

The Chagny Letters

by themistresssnape

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

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PROLOGUE

It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. I had only been in France for a few days working on my graduate thesis in early twentieth century history when I received an anonymous message at my hotel. The concierge could not describe to me the person who delivered the message, only that he had been instructed to give the note directly to me at his earliest ability. Strangely, the message was written in both French and English, one atop the other in a neat, looping script. Here, I reproduce the message in full detail as it was given to me.

Mlle. Emmyline Leroux,

Il a été amené à mon attention par les compagnon mutuels que vous êtes en France. Si vous faites, s'il vous plaît le voyage au Chateau de Chagny au nord de Paris. Vous trouverez un packet illuminant sur la quatrième étagère du cabinet de livre dans le salon. Ne pas partager que vous trouvez avec n'importe qui jusqu'à ce que vous avez entendu de moi. Si vous êtes dans le besoin de ma correspondance, vous pouvez vous fier M. Rigalto pour livrer quoi que vous pouvez avoir besoin d'envoyer. Il peut m'atteindre n'importe quand, le jour ou la nuit.

It has been brought to my attention through mutual companions that you are in France. If you would, please travel to the Chateau de Chagny north of Paris. You shall find an illuminating package on the fourth shelf of the book cabinet in the sitting room. Do not share what you find with anyone until you have heard from me. If you are in need of my correspondence, you may trust M. Rigalto to deliver whatever you may need to send. He may reach me any time, day or night.

Votre serviteur humble,

Your humble servant,

G. H.

I'm sure you could understand the confusion that came over me as I read this message on my way to the Bibliothèque Nationale to begin my preliminary research. As you are now aware, I had only been in France for a small number of days. I couldn't have met more than three or four people outside of the hotel staff, and any of my other acquaintances were academics. True, my father was French, but had not been in the country for nearly thirty years. My mother was Italian. So you see, I could not imagine

how this G. H. could have known of my arrival through a mutual companion. I had no companions in France!

For days I read the message with a strange suspicion that I was the recipient of a cruel joke by students at the university who were angry at my arrival to study turn of the century France. Again and again I asked the concierge, M. Rigalto, to tell me of the person who delivered such a strange message. Each time he refused, saying that he could not describe the messenger because he had been instructed to keep their identity secret. M. Rigalto assured me, however, that I could trust the word of my secret correspondent for they were honorable in the highest degree.

The longer I pondered the message and the messenger, the more ill at ease I became. I resolved to do away with the irritating note at once, but found that I hadn't the heart to put it in the wastebasket. I would let it slip from my fingers and float on the air to the mouth of the bin, but each time I found myself retrieving it from the pile of discarded rubbish. There was something intriguing about the message, more so than the method in which it was delivered to me. How did the messenger know which hotel was my own? Why did they intend to send me to the Chateau de Chagny? What faith did the messenger have in M. Rigalto that he should be the go between of our correspondence?

A fortnight had passed with my only travel being between my hotel, the university and the Bibliothèque Nationale. I did not want to trust this G.H. and their entreaty to go to Chateau de Chagny, despite the praises of faith that M. Rigalto sang. The message was hidden away beneath a stack of papers and books in my room, not quite out of mind even though it was out of sight. As I sat going through my already extensive notes, I began to wonder; what would be the harm in taking a trip to the Chateau?

Then it happened. As I left one morning for breakfast at a small café down the street, M. Rigalto called for me, a plain white envelope in his hand. "A message for you, Mlle. Leroux. They ask you read it at once."

You could imagine my hesitancy as I read the address on the outside of the envelope and recognized the neat, looping script of my secret correspondent. I had quite a war with myself as I tried to decide whether to open the message or to simply return it to M. Rigalto with instructions to return it to its sender. I did not understand why I must be the one to receive these mysterious messages. Yet, my curiosity prevailed, and I opened the message. There it was, again in both French and English, a short missive from G. H.

Mlle. Leroux,

Je comprends que vous le trouvez difficile à me fier comme vous êtes incertain quant à mon identité et mes motifs pour contacter vous. Peut-être je dois faire quelque geste pour gagner votre confiance. Donc, je vous dirai ceci, mais vous ne devez pas demander plus de moi en ce moment. Votre cher Mme d'ami. Firmin est la dame qui m'a alerté à votre présence en France. Je dois demander que vous ne la demandez pas pour l'information de moi comme elle a été instruite pareil comme M. Rigalto. Maintenant, s'il vous plaît le retour à votre suite où vous trouverez un cadeau sur la table de souper et une explication quant à pourquoi je cherche pour vous aller à Chateau de Chagny.

I understand that you find it difficult to trust me as you are unsure as to my identity and my motives for contacting you. Perhaps I should make some gesture to earn your trust. Therefore, I will tell you this, but you must not ask any more of me at present. Your dear friend Mme. Firmin is the lady who alerted me to your presence in France. I must ask that you do not ask her for any information about me as she has been instructed the same as M. Rigalto. Now, please return to your suite where you shall find a gift on the dining table and an explanation as to why I seek for you to go to Chateau de Chagny.

Votre serviteur humble,

Your humble servant,

G. H.

It was much to my confusion—and M. Rigalto's delight—that I contacted my appointments that morning to cancel our meetings. I cannot remember a lift ride that seemed as long as this one. It was as if it was Christmas and I was an excited child, desperate to get to my gifts and open the unknown packages. I could not know that the gift awaiting me in my suite would lead me on the most strange and illuminating journey of my life.

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Notes from the Mistress: The hospital called this afternoon, and the doctors are allowing me to stay home for the rest of the weekend. They want to see how my stay in the hospital so far is helping me deal with "real life." I was so excited that I invited several of my friends over to watch "The Phantom of the Opera" with me and Gerard. That is where this tale developed. I hope you enjoy my little foray away from the world of fanfiction, just for a little while.

The Curiosity of the Gift

Chapter 2 of 11

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Chapter 1: The Curiosity of the Gift

The mysterious letters from G.H. and the strange appearance of a gift on the table of my dining room made me more than slightly nervous. Perhaps most unsettling was the knowledge that someone gained entry to my rooms and left without leaving any sign in the span of a quarter of an hour. I must confess I still thought myself the end of some elaborately orchestrated joke. What objects I had on my person at that moment were left in a most haphazard fashion at the door to my rooms, and I began to check each closet and every hidden orifice for my guest. After nearly half an hour of searching, I found no one and no trace of anyone having been there at all.

At the end of my search, I found myself again before the gift. The box was rather small, about the size of a watchcase, wrapped in blood red paper, and tied with a black bow. Taking a seat at the table, I stared at the gift, watching the light from the overhead chandelier glittering on the red foil paper. I was at once overwhelmed with fear and desire as I stared, longing to reach out and open the hypnotizing gift but afraid to will my fingers to take it. Perhaps I could overcome my great curiosity by simple force of will, yet to this day I do not believe myself capable of such strength. And so I resolved myself to open the package and quickly dispatch with the task G.H. had chosen to befall me.

I could not bring myself to tear that beautiful paper through impatience, so I took my time, placing the bow and foil to the side. There was a plain, white box beneath the elaborate decoration, which only piqued my curiosity about what lay inside. Whoever wrapped this gift—which I was much inclined to believe it was my mysterious G.H. himself—had taken great care and poured much love into the package. At last I removed the cover of the box, revealing a folded sheet of paper and a beautiful antique necklace.

The necklace was simple enough, a pendant attached to a wide, black, silk ribbon, but it was mesmerizingly beautiful. A porcelain silhouette of a young woman was set against a garnet background. An ornate lattice of silver that joined to the silver backing into which the rest was set surrounded this. I ran the tips of my fingers over the rough porcelain and over the silver backing. Exactly in the middle of the backing, I felt etchings in the silver and turned it over in my palm. In very small, neatly placed French was an engraving that read, "To my lovely bride, my Lady de Chagny, with love, your Philippe."

I could barely bring myself to put away the necklace to read the letter. At last, I tore my eyes from that beautiful piece of antique jewelry and unfolded the letter that had lain forgotten as I admired the Lady de Chagny's necklace. The letter was in the familiar script of G.H., produced both in French and English, although I shall hereafter reproduce our singular correspondence in my native tongue only, which is Lancaster English. In the letter accompanying Lady de Chagny's jewelry, my dear pen pal gave a lengthy exposition of his meaning and purpose for contacting me and placing this most intriguing project at my feet.

My dear Mlle. Emmyline Leroux,

By now I am quite sure that you are fully at most unease—if not entirely terrified—by my insistent correspondence with you. As I have pointed out previously, I am on very honorable and honest terms with M. Jacques Rigalto, your concierge who may thoroughly be trusted with our correspondence as well as whatever proof of my honor you may desire. I have instructed M. Rigalto to answer whatever questions you may have regarding my person excluding—of course—my true name as well as my place of residence. That, I assure you, will be revealed in due time.

