green hills and wild roses in bloom, it held the kind of peace they had long been denied. A sanctuary from war, from politics, from all the noise that had once defined their lives.

Severin stood at the altar, his posture straight, though a subtle limp followed him like a loyal shadow. He wore a tailored black coat with silver trim—the colors of his old regiment. He had insisted. He would not hide who he had been, even if the crown sought to erase it.

His eyes were locked on the door.

And then she appeared.

Bethania Lenoir—soon to be Derbois—stepped into the room like a living answer to every prayer he'd never dared to speak aloud. Her gown was simple, white and flowing, stitched with lace by her mother and sisters. No diamonds. No corseted fanfare. Just her, barefoot beneath the hem, with her long dark hair tumbling down her back like silk. Her feline eyes locked onto his the moment she saw him.

The chapel held its breath.

Even Silvian, notoriously unimpressed with ceremony, seemed taken aback by her beauty.

Madam Lenoir dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Marcel, already holding Faustina's hand, muttered something about needing a drink just to survive the

emotional onslaught. Rachelle gripped Beaumont's arm with quiet joy. Cristian and Tabitha exchanged smiles, both of them remembering a time not long ago when none of this had seemed possible.

And Severin—wounded, nearly broken by war, abandoned by his nation—stood unshaken. For all he had lost, this was the moment he gained everything.

The ceremony was short.

There were no long speeches. Just whispered vows, soft promises, and the trembling of hands joined after too many days apart.

“I, Bethania Lenoir,” she said, voice steady despite the tears brimming in her eyes, “take you—this fool, this lion, this man—to be my husband.”

He laughed quietly, wiping a tear from her cheek.

“And I, Séverin de Derbois,” he said, “vow to never leave your side again. Even if I have to crawl to you.”

They kissed before the priest had even finished.

The crowd burst into cheers. No nobles. No military officers. No ministers. Just family. Just love.

—

The reception was held at the Meslay estate.

By Severin's decree, the property had been quietly transferred to Beaumont and Tabitha—insurance in case his titles were stripped. He had made the decision during the Belgium campaign, when death had seemed a near



certainty. Now it served a different purpose: a symbol of rebirth.

The courtyard glowed with lantern light. Musicians played under a blooming trellis. Tables were lined with rustic dishes, simple wines, and local cheeses.

Hadeline ran barefoot between the tables, laughing as she weaved in and out of conversations. She climbed into Severin's lap and demanded to dance. He obliged, limping along awkwardly until Bethania came to rescue him.

Faustina and Marcel stole away behind the stables, their silhouettes unmistakable in the candlelight. Marcel's jacket hung over Faustina's shoulders as she kissed him, stealing one of the desserts in his hand.

Angelica, with a glass of white wine, chatted easily with Abeline and Tabitha. Silvian stood nearby, looking suspiciously cheerful with a pretty red-haired woman on his arm.

Madam Lenoir and Severin's mother sat beneath the pergola, chatting about gardens and grandchildren as if they'd been friends forever. Time had softened them. Or perhaps war had reminded them of what mattered most.

And in the center of it all, Severin and Bethania sat hand-in-hand, her head on his shoulder, his injured leg stretched out, their fingers tangled like roots in the soil.

They had survived revolution, betrayal, war, and heartbreak.

Now, they were simply husband and wife.

Not nobility. Not soldiers.

Just the Derbois.

## Chapter 85 – Trial by Friendship

Weeks had passed since the wedding, and joy had slowly given way to unease. One morning, a knock at the door shattered the calm. A courier stood stiffly at the threshold, delivering a single envelope sealed with the royal Bourbon insignia.

Severin opened it with slow fingers.

A summons.

The new monarchy—restored in full power—was holding public tribunals, rooting out former Bonapartists and generals who had fought during the Hundred Days. His name was among them.

Bethania read the letter over his shoulder, her face unreadable.

“They’re going to try you,” she said softly. “You knew this might happen.”

Severin didn’t respond at first. He stared at the letter, then out the window to the gardens beyond. His jaw tightened. “They’ll strip everything,” he said finally. “The titles. The name. And if they want blood—”

“You’ll not face it alone,” she cut in. Her voice was firm.

“I brought you into this,” he said bitterly.

“You didn’t bring me anywhere I didn’t choose to go.”

Severin looked at her, torn. “If it comes to prison—or worse—”

She didn't let him finish. "Then I go with you. That's what vows mean. That's what love means. You said you wouldn't leave me. I meant it too."

He ran a hand through his hair, pacing. "This isn't a duel, Bethania. This is politics. Public spectacle. It's death sentences dressed in formality."

"And I'm not afraid of it."

He looked at her. Really looked. And saw that she meant it.

With resignation and something deeper—a kind of quiet awe—he nodded.

"We ride at first light."