Please feel free as well to inquire of Mme. Katharine Firmin if you have further reservations as to my honor or intentions in approaching you with this inquest, which I have so mysteriously brought to your knowledge. Here, I must stop and beg your pardon and forgiveness at my behavior as far as our current list of correspondence is concerned. I should hope that, when all of our knowledge is fulfilled in regards to the Chateau de Chagny, you will understand why I have maintained such stringent codes of secrecy.

In your hand—as I assume you have the darling Lady de Chagny's remarkable necklace in your grasp at this moment—is the wedding gift that was given to Lady Marguerite de Chagny by her husband-to-be, the Lord Philippe d'Arc Bordeaux, on the eve of their wedding in July of 1889. As you are absolutely aware, the French aristocracies were under the titles of Counts and Countesses, Viscounts and Viscountesses, and so forth unless they held before a title of the clergy. It may be quite odd—as there has always been much animosity between the dominion of the British and we who are French—but the Mlle. Marguerite and M. Philippe were granted their titles before their nuptials by the British crown with the permission of our government.

The records of which I—and those who share my interest in the most singular life of the Lady de Chagny and Lord Philippe—have gained access to give account of the Lord and Lady holding their wedding mass at the cathedral of Notre Dame on July 22, 1889. In September of 1890, a son bearing the name of Erik Louis de Chagny Bordeaux was baptized in Paris. The young Lord's death certificate was filed on his second birthday. Lord Philippe—as the records show—died in Crécy in March of 1901 of pneumonia. He was twenty-nine years old.

What had driven my interest in and my contact of you—Mlle. Leroux—of this matter is that there is no mention of the death of Marguerite de Chagny in any records in France or England. There is a passing mention in the survey records of Paris that the Chateau de Chagny had been abandoned as of the autumn of 1902. I have been assured that you are a meticulous child of research and that—to you—history is a great love. Please, Mlle. Leroux, find her—find our darling Lady de Chagny, and bring her home.

Your most humble servant,

G.H.

Notes from The Mistress: I've had this chapter finished for some time now, but with everything going on, I haven't had time to post it. I'm working on the next chapter, as well as the next portion of *Softer Side*. Hope you enjoy!

A Most Beautiful Country

Chapter 3 of 11

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Chapter 2: A Most Beautiful Country

It would be quite useless to say that I found the gift of Lady de Chagny's necklace enchanting. Although the engraving on the silver backing was no older than the summer of 1889, I was quite certain that the charm itself was almost two hundred years old. For nearly a fortnight after receiving such a wonderful gift from G.H., I spent the entirety of my research time searching for whatever scraps of information and any minor mention of the Lady de Chagny or any conspicuous relation. At the end of my search, however, I was hopelessly disappointed, as I had found no more than I had already been told by my secret correspondent.

Perhaps I had decided on my course of action from the moment I read the first missive sent to me by G.H., but it was a great stain on my will to actually take the first step on my journey beyond a pile of dusty books and rustling pages of notes. The summer was fading quickly, and the vibrant colors of autumn were appearing in minute doses upon the trees lining the streets of Paris. It was difficult to imagine how my journey would begin, as I was utterly unfamiliar with the area and would much rather have spent my time watching the golden hues of autumn seep into the trees.

So it was, on a bright, windy September morning that I prepared my luggage for the trip to the Chateau de Chagny. It was several weeks removed from the delivery of the gift from G.H. that I made my preparations to travel, and I had received a third missive from my correspondent listing a small bed and breakfast near the Chateau that would suit my needs. M. Rigalto was familiar with the proprietors of the inn, and made such arrangements with the caretaker that I was to stay for as long as needed without rent.

I was ill at ease with traveling alone away from the city, my stomach in knots and my hands uneasy with trembling as I waited in the lobby for the taxi M. Rigalto had summoned. My luggage sat on a tram by the door with a young bellboy, his dark hair blowing in the autumn breeze. Lady de Chagny's necklace was in my purse, locked away safely in its box, and the many notes I had made of her life were bound in a leather notebook and tucked away in my luggage. I had no idea what I would find when I arrived at the chateau north of Paris, but I felt something calming in the pit of my stomach.

The driver of the taxi was a nice man from Orleans who spoke of nothing but Jean d'Arc for the entire drive. He told interesting tales about the holy warrior and her great siege of the town. His voice was soothing, a lulling quality to it that matched the rhythmic shaking of the taxi. I relaxed against the seat, listening to the driver weave his tales and watching the outskirts of Paris fade away into a quiet countryside. It was a most beautiful country with groves of trees lining the roadway and fields of wildflowers stretching out far and away. The gold and orange hues of autumn were exploding from the uppermost branches of the trees down through the bottom. The sky was a crystal, sea blue broken by cotton ball clouds.

"Ah, mademoiselle, we have arrived." The taxi had come to a stop in front of a large manor house bearing the name *The King's Bed* on a wooden sign in the yard. The driver came around to open my door and held out his hand to help me out. My legs ached from sitting for nearly two hours, and my back felt as if it were in a vise. The driver was busy at the back loading my luggage onto a little tram as I stretched and walked up to the front door of the inn.

The door was made of sturdy oak reinforced with iron bars. There was a tiny window in the middle, the opening covered from within with a little door, sitting above an iron knocker. Taking the heavy ring in my shaking hand, I knocked twice and stood back. A stone balcony formed the overhang above the door, several urns of flowers sitting on its rails. Two small trees stood on either side of the door, sculpted into tight spirals and decorated with blue and white silk streamers. Sloping gardens stretched out to my right and left before disappearing around the back of the house. It was beautiful.

The door opened to reveal a young woman in a yellow country dress, her golden hair held back in a thick braid. She smiled, her gray eyes twinkling. "Welcome, mademoiselle, to *The King's Bed*. Please come in," she said as she stepped aside and dropped into what was unmistakably a curtsy.

I followed the young woman in, noting in passing that she could hardly be a year or more older than myself. The driver followed close behind, pushing the tram with my luggage uneasily over the rich rugs covering the polished wooden floors. Beautiful tapestries and paintings hung on the walls on each side of the entry hallway. A great window with French doors stood behind the desk at the end of the entryway. There was a grand staircase that rose to the upper floor on each side of the desk. A large portrait of King Louis XIV hung on the wall at the upper floor landing.

"Pardon me, mademoiselle," I said, my eye caught by a portrait of a dark haired woman wearing a silver gown and hood to match. Her dark eyes were piercing, and her lips were turned upwards in a knowing smile. "Would you know the woman in that portrait there?"

The young woman hardly glanced at the portrait, as if it were a common talking point of the guests coming in and out of the bed and breakfast. "That is Queen Anne, mademoiselle. The wife of King Henry of England," she replied, still leading me toward the desk at the end of the entryway.

"Queen Anne?" I repeated, puzzled. "You wouldn't be speaking of Anne Boleyn, would you, mademoiselle?"

"Oui, mademoiselle. This house was once a favorite home of Queen Anne when she was a young girl at the court of France. The Chateau de Chagny was built using the same plans as this very house."

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The Gentleman Nicolas Lancaster

Chapter 4 of 11

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CHAPTER 3: The Gentleman Nicolas Lancaster

I was to be boarded in the very room in which Queen Anne had bedded during her time with the French court. The room was large and lit by two sets of wide doors that opened out onto a private balcony at the back of the house. The bed was large and covered with a feather down mattress and pillows. There was a canopy of green silk with matching hangings. The covers were like ivory with the inn's monogram stitched in the center in gold. Beautiful tapestries hung on the paneled walls: altar cloths and great trains of courtiers bearing the fleur-de-leis on blue standards. A grand fireplace sat in the wall opposite the bed, a second portrait of the queen hung over the mantle.

The young woman in the country dress assured me that all arrangements for my stay had been taken care of and that I was to be allowed full use of the library still kept in the house. "Be assured that we will do all that is necessary to make your stay as productive as possible, mademoiselle. I am to understand that you will be going to the Chateau de Chagny while you are staying with us?" said the young woman as the last of my luggage was taken from the tram and placed at the foot of the bed.

"Oui," I replied. "Were there arrangements made as to how I might go between the chateau and here?"

"M. Rigalto has arranged for a car for you, mademoiselle. You shall have one of the men from the inn to drive you as you wish. If you wish to go to the chateau now, I can fetch him for you."

I turned on the spot, taking in the whole of the room and feeling the uncomfortable ache in my bones from riding in the taxi for so long. "Thank you, but I believe I will go to the chateau tomorrow. For now, I would like to rest."

"As you wish, mademoiselle. If you fancy something to read, the library is in the east wing of the house. Its doors are always open when there is daylight." The young woman dropped again into an unmistakable curtsy and backed out of the room.

I stared up into the dark eyes of Anne Boleyn as the young woman quietly shut the door to my rooms. I could hear the wind rustling through the leaves on the trees in the orchard and the crunch of gravel as a second car arrived out front. The heavy feeling of sleep clouded my thoughts so much that I swore that I saw Anne's lips quirk upwards in a sly smile. I stifled a yawn with the back of my hand and stumbled over to the bed, quite certain that I would fall into sleep before I sank onto the mattress.

I awoke what seemed several hours later. The sun burned crimson and orange through the windows of my rooms as it sank below the horizon. The room was warm and quiet, much like my apartments in Paris. So comfortable was the bed that I was hardly inclined to move, much less rise for supper.

There was a soft knock on the door of my rooms. "Yes?" I called, waiting as the young woman poked her head around the door. "We are serving supper in the dining hall, mademoiselle. Would you like to come down, or should I have something sent up to you?"

Still fighting the muffled grogginess of sleep, I forced myself to sit up. "I will come down, thank you. Please give me a few moments to freshen up."

The young woman smiled and backed out of the room as I stood and made my way to the small bathroom attached to my rooms. I splashed my face several times with cold water and combed through my dark hair with my fingers. My black eyes stared back at me from the looking glass over the sink. Even to myself, I looked unbelievably tired and ill at ease.

I stumbled sleepily as I made my way from my rooms down the hallway toward the grand staircase. My stomach was once again tied in tight knots and my hands were trembling with unease as I leaned heavily against the banister while I climbed slowly down the stairs. Bright candlelight flickered from the chandelier hanging in the entryway, seeming to dance in time with the sound of tinkling cutlery and laughter from the dining hall.

A dark headed man stood at the doorway, his head tilted back to rest against the frame. His eyes opened at the sound of my shoes muffled against the carpets. He looked up at me, a curious expression on his face. "You must be Mlle. Leroux," he said, his voice a smooth and deep timbre that vibrated to my bones. He inclined his head in a slight bow. "I am Nicolas Lancaster."

"Good evening, M. Lancaster," I replied, inclining my head back at him. "Please excuse my appearance, as I had a lengthy ride from Paris and desired a nap before supper."

He smiled indulgently and offered me his arm. "Would you allow me to escort you in to supper?" he asked. Quietly, I accepted and allowed him to steer me into the dining hall and into a seat next to his own.

The table groaned beneath platters of roast chicken, glazed ham, scalloped potatoes, steamed vegetables, and sweet rolls. Two grand candelabras stood near each end of the table, glittering with six tapered candles each. Plates were passed around, each piled high with samples of each of the many dishes provided by our hosts. Besides M. Lancaster, and myself, there were two other guests, an elderly couple who were traveling through the countryside on their second honeymoon. Then, of course, there were our hosts: the young woman, two older gentlemen, and a young man of approximately the same age as myself.

"What brings you to this part of France, mademoiselle?" asked M. Lancaster, looking at me from the corners of his dark eyes. "Surely you are not a born Frenchwoman?"

I stifled a laugh. "Actually, M. Lancaster, I am a born Frenchwoman. However, I was raised abroad. My parents were professors of history and art. And so, of course, am I. My presence here is due to the Chateau de Chagny. I am here to study the life of the Lady de Chagny," I replied, taking the wine offered to me by one of my hosts.

"You and so many others," replied M. Lancaster. "It seems that there are always people in this part of the country looking after the Lady de Chagny."

M. Lancaster, who refused to allow the merriment of us all to wane, nearly always directed the conversation over supper. He insisted I be served first when a dessert of sherbet tart was served, and he would not allow me to leave the table without assurances that he could escort me back to my rooms.

"I am down the hall, Mlle. Leroux," he whispered later that evening as we made our way up the grand staircase to my rooms. My hand was tucked into the crook of his elbow, his own large, warm hand over my own. "Should you need me, feel free to send for me. There is a night man at the desk, and he will help you in any way he can."

I was quite sure I was blushing, but I nodded solemnly as we came to a stop outside of my door. "Thank you for your kindness, M. Lancaster. I will see you at breakfast," I said softly, bowing my head to him as so many others at *The King's Bed* were wont to do. Perhaps it was knowing that royalty had once been in this house, but there was an air of court ceremony blowing through these years old halls.

Largely due to my unusual nap the afternoon before, I was up with the dawn the next morning. My rooms were suffused with a soft golden pink light as I pulled myself from beneath the warm linens and threw open the doors leading out onto the balcony. The worn stones were cool beneath my bare feet and the air was crisp and clear with the scent of autumn. I stretched and pulled my dark hair over one shoulder, combing it through with my fingers.

"I do so love the country," I whispered, leaning over the railing to see the great French doors of the entry hall being thrown open to the morning.

There was a soft chuckle from somewhere to my left, and I looked over to find Nicolas Lancaster standing on his own balcony. He was sipping a mug of hot coffee and smiling out into the morning. "Good morning, Mlle. Leroux," he called from his balcony, the morning breeze ruffling his dark hair. "I trust you slept well?"

I smiled back at him though the shame at being caught in my nightdress rose in my cheeks. "Very well, thank you," I replied, dropping him a small curtsy for the fun of it. "And yourself, sir?"

"The same," he replied, holding his coffee mug up in salute. "Shall I meet you for breakfast or have you another engagement for this morning?"

"No, but thank you, sir. I had hoped to go directly to the Chateau de Chagny once my driver was prepared. I have much to look for, but I am quite unsure as to where to begin. Might I have the honor at supper tonight?" I wrapped my arms around my body against the coolness of the wind.

"Yes, now go inside before you catch your death of cold. I will go down to make sure your driver is ready to leave at your will," he said, shooping me along with a broad, handsome smile.

M. Lancaster was as good as his word. In fifteen minutes, I was showered, dressed, and laden with my leather notebook and research materials in my bag. My driver, who turned out to be one of the elderly gentlemen I met at supper the night previous, was found standing at the foot of the grand staircase waiting for me.

"Are you prepared to go to the chateau, mademoiselle?" he asked in his grandfatherly voice. When I nodded in reply, he offered me his arm and a soft, "Then off we are, then."

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Shadows of the Chateau

Chapter 5 of 11

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CHAPTER 4: Shadows in the Chateau

My driver left the car at the front of the Chateau de Chagny, promising that he would be nearby while I toured the house. The young woman at *The King's Bed* had certainly not lied: the chateau looked remarkably like the little inn. The balcony above the door was hung with silver streamers made of silk. Standards bearing the fleur-de-leis hung from each window, fluttering in the breeze. The left of the chateau was covered with crawling ivy and flowers. A great, sprawling lawn fell away from the left of the house, leading up to a grand orchard of apples and pears. A sweeping garden of lilies and roses lay tucked away around the right side of the house, swaying in the soft breeze.

The keeper of the grounds answered the door at my first knock, and bowed slightly as he allowed me inside. "Good morning, Mlle. Leroux," he said as he closed the oak door and secured the bolt. "I have instructions that you are to see anything in the house you wish."

"Thank you, monsieur," I replied, hugging my bag to my side. "I would very much like to see the Lady de Chagny's sitting room today."

The keeper smiled and led the way through the entryway to the grand staircase at the back of the house. There were dozens of portraits hanging on the walls, each of the same young woman. Her hair was a bundle of chestnut curls that tumbled down her back, her eyes a bright and brilliant blue. She wore an abundance of gowns, from the many hues of blue and pink to pale yellows and whites. The largest of all the portraits hung on the landing of the upper floor.

Her smile was wide and radiant. Her hair was wound in a halo of pearls and flowers. Her gown was pale violet and swept the floor in the Victorian style. Her arms were wrapped around a bundle of swaddling clothes, out of which peeked the sweet round face of a newborn child. "The Lady de Chagny and her child, Erik," said the keeper, watching the awe wash over my face as I stared upwards at the portrait. "There is another portrait of her ladyship in the sitting room, with Erik not long before his death. It is this way, mademoiselle."

I followed the keeper up the grand staircase and into the west wing of the chateau. Her ladyship's sitting room was in the same position in the house as my rooms at The King's Bed. As the keeper said, there was a second portrait of the Lady de Chagny and her son over the fireplace. A single wall had been inlaid with shelves that creaked with the heaviness of many volumes of books and blown and spun glass ornaments. My eyes swept the fourth shelf, desperately seeking some tome or ornament to stand out amongst the others as that parcel G.H. sent me to retrieve.