---

Paris was not as they had left it. The streets bore new flags. Royal blue. Fleur-de-lis on every corner. Posters praising King Louis. The tide had turned, and it turned sharp. Severin felt it in every glance cast his way, every muttered word as they made their way through the streets.

This city that once welcomed him now watched him with suspicion.

Bethania held his hand in the carriage, tight and warm. He remembered Blois. The Protestant chapel. Her stubbornness then had felt reckless. Now it felt like salvation.

When they reached the courthouse—an enormous building draped in Bourbon banners—they dismounted slowly. The air was heavy.

Severin straightened his coat. Bethania adjusted her gloves.

A guard approached. "Name?" he asked.

"Duke Severin de Derbois," he said. "Here to answer summons under tribunal code B-17."

The guard frowned. Flipped through a leather-bound registry.

"You've been dismissed," he said flatly. "The case is closed."

Bethania blinked. "What? There must be some mistake. We were ordered to appear today."

The guard shrugged. "I don't write the orders, madame. You're free to go."

Before they could protest further, a voice floated from behind the marble columns.

"My daughter."

Bethania turned.

Out stepped Madame Sophie, no longer in her field-worn clothes, but in noble attire. A sapphire brooch gleamed at her neck. Her hands, gloved and firm, held a folder stamped with royal wax.

"Sophie?" Bethania gasped. "What are you—?"

The older woman smiled and handed Severin the folder.

He opened it, eyes scanning quickly.

A royal pardon.

Full.

For him. For Bethania. For the Lenoirs. For the entire Loire Valley division.

He looked up, stunned.

Bethania gripped Sophie's arms. "How—how did you—?"

"You never asked my last name," Sophie said. "Madame Sophie de Montreuil. My father was cousin to the king." She gave a playful tilt of her head. "I preferred patching soldiers to playing politics. But when I heard your name on a list..."

She paused, touching Bethania's shoulder.

Severin looked down, humbled. "You saved our lives."

Sophie raised an eyebrow. "Please. You already did that—more than once for an ungrateful France."

There was a beat of silence. Then Sophie clapped her hands once. "Now! No more courthouse drama. We're in Paris. And I am in the mood for duck confit and good wine."

Bethania laughed. Severin let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding.

The war had ended. The court had closed. But their story?

It was just beginning.

## Epilogue – “Moonlight Adieu”

The halls of Meslay were quiet again. Peaceful. Not with the silence of absence, but with the soft quiet of fullness — of a home no longer waiting for something to arrive.

The windows stood open, the spring breeze carrying in the smell of lilac and grass. Somewhere in the fields beyond, children laughed. The estate was alive.

Bethania sat at the piano, her posture slightly strained. Her dark hair cascaded over her shoulders, her face softened by the glow of moonlight pouring through the tall windows. She played slowly — a lullaby. Unfinished. Invented. The notes gentle, like footsteps through memory.

Her belly pressed against the keys, awkward and stubborn.

She paused for a moment, sighed, and let out a breathless laugh.

“She kicks every time I play in E minor,” she murmured to herself.

Behind her, in the doorway, Severin stood — older now, though not by years. A different weight lived in his shoulders, a different kind of calm in his eyes. The limp in his left leg was permanent, but he carried it with the same grace he wore his name.

In his hand, a sealed letter. He hadn’t opened it yet.

He didn’t need to.

He listened.

That was enough.

Bethania turned to look at him, catching him mid-thought.

“Come here, lionheart.”

He stepped into the room, the wood creaking under his boots. Slowly, he came to sit beside her on the piano bench.

“What is it?” she asked, nodding to the letter.

He handed it to her.

“I think it’s from you.”

Bethania blinked. She opened it gently, and inside was a letter she had written nearly six months ago — forgotten, tucked into a drawer during a quiet afternoon while Severin was out riding.

Her handwriting, careful and sharp, filled the page.

She read aloud.

*To my daughter—  
If the world is kind, you will read this  
someday and ask me why we chose the name:*

*Elise.*

*So I will tell you.  
We named you for music. For the melody  
your father first wrote while missing me, and  
for the hope that music brings, even in war.  
We named you for strength — for the women  
who came before you. For your grandmother,*



*who taught me to fight with silence. For your  
aunt Faustina, who taught me to fight with  
fire. For Madame Sophie, who taught me to  
fight with love.*

*We named you for peace — because peace  
must be chosen. Not found.  
And we named you Elise, because it was the  
only name your father ever said aloud while  
dreaming. You are already loved. Fiercely.  
And when you are old enough, I will tell you  
everything.*

*But for now, just sleep.  
And listen for the music.  
— Maman*

Bethania folded the letter slowly.

Severin leaned in, his lips brushing her temple.

Outside, Meslay glowed under the moon. Inside, their story  
— once full of gunpowder — had become a cradle song.