"I thank you for your help," I said softly, dropping into a slight curtsy. "Might I have a few moments to look through her ladyship's books?"

"Of course, mademoiselle," he replied, bowing his head. "I shall be at the end of the hallway if you should need anything." With that he backed out of the room and shut the door softly behind him.

I waited for a long moment and listened to the sound of the keeper's footfalls growing fainter as he reached the end of the hallway. I crossed the room quickly and bolted the door swiftly, hoping the iron lock did not echo too loudly in the empty hallway. There seemed to be a hundred books and ornaments on the shelves in the sitting room; at least several dozen were on the shelf indicated by G.H. Sunlight filtered in through the velveteen curtains as I stood in the center of the sitting room, desperately trying to decide what I should do.

For several minutes, I paced across the thick Persian rug and stared at the shelf. Each time I came closer and closer to the wall of shelves, my eye was drawn to the center of the shelf and the smallest volume. My hands trembled and my heart pounded with anticipation as I pulled the book from the shelf. I opened the plain, cloth cover to find "The Psalter of Anne the Queen" written in a neat, flowing script on the inside cover. I should not have been surprised to find a book of prayers from the Catholic Church in the Lady de Chagny's sitting room. After all, she married Lord Philippe in the holy wedding mass and saw that Erik had a proper Catholic christening.

My fingers flipped through the pages of her ladyship's prayer book, barely aware of anything else in the world. When I looked up to replace the book on the shelf, I saw something tucked away behind the other volumes. Its hue was so far removed from the grain of the wood that had been used to make the shelves themselves. My hands are tiny, but it was quite a difficult squeeze to reach the hidden object. The texture beneath my fingertips was smooth and cool, much like the cover of my research notebook. After several minutes of struggling, I was able to clasp the object in my hand and dislodge it from its hiding place.

In my hands, I held an old, well cared-for journal. It was tied closed with a supple thong of brown leather, its pages rough as parchment and heavy with ink. I slipped the journal into my bag, my heart thrumming against my ribs with nervousness. Her ladyship's prayer book was still clutched in my hand as I crossed the room to unbolt the door. My eyes caught the portrait of the Lady de Chagny that was over the fireplace. I stared into the bright blue eyes that seemed somehow listless as she held her toddler child in front of her. Perhaps, even then, she knew that she was to lose her only son in only a few months time.

I tore my gaze from the sad eyes that were staring down at me and pulled at the iron ring to open the door. The cool air of the hallway rushed against my face as I edged out of the sitting room, closing the door behind me. "Pardon me, monsieur," I said softly as I reached the end of the hallway. I held out her ladyship's prayer book for the keeper to see. "Might I be allowed to borrow this for a while? I am staying at *The King's Bed*, you see. It was once Queen Anne's home, and I would love to read her Psalter in the library of her former home."

The keeper looked down his old nose at me for several long moments before nodding so slightly that his jowls barely shook. "Oui, mademoiselle, but best keep that to yourself. Not many know Lady de Chagny owned a copy of that book," he whispered. He straightened and bowed his head to me. "Do you wish to see anything else today?"

"No, monsieur," I replied. The keeper led me down the grand staircase and into the main entryway. "I thank you for your service today. Perhaps you will be so kind as to tell me some stories of this house when I return tomorrow."

The keeper nodded as he unbolted the front door of the house. "Anything you wish, mademoiselle."

The sun was hanging high above the chateau as I heard the bolt of the door slide into its cradle once more. True to his word, my driver was standing at the backdoor of the car. "Did you find anything of interest, Mlle. Leroux?"

"Oui, and thank you," I replied as I slid into the backseat. I clutched my bag against my stomach. I longed to retire to my rooms at the inn, have a nap before supper, and lock myself in the library to read the journal.

Much to my surprise, however, M. Lancaster was waiting on the grand balcony, watching for my arrival.

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Letters of the Past

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 5: Letters of the Past

Nicolas Lancaster was looking down from the grand balcony as my driver helped me from the back seat. His dark hair was dancing in the cool autumn breeze and his dark eyes were alight with mischief. He smiled his charming smile and tucked his hands into his trouser pockets. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, baring the tanned skin of his forearms. I looked up at him, lifting my hand to shield my eyes from the sun that blazed overhead, and felt my stomach drop with nervousness. I had known few handsome men in my life, and none so charming as Nicolas Lancaster.

"You are back early," he commented, as if my comings and goings were any of his concern. "And here I was about to lock myself in the library and drink myself into a stupor in your absence."

I felt the blush spread from my neck up to the line of my hair. M. Lancaster smiled roguishly, as if it was his greatest pleasure to spend the day making young women blush with flattery. "I am sorry to hear it, sir," I replied, feeling the muscles of my forehead and cheeks ache from squinting against the sun. "Please forgive me for the inconvenience I have caused you. Now, if you will pardon me, I would very much like to get out of the sun."

"Of course! I shall never forgive myself if you are stricken with sunburn," he replied, bowing his head. He continued to smile devilishly as he turned and left the balcony, closing the doors behind him.

"M. Lancaster, is right, mademoiselle," said my driver, laying a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "It would be quite a pity to redden such fair skin as your own. Perhaps it is best you go and have a bit of a lie down with a cool towel to your face. I shall see to it that some lunch is brought up to you."

I nodded, knowing that I had no intention of lying down once I was once again locked away in my rooms with Anne Boleyn's cunning dark eyes staring down at me. All of my mind was consumed with beginning the journal that was tucked away in my bag. Clutching it against my ribs, I followed my driver through the great oak door of The King's Bed and into the cool darkness of the entryway.

The young girl was standing behind the desk at the end of the entryway, the doors behind her opened into the afternoon and showering her in a halo of light. She smiled at me as I mounted the steps of the grand staircase and dropped a small curtsy. Her eyes twinkled with all of the air of a girl watching a beloved sister as I climbed the stairs to find Nicolas standing at the top.

"It is imprudent for us to continue meeting like this, sir," I said, dropping my eyes to the pattern of the carpet at his feet. "The inn hosts will suspect something."

"Let them gossip, if they have nothing better to do with their time." He offered me his arm with another charming smile. "Have you learned anything new about our Lady de Chagny?"

"A little, sir, but not enough to paint a becoming portrait of her," I replied, allowing him to guide my hand into the crook of his elbow and lead me toward my rooms. "Please ask me again in a week or so, and I may have a better answer for you."

"So elusive! If I did not know better, I would argue that you did indeed find more than a little, madam. Perhaps I could ply you with some wine and chocolate to tell me what you have uncovered?"

"I am afraid I have nothing of interest to tell, and wine and chocolate would do little to break my resolve if I did," I said, half of my mind on the journal held tight between my ribs and M. Lancaster's elbow and the other half on keeping my voice steady as the lie flowed past my lips. "I will swear to you here, sir, that when I find something of interest, you shall be one of the first to know."

"One of the first? Ah, there is a line for you, then?" he said, arching one dark eyebrow at me. "Perhaps I shall have to work harder to ascend the lists, mademoiselle."

We stopped at the door of my rooms, and Nicolas Lancaster looked down at me with his sinfully dark eyes. I felt my stomach clench at the intensity and laughter mixed in those brown orbs. His lips turned upwards in a grin before he bowed over my hand and kissed it softly. "I leave you here, then. Shall I fetch you for supper?"

"Yes, I would like that very much. And now, if you please, I would like to rest for a while." I curtsied to him, so much so that it made him laugh aloud as I wobbled. My face burned red with embarrassment as I backed against the door of my rooms, pushing my way from under the dark gaze of Nicolas Lancaster.

One look in the mirror insisted that I lie down with a cold towel and some aloe extract on my face. I looked as if I scrubbed my face with sandpaper that morning; my face was so red and raw. It felt so wonderful to fall onto the feather down mattress, to cover my face with cold towels and listen to the sound of the inn hosts bustling around downstairs. So comfortable was it that I presently fell asleep.

I awoke to the sound of the young woman arranging a lunch tray on the small table near the balcony doors. She was quiet as a well-bred church mouse, moving cutlery and classes just so in order to keep from making any noise at all. Sitting up, I groaned with disappointment that my towels were now too warm to be comforting.

"Oh, I'm sorry, mademoiselle," said the young girl, dropping into a curtsy. "I did not mean to wake you. I knocked several times, but you didn't answer. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, I just wanted to make sure that you had something to eat when you awoke."

"Thank you..." I answered, letting my voice die out into silence. It had just entered my mind that I did not know the young girl's name, nor any of the names of my other hosts. "Please forgive me, I have been horribly rude. What is your name, mademoiselle?"

The young girl blushed and dropped her gaze to the floor. "Madeline, mademoiselle. Madeline Howard."

"I thank you, Madeline," I said with a smile. "You are wonderfully helpful." I climbed reluctantly off the bed, combing my fingers through my hair and twisting it up with ease. The succulent smell of roasted chicken and seasoned herbs filled my nostrils as I crossed the room. A tumbler of fresh lemonade sat on the tray, the outside of the cup beading with moisture. My mouth watered as I took the chair Madeline had drawn out for me. "This looks amazing."

Madeline blushed with pride. "Thank you, mademoiselle. It is a recipe that my grandmother taught me when I was a little girl," she said softly, backing toward the door. "I will be back within the hour for your tray, Mlle. Leroux."

Without hesitation, I began to tuck in to the little feast before me. The journal I had found at the chateau lay nearly forgotten on the bed as I savored the sweet and spicy taste of the chicken and herbs. The afternoon sun was beginning to hang lower in the sky, warming the cool air of my rooms. I ate with haste, not because I felt rushed by Madeline's promise to return within the hour but because I was so ravenously hungry.

I sank against the back of the chair and closed my eyes for a long moment before returning to my bed. Quietly, I pulled the journal and the Psalter of Anne Boleyn from my bag and turned them over in my hands several times each. Pulling back the covers, I scrambled into bed and drew the hangings around me. The leather strap holding the journal closed was cracked with age, prompting me to untie it slowly. The parchment pages were brown and wrinkled from being left so dormant for so many years. They crackled with the heaviness of ink and time.

My heart thumped against my ribs as my eyes raked over the first page of the journal. The curling, elegant script of ages gone by stared up at me with such patience that it seemed as if it had been waiting for me all of my life.

Her Ladyship's Echo

Chapter 7 of 11

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 6: Her Ladyship's Echo

November 1901

Philippe has been ordered to the fortress at Crécy by Émile Loubet, the lord President of France. I begged him not to go, all the while knowing full well that he would not refuse the call of his country. He set out this morning by carriage into Paris, where he will board the train to the coast. He promised that he would send a letter by express post as soon as he arrived at the fortress and received his orders. I have yet to understand why Loubet has summoned the captains of the army, but there are whispers of unrest in Austria and Prussia. I cannot bear the thought that he should go to war. I have already lost my Erik to scarlet fever and two other souls to still birth, I believe I shall die if I lose my Philippe as well.

I felt my eyes prickle with tears as I read the first entry in Lady de Chagny's journal. It was the dawning of a new century, and yet her ladyship's only thought was of her husband and the three children she had lost. She was utterly alone, shut up in the chateau built for her by her beloved husband, fighting against the sickness brought with the cold rains of winter. Her heart went out with her husband; her prayers went up to God to protect him and to bring him home to her quickly.

It is now three weeks since Philippe was summoned to Crécy, and I have heard nothing save that he arrived safely at the fortress. I have written to him perhaps half of a dozen times, but have received no response. News came from the city that much of the countryside is stricken with pneumonia, and a good number of the cities of the coast are stricken as well. I have went to the parish church to hear Mass every morning since Philippe rode out, and yet I sometimes feel as if my life has been abandoned by God. What more have I to lose if Philippe is taken from me? Shall everyone I love be caught up to heaven but me?

December 1901

The news has come, and God has cursed me. Philippe is gone, taken from me as my children were taken with fever and sickness. The fortress was stricken with the epidemic of pneumonia in the first days of the month. Philippe was one of the last to be forced to take to his bed. He was one of the first to die.

I have ordered the servants to remove themselves from the house and take the Christmas pleasures with them. My maid, Rachel Howard, dissolved into tears when I bid them all go home to their families. She could not abide the thought of my being left alone in the house for Christmas. I have no stomach for the company, for the garlands and taffeta bows, and the tree bedecked with ornaments. I will be left alone with my despair, and I will do penance at Mass for the sins for which I sit under condemnation. I know that God cannot give me back my husband or my children, but perhaps my prayers will bid Him catch me up to be with them. If my Lord shall not do it, I shall take matters into my own hands and bid my friends pray me from punishment.

"My Lord, have mercy," I whispered, hastily making the sign of the cross. "The poor woman."

I cannot bear the emptiness of this house, and yet I am sickened at the thought of it filled with company if I cannot have Philippe and Erik with me. The news of my husband's death has reached the priest at the parish. He has come to call several times with prayers and food from my Christian brothers and sisters and with words of comfort that ring hollow in my ears. I have said confession each time he visits, and performed more penance than he commanded to beg forgiveness for the stain of my sins. I have taken the Holy Communion, with the blessed wine of the Savior's blood. I know of nothing more I can do.

My Holy Father has recommended that I summon one or more of my servants back to the house, as he fears for my soul in the idleness of my despair. I believe he has heard my prayers, my whispered sobs pleading for death, as I knelt before the altar of the crucifix. He is afraid of what I might do in my anguish, and for that he has much cause. It consumes my thoughts when I am alone, when my mind is quiet as I long for sleep to come. The lot of it is vain. My prayers stop at the rafters.

January 1902

It is the New Year for the whole of the world, but for me it is nothing but further torment. It is hard to understand that the sun continues to rise, that the earth still turns beneath me when I cannot see past my own darkness. The priest has stopped his visits, and perhaps he considers me lost to damnation. I agreed to summon Rachel Howard back to the house, and joyfully she came with her mother and young sister behind her. The Holy Father has bid them watch me, and I would not be surprised to know that they report to him. I am sure, at least, that the gossiping Mother Howard tells him of everything she sees. Perhaps I will send her away and dare her to appear in my presence again.

The deed has been done. I am to leave this horridly empty house and all of her ghosts behind me. I have been haunted to the brink of insanity and I have heard the Mass more often during the past months than I have in my entire life. Rachel will come with me, though she is sore to leave her sister and prattling mother behind. She is a good, clever girl. I believe she pities me. Who would not? After all, I am a childless widow at the age of twenty-six. We leave by carriage in the morning. I am to stay with my brother, Charles, and his wife at their manor house in Orleans. And what joyous news arrives with their invitation to their poor, heartbroken sister! My sweet sister-in-law Elizabeth is with child!

I closed her ladyship's journal and put it aside. My cheeks were wet with tears as I thought over the despair of Marguerite de Chagny. I wanted to burrow beneath the blankets and weep until I was much too tired to do more than sleep.

There was a gentle knock on the door and I brushed away the tears angrily. "I am finished with the tray, Madeline," I said, struggling to keep the sadness out of my voice as I adjusted the hangings to close tighter around me.

"Mlle Leroux?" came the voice of Nicolas Lancaster. "What the devil is the matter?"

He crossed the room in all but a run and threw the hangings back as I tucked the journal away beneath my pillows. His dark eyes took in the red splotches on my face from sunburn, the puffiness of my eyes from crying, and the sorrow flooding over my entire being. "Good Lord, girl, what has become of you now?"

I saw M. Lancaster's dark eyes staring at me, a concerned look clouding their laughter, and felt as if the ground were rushing away from me and up to meet me at once. My head was swimming, and I was relieved to know that I was sitting firmly on the bed. Desperately, I searched around me for something to keep me latched firmly to consciousness but to no avail. I had no more than locked my gaze on the shadowed eyes of Ann Boleyn before I felt myself falling through the mists of unconsciousness.

What was apparently only a few minutes later, I awoke to find myself in the arms of Nicolas Lancaster. He was looking down at me with fear and worry creasing his handsome face. He held me close to his chest like a child, my head resting on his shoulder. It was a comforting thing to awake and be held so gently. I felt no surprise, embarrassment, or unease at being in his arms.

"There's our girl," he said soothingly, glancing back over his shoulder. "Fetch me some cold towels and wine, Madeline. It appears she has just fainted."

He turned back to me, relief flooding his features. His large, warm hand pushed my hair back from my forehead. "You gave me quite a scare, fainting on me like that," he muttered, a soft smile ghosting over his lips. He took the cold towel that Madeline handed to him and began dabbing at my face with it. "You'll take some wine in a moment, but let's get your bearings back first."

"Thank you, M. Lancaster," I whispered, savoring the feeling of the cold towel on my face.

"Good Lord, girl, if you're going to scare me like that, the least you can do is call me by my given name," he replied in mock indignation. He set me back against the pillows, the towel still against my face. "Here, sip this for a moment."

I did as I was bid, taking the cup of wine from him and sipping it slowly. He left the bed to go to Madeline, to whom he began whispering feverishly. They had their heads together for several moments, and I fought a strange surge of jealousy at the sight. I looked away, into the seductive eyes of Queen Anne, wishing that I possessed her cunning and wit with men.

At long last, M. Lancaster turned away from Madeline, who scurried out of the room and shut the door softly behind her. "Now let's have it," he demanded softly, perching on the bed next to me. "Say my given name and have it done and finished with."

"Nicolas," I mumbled, purposely looking anywhere but in his dark eyes. I could see him shake his head out of the corner of my eye, his perfect jaw firmly set.

"Again. Louder, if you please, madam."

"Nicolas," I chimed, a little louder.

"Again."

"Nicolas."

"Once more."

"Nicolas."

He inclined his head towards me and moved further up onto the bed. He leaned over my thighs, one hand on either side of my hips. "Good. I'd very much like it if you would not call me M. Lancaster anymore."

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Secret to be Shared

Chapter 8 of 11

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 7: The Secret to be Shared

Nicolas refused to allow me to leave my bed all the rest of that afternoon. It appeared later that he had ordered Madeline to excuse the both of us from supper that evening, and to send two trays up to my rooms. He left the doors of my rooms open in order to keep the gossip at bay. He sat in a chair next to my bed, one of his hands always near one of my own. It was as he was clearing away our supper trays that he saw the corner of Lady de Chagny's journal under my pillow.

"What do you have there, Emma?" he asked, insisting on using the horrid nickname my grandmother gave me as a child. I was disgusted with myself for telling him about it over supper. He reached out and pulled the journal toward him.

"A great secret," I said, snatching the journal back from him. I held it close to my heart, wishing with all my heart that I could turn the clock back in order to hide it from his eyes. "I can show it to no one."

He turned his dark eyes on me and I felt my heart flutter and drop. "A secret, then," Nicolas whispered. "About Lady de Chagny no doubt. I understand."

He smiled reassuringly at me and laid his hand atop my own. I felt the soft leather of the journal beneath the fingers of one hand and the warm roughness of Nicolas Lancaster's skin on the other. My eyes raked over his face, taking in the tanned skin of his face and the emerging shadow of whiskers, as he looked up at the portrait of Queen Anne.

"Nicolas," I whispered, drawing his attention back to me. "I have sworn to you to share anything of interest that I found of the Lady de Chagny, and I will honor that vow. But now you must swear to me that you will breath a word of what I tell you to no one. This journal and whatever is written inside must be kept an utmost secret. Do you swear to me?"

"I would swear an oath to the devil himself if you asked me to," he replied in a theatrical voice. He drew my hand to his lips and kissed my palm, the stubble on his face scratching delightfully against my skin. "I will take it to the grave, Emma, I swear it."

I looked down into his upturned face, taken aback at how youthful and handsome he appeared as the evening light filtered through the curtains and bathed him in an angelic glow. Opening the journal and finding the last entry I had read, I laid in on the bed in front of Nicolas. "Read it aloud," I commanded gently. I placed my fingertip on the beginning of the entry. "And start here, if you please."

Taking up the journal and holding his place with his finger, Nicolas stood from the chair by the bed and climbed up beside me. He leaned back against the pillows and drew me toward him with his arm around my shoulders. Settling the journal open in his lap, he began to read.

February 1902

Rachel and I have arrived in Orleans at the house of my brother and his wife. The manor house is quaint and silent, as it is set back from the main thoroughfares of the city. My brother Charles was standing at the gate, looking down the road for our carriage. He has aged greatly since I saw him last, on the feast day of St. Mary six years ago. It was the day I was churched after losing my second child. His face was lined with care even though he was smiling at me as he helped me out of the carriage.

"Welcome home, dear sister," he said, drawing me forward into an embrace. "Into the house with you and your lady as well. Elizabeth is waiting to see you and get you settled in."

We followed my brother down the lane and into his house. My sister-in-law stood on the threshold, her belly swollen and her arms outstretched. I felt the bile rise in my throat as I saw the bump beneath her gown. I could not understand why God has sought to punish me so severely, to bring me from my empty house to this place with Elizabeth and her healthy baby in the womb. I forced myself to smile and congratulate her while she embraced me and led me into the house. O, how I wish I were back at the house Philippe built for me!

I have settled into life in the city, though I find myself weeping at night for my little life in the country. Rachel and I are forever following after Elizabeth and her servant girl, learning to navigate the markets and shops of Orleans. The monument to St. Joan stands in front of the church, bedecked with flowers. The priest came out to bid us welcome, and drew us into the sanctuary to hear Mass. I could not plead my case to be spared, as both Rachel and my sister-in-law are greatly pious.

Nicolas stopped reading for a moment and took a sip of wine from the glass by the bed. "There is nothing more until May," he said, flipping the pages idly.

I nodded, resting my head against his shoulder. "Please, read more."

May 1902

It is three months since I have arrived at my brother's house in Orleans. The despair and anguish are ever present on my face now, so much so that my sister-in-law has stopped asking me to Mass. Rachel appears to be on the verge of tears each time she sees me. I spend increasingly more time in my brother's library, writing letters to my husband's captains at Crécy and sending directions to my servants at my chateau. I have instructed them to close up the house, to leave it as bare as a castle when the court is on progress. My possessions are to be sent here by carriage with the utmost of care.

Elizabeth seems to grow fatter each day. She is in her eighth month by her reckoning, and the child moves within her without ceasing. She speaks of nothing but the child, and I am sick with it. My brother has begged me to be with her when the child comes, as she has no knowledge of what must be done. The man has no compassion for me in my state. He brings me to his house where he is with the woman he loves that is bearing his child. Yet I am to sit peaceably by and deliver their child when I have lost both my children and my husband. I am certainly cursed of God!

Nicolas closed the journal and tucked it back beneath my pillow. The sun had set outside of my window and a beautiful twilight of stars appeared. I was of two minds, wrapped so snugly in my bed. My heart ached for Marguerite, being exiled to her brother's home and forced to deliver his child while she herself was all but barren. And yet I was content, my head resting against Nicolas's shoulder, his arm around me, his cheek pressed against the top of my head.

"I feel so horribly sad for her," I whispered against the darkness. "What it must have cost for her to go to her brother and tend to his wife."

Nicolas exhaled sharply, rustling my hair. "We must all sacrifice something in our lives, Emma. The Lady was called upon to give too much, her husband to pneumonia at his country's service, her children to still birth and fever. I am not surprised she was bitter. I do not grudge her from leaving the church."

I felt the tears begin to burn again and fought desperately to keep them hidden. "Sleep, Emma," he said, sliding from the bed and tucking me in like a child. "I will come see you in the morning."

"Nicolas... the journal," I said softly. "You won't..."

He smiled his charming smile that made his eyes sparkle. "Not a word, my little queen. I'll not breathe a word."

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And the Demons Come With Love

Chapter 9 of 11

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 8: And the Demons Come with Love

I could hardly tear myself away from Marguerite's journal over the next several days. My being was consumed in the flowing script that covered each page, in the pain and despair that poured from her Ladyship's soul into mine. There was little that could raise my spirits; the watery autumn light that filtered through the windows hurt my red and swollen eyes so much that I drew the curtains, plunging the room into darkness. I could bear no sound from the other guests, and so I locked my door firmly against their

joy. There was no thought for food in my head, I supped on the ink-soaked pages before me. M. Lancaster approached my door several times begging entrance, but I felt no pang of need for his company. I desired nothing but that the journal of the Lady de Chagny never end.

June 1902

Elizabeth has delivered, a healthy and vibrant young boy with his father's eyes and his mother's nose. Rachel could not remain in the room, as she has never before been privy to the delivery of a child. If I am not mistaken, she became sick in the corridor and spent the remainder of the night in her bed.

I am frightened by the fact that I felt nothing; no joy, no sorrow, no bitterness. Only the relief that my purpose had been accomplished. I did not expect to feel much of anything, as I had delivered myself several times and watched with helplessness as God took them from me. While I felt nothing at the delivery, the bitterness of being robbed of my husband and my children begins to seep in. I, who spent every free moment with my priest and confessor, who followed every direction from the clergy and the midwife, had my children taken from me within moments of their birth. Yet Elizabeth, whom I have seen neglect her confessor and who went away from the midwife and into the field, is given a son so healthy as to be sure that he will live a long, healthy life.

There is talk in the village that I have taken to witchcraft or some type of sorcery as I have not attended Mass or held conference with a confessor or priest since I arrived. My dear brother has tried desperately to dissuade such rumors with stories of the loss of my husband and children, but it is to little avail. There are town children who run by the fields to catch a glimpse of me, to toss rocks and throw mud and dung. I have escaped one hell and fallen into another. What more can God do to me?...

... Elizabeth and Charles went off in their carriage this morning to the village church to have their darling son christened and baptized. My brother came to me late in the evening last night with the news that I was requested to stay behind when the carriage left for church. "In any other time and circumstance, sister, it would be your privilege and duty to serve my son as god-mother; this is my desire, and were our dear mother still living...God keep her soul in heaven..." here he drew his eyes to heaven and made the sign of the cross, "But you have not been to church in months, sister. I have seen you neither receive a confessor nor say your prayers. It pains me that you behave such, as there is talk in the village that I harbor a witch in my home. I would that the townspeople could understand your plight, but they do not receive my excuses for you because you certainly do not appear a widow grieving properly. You are no longer responsible for your own soul, therefore I cannot, in good conscience, put the spiritual responsibility of my son in your hands." This was delivered in such a methodical, emotionless manner that it was as if Charles were giving orders to the kitchen servants. Afterwards he quit the room with such finality that no moment was left for my defense.

And so, here it is that I sit in the back garden while the servants scurry through the house tidying up and the field hands toil through the cold rows. The day has been cool and crisp and the horizon is hung low with gray clouds that threaten rain. I am certain it will come a pour before nightfall; I selfishly hope that my brother and his wife are caught unawares in town and are forced to take up lodging in the inn. It would be pleasant to spend one night devoid of the shouting of that horrid shrew, the simpering of my spineless brother, and the constant whimpering and crowing of that child. I have grown to despise the sound of him in my ears, let alone the sight of him. Such a blessing it would be to live out the rest of my days without the sight and sound of children...

August 1902

... My Rachel has taken ill with typhoid fever and has been ordered to bed by the physician. She was moved to the servant's house beyond the back garden at Elizabeth's behest. My brother's wife would not have such an illness in the presence of her darling André. I am sick with her constant doting and proclaiming her wretched child the most beautiful creature to ever leave God's worktable. I would throw the stupid thing in the garden well if ever given the chance, but Elizabeth keeps the putrid creature with her at all times. Charles, my darling brother, has said little to me since they returned from spending the hot, summer months by the sea. Annette, the pompous and ignorant woman who Elizabeth calls her sister, was given the place of honor at the christening and visits daily to see to the "spiritual health" of her god-son. She does little more than glare and follow my every footfall through the house, muttering prayers to each saint and martyr she can recall that I do not cast some horrid spell on her perfect nephew. I am ill tempted sometimes to begin spouting nonsensical poems to see the look of pure terror and scandal on her face as she runs through the house screaming for my brother and the priest.

If I have passed a single day without the town children skipping past the house and screaming and throwing objects at me, then I must certainly have gone blind and deaf. Each morning they come with more vengeance and hatred than the morning before, and they do not leave until well in the evening. They remain beyond the gate at most times, and yet many of the older children have mustered the courage to enter the front garden and taunt me to cast spells of punishment for their torture of me. The little ones bring rotten fruit from the village vendors and gather dung from the farms nearby to supply the older ones with projectiles. I suppose the entirety of my wardrobe will forever reek of their stink. Charles no longer seeks to defend me, but warns me only to remain hidden away on his property for fear that someone from town will lash out in their fear of me. And yet he requires me to stay and play nursemaid to his stupid wife and horrible child...

... Three weeks have since passed from the day Rachel was forced into her bed, and now she is laid out in a pine box in the rear of a wagon. She will be returned to her busybody mother and sisters to be laid to rest in the churchyard near the chateau. I will not have her buried here, where there are none that know her, and none that will pay respect to her. I desired to accompany her to her final resting place, and yet my brother saw to it that Elizabeth made arrangements for such a wagon that could transport none other than Rachel and the driver. I suffered a visit to the village the morning after her death to post a letter to her mother. With great haste, the missive will arrive before the wagon bearing her daughter. There might have been little love in my heart for Rachel's mother, and yet I find such sympathy for her taking root in my soul that I can no longer harbor cold thoughts toward her. I, like no other, know the pain of losing a child that is most dear.

"There is no grace for her," I whisper, slipping the Lady's journal beneath my pillow. The bed hangings are pulled shut securely, the door bolted against any intrusion. I have kept to my room for five days, feasting solely on the words of her Ladyship's journal and a quickly festering basket of fruits and cheeses that was provided during my first days at *The King's Bed*.

There was a swift, thundering knock on my chamber door that was followed by the deep voice of Nicolas Lancaster. "Emma, open this door at once. You have locked yourself in your room for nearly a week. Now, you must come out and have something to eat." Here he knocked soundly on the door once more. "Emma, I demand that you open this door immediately!"

Bile rose in my throat at the thought of food, and yet there was some pleasant warmth that suffused my blood at the sound of M. Lancaster's voice. He continued to knock, and then to pound, on the door, all the while alternating between calling for me to unbolt it and for Madeline to bring the key. My brain warred with itself, as I desired nothing more than to return to her Ladyship's journal but burned for the presence of another being with a beating heart and warm blood.

"Emma, I will break the door down if you do not open it to me at once!"

Groaning, my muscles aching with the sloth of lying in bed for several days on end, I pulled myself from the feather down mattress and stumbled toward the door. My pulse pounded in my ears, driving warmth up through my body and causing my head to spin as I clutched at the door latch. "Rest yourself, Nicolas. I am at the door now."

"Dear God," he replied, pushing his way into my rooms once I had opened the door. "You are as pale as a ghost, Emma! Have you done nothing but read that blasted journal?" The last he hissed in my ear, his voice filled to the brim with venom. "I never would have sent you to that damned chateau if I knew you would do this to yourself!"

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I am planning on binding this story once it is finished and I am seeking someone who would be willing to contribute a few illustrations. This story will not be sold, but will be placed in my private collections. Please email me if you would be interested!

The World Crashes In

Chapter 10 of 11

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 9: The World Crashes In

The words of M. Lancaster swirled through my dizzied brain, through the frantic beating of my heart and the pounding of my pulse in my ears. *I never would have sent you to that damned chateau if I knew you would do this to yourself!* I fixed my eyes on the dark orbs staring down at me and clutched my fingers around the lapels of M. Lancaster's autumn coat as my knees failed me. The arms of this stranger wrapped firmly around my person and prevented me from fainting directly to the floor of my chambers. I was swept up and carried to a nearby chair, where the window doors were thrown open to the autumn breeze.

I caught sight of Madeline Howard, standing behind M. Lancaster's shoulder. Her eyes were opened quite wide, their orbs moving ceaselessly from myself to my rescuer. It seemed the wheels of her brain were turning in motion at his confession, a notion that she was most certainly unfamiliar with in regards to my presence at the inn. Her complexion was pale and her person trembled. "Are you well, mademoiselle?" she asked, taking my hand within her own.

My eyes passed from M. Lancaster to Madeline, whom I stared at as if she were my dearest lifeline. I sought to convey to her my unease and deception without utterance. I clamped upon her hand like a vice, seeking desperately to urge her to disappear quickly and send for a car to return me to my apartments in Paris. I no longer wished to seek the countenance of the Lady de Chagny, or to learn any of her secrets, only to flee from the illusion of the man before me. "Madeline, please send them away," I whispered, pulling her as nigh as I dared.

She nodded, removing herself from my grasp and pulling firmly on M. Lancaster. "Please, monsieur, let us leave the lady in peace for a moment. Jean Luke, please bring Mlle. Leroux a bit of meat and bread with some tea, if you would." Madeline directed the last to the young man near my age. He waited, his eyes fixed upon me, as the others cleared the room. M. Lancaster was hesitant to leave; he lingered by the doorframe and stared at me with great intensity. "Jean Luke, take M. Lancaster to the library, and," here she beckoned the man over to whisper to him, "have Richard stay with him. I will not have him upsetting Mlle. Leroux again today."

Jean Luke took M. Lancaster firmly by the arm and directed him from my chambers, much to his hesitation and protestations. The sound of his voice echoed down the corridor as he was taken to the east wing of the house to be kept in the library. Madeline crossed the room and latched the door, bolting it firmly in place. When she returned, she set herself on the footstool at my side and took my hand in her own once more. "What would you have me do, mademoiselle? I see that you are sorely upset and I would do all that is in my power to remedy that."

"I wish to leave," I replied, my heart beating wildly in my chest and my person trembled and shook in waves. "I wish to return home."

Madeline nodded and watched me closely. "I see. I will see you settled with something to eat, and then I will call for your car. Will you need assistance in gathering your belongings?"

"No, but thank you. I would, however, like to send word to the concierge at my Paris apartments. Please request that he have my things gathered by the time I return and reserve a place on a flight returning to London tomorrow morning." I shuddered as there was a knock on the door, and Madeline went to answer it. Jean Luke passed a tray through the opening before retreating back downstairs. She brought the tray to me and bid me eat. "If you would, Madeline, find my father, M. David Leroux. He is a professor of art history at Oxford University. I would like him to meet me at the airport."

Madeline nodded absently as she began scouring the room for my possessions and bringing them over to the bed. My luggage was pulled from the closet and packed with meticulous care. She was careful to gather my toiletries from the bathroom and my papers from the bedside table. I watched with guilt as I made short work of the meat and bread provided by Jean Luke. "Please don't do that, Madeline. I will be able to do that in a moment. Just let me get my feet back beneath me and I will be fine."

Nodding once again, she continued to pack my things without regard to what I had said. Her gentle hands slipped beneath the quilts of the bed and under the pillows, where she pulled into view the journal and Queen Anne's Psalter. She smiled softly before placing the journal with my luggage and laying the Psalter on the bedside table. "I will return that to the chateau in the morning. We shall miss you, mademoiselle."

Once Madeline was assured that she had gathered all of my belongings, she slipped from the room to send for my car.

I felt such ease when at last I was safe in the back of a taxi that was on a sure course back to the busy metropolis of Paris. Although I resisted the urge to look back upon *The King's Bed*, with its great oak door and multitude of portraits of Anne Boleyn, once more, I felt the searing eyes of M. Lancaster upon me. My senses knew his presence on the front balcony as he watched the taxi down the winding drive and off into the distance. Blood boiled in my veins at his treachery and my thoughts swam in fear at the ease with which he beguiled me. *How could I have been so fooled?* I asked myself. *What naïveté does reside in my bones!*

I wanted to climb beneath a rock and be sick. I had wanted so desperately to believe in the mystery of the Lady de Chagny and to embrace the fact that such a handsome and charming man as Nicolas Lancaster could find me attractive. So much of my life had been spent in libraries, hidden away behind piles of books, papers, and research materials that I had little experience with men. I was unsure of how to proceed around them, especially one as charming as Nicolas. My stomach clenched and bile rose in my throat as I grew more and more disgusted with myself.

I swept past M. Rigal without so much as a word or glance in his direction. The elevators seemed to take longer than usual to arrive, and when it did, I felt as if I would collapse against its walls. Tears poured like streams down my cheeks and I desperately needed to find my apartment, feeling the bile rise higher in my throat. I broke into a stumbling run as soon as the doors opened, the tears streaming and the sick fighting to break out of my body. My body trembled as I scrambled to fit my key into the lock. I barely made it in the door before I was sick on the floor.

Home Brings Comfort

Chapter 11 of 11

TEMPORARILY ABANDONED. I PROMISE I WILL FINISH IT, BUT THE MUSE IS SLOW RIGHT NOW. It is all quite odd how the events to be related in this work were brought to my attention. Here, I reproduce them in full detail as they were given to me.

CHAPTER 10: Home Brings Comfort

My things were packed and loaded onto the tram outside my apartment door. I was desperate to return home to England, to Oxford and my father. I had received a message from Madeline Howard early that morning that my father was unable to meet me at the airport, but was sending his research assistant to collect me. I was nervous, I had never met his research assistant as he had been hired after I left for France. At least my father called before I left the hotel.

"Are you alright, darling?" he asked above the sound of rustling papers. I smiled as I imagined him in his library with dozens of art books spread out on the table around him and a master's work projected onto the wall. "Will you be okay traveling alone?"

"I'm fine, Dad," I replied, checking drawers to ensure that I was leaving nothing behind. "The flight won't be very long and I'll probably sleep the entire way. I wish you could meet me at the airport, though."

"I am sorry, darling, I really am. I cannot get away today, department meetings all morning. But Alec is a nice boy, you'll like him a good deal," my father said, a smile in his voice. "He'll be there to collect you as soon as your flight arrives. Would you like him to have one of those signs with your name on?"

"Why not." I checked the clock and realized that my taxi to the airport would be arriving in a few moments. "I've got to go, Dad. My taxi will be here soon. I love you, and give my love to Mum if you talk to her."

"Love you too, sweetheart. Be careful."

The trip home was uneventful. I felt little remorse for treating M. Rigalto so terribly, but I felt as if he had played some part in my delusion and I was not willing to be friendly with him. The young bellhop loaded my luggage into the car and received a warm smile and a decent tip before we were off. The flight was smooth and comfortable, as it was not full. I was so happy to be going home that I was able to eat a light brunch and take a short nap before we landed in London.

It felt wonderful to be home again, to feel the rain on my face and feel the cold autumn wind on my face. I could feel a new resolve and confidence pour through me with a suffusing warmth as I made my way into the terminal. The lights were bright and people were milling about, meeting family and friends and saying goodbye. I couldn't hide the smile spreading across my face as I watched the people come and go.

I looked around the terminal for a moment before I spotted my father's research assistant. He was near my age and handsome. He looked to be a little over six feet tall and had short, sandy hair. There was a wide smile on his face as he shuffled from one foot to the other, a sign reading *Emmy Leroux* in his hands. I took a deep breath, smiled in return, and made my way over to him.

"Are you Alec?" I asked, holding out my hand. I liked the look of him, the cool confidence and peacefulness that radiated from him. There was something in his warm, sea foam eyes that sent a wave of warmth through me.

His smile broadened as he shook my hand in return. "Yes, and you must be Emmyline."

"Call me Emmy," I replied, liking the way his voice washed over me. It was rough and sweet and reminded me of everything that made me happy. "Would you mind helping me collect the rest of my luggage from the baggage claim?"

"Of course," he replied, taking my carry-on bag from me and throwing it over his shoulder. "You dad says you were studying in Paris. What were you there for?"

"Turn of the century French history. It was wonderful to visit Paris again after so long, but I'm glad to be home," I said, sighing happily. Alec was still smiling softly as he listened to me talk and led the way over to the baggage claim. "I didn't get very much done, but I was losing interest in the subject anyway. My dad always said that if I stayed with one thing more than a few months then I must be sick. I think I may change my study to English history. At least I won't have to leave home again."

Alec chuckled and began searching the conveyor belt for my bags. "I know what you mean. My dad wanted me to play football for Chelsea, but Mum wanted me to go on to university. I'm glad that I listened to her. I can't stand the sight of a football now," he said, reaching out for two of my trunks that I had pointed out. We waited for the third to appear.

"My mum wanted me to go on a long holiday before finishing my studies, but I just wanted to keep going. I think she wanted me to join her in Istanbul for the year. She's studying Byzantine art and religious history. Oh, here," I mumbled as I tugged my final trunk from the conveyor belt. "Where the bloody hell is a tram when you need one?"

Disappearing for a moment, Alec returned with a tram and began loading my luggage. Even beneath his worn leather coat I could see the muscles of his arms and chest coil and ripple as he hefted my trunks with ease. I watched with fascination, as the only men I had ever been around were academics and prone to be less than athletic and muscular. When he was finished, he smiled at me again and started off toward the exit.

"So, Alec, what are you doing working for my dad?"

"Not much," he replied. "I just keep track of his books, papers, and appointments. I've helped get things prepared for his classes. Even taught a few actually when he's been sick. Mostly the mythology and religious art courses, but I've done a few of the art history ones, too. Your dad's been good to me, and he's helped me with my own papers. He's a good man."

The crashing sound of a tumultuous rainstorm met our ears as the exit slid open. The cool English air swirled around us and heavy raindrops sprayed up as they bounced off the ground. Alec grimaced, a look almost as handsome as his smile, as he glanced from me to the torrential rains. He shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to me. "Put this over your head. It'll keep you dry enough until we get to my car. Luckily, it's just across the street there."

I held the worn leather over my head, inadvertently inhaling the scent of his cologne. There was little I could do to hold back the laughter as we ran across the street, thudding through puddles and splashing water onto our clothes. Alec tugged his keys from the pocket of his soaked jeans and unlocked the passenger door for me before going to load my luggage in the trunk. The car was cold and water dripped from my clothes and the jacket in my lap as I watched Alec in the rearview mirror. The rain tapped on the roof and dripped off the end of his nose as he pushed the trunk shut.

"Holy shit," he muttered as he hurried into the car. His hair was plastered to his head and his clothes clung to his well-muscled form. He glanced over me, taking in my soaked form. Laughing, he started the car and turned on the heat. "Well, at least you're dryer than I am."

I laughed, taking in the sight of him. The car began to warm as Alec turned out of the car park. I felt the color rising in my face as I closed my eyes, leaning back against the seat and finding the image of a rain-soaked Alec burned into my eyelids. It was a pleasant image, one that I was frighteningly comfortable luxuriating in as we drove out of

the city on our way to Oxford.

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