

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend

Echoes of a Christmas Out of Time

Mikaela Georgio

Urban Legend

Echoes of a Christmas Out of Time

Chapter I

The Banquet of Lost Souls

Each year, as Christmas draws near, a peculiar legend resurfaces amongst the villages surrounding Orléac Manor. The elders recount that at nightfall, when the air turns to ice and snow begins to blanket the earth, Christmas carols rise mysteriously into the air, echoing all about the abandoned manor. The manor, perched at the heart of the dense and mysterious forests of the Vosges, is an imposing seigneurial residence constructed at the dawn of the eighteenth century. Its architecture reflects the classical French style of the period.

Erected in 1705 by the Orléac family, a lineage of prosperous nobles, the manor was intended as a dazzling manifestation of their power and wealth. Originally, this architectural jewel was a model of baroque elegance, with symmetrical façades, grand mullioned windows, and balconies adorned with ornamental ironwork. The stones used in its construction came from local quarries, lending the edifice a grey-blue hue that blended harmoniously with the Vosgian landscape, particularly in winter when snow covered the estate.

Around the manor once stretched formal French gardens, with geometric pathways, meticulously maintained flower beds, and fountains fed by the natural springs of the forest. Today, these gardens are but a shadow of their former selves: overrun by wild vegetation, the fountains dried up, the moss-covered statues stand as silent vestiges of a bygone age.

Within, the manor was a veritable treasure trove of art and period furniture. Aubusson tapestries adorned the walls, depicting mythological and historical scenes. Crystal chandeliers illuminated rooms embellished with carved oak panelling. Monumental fireplaces of Baccarat marble, decorated with gilding, warmed the great chambers where lavish receptions were held.

The Orléac family was amongst the wealthiest and most influential in the region. They possessed vast estates throughout Lorraine and maintained privileged relations with the court of Versailles. Their fortune derived principally from forestry and metallurgy, the Vosges being rich in natural resources.

This opulence was reflected in their extravagant way of life. Each Christmas, the manor welcomed dozens of guests for a sumptuous banquet, where the finest wines and most refined dishes were served. The ballroom resounded with music from the finest musicians come from Paris, and the festivities often lasted until dawn. Yet behind this façade of prosperity, the family was consumed by internal rivalries, unspeakable secrets, and a profound contempt for the people of the surrounding villages.

In 1793, whilst the French Revolution raged and the country was shaken by the Terror, executions, and the upheaval of the established order, the Orléacs seemed to exist in a world apart, sheltered behind the walls of their sumptuous estate, preserved from the surrounding chaos. These nobles of ancient lineage led an existence of ostentatious luxury and frivolous pleasures, deaf to the cries of revolt rising from the surrounding countryside.

Their château, nestled at the heart of vast fertile lands, had become a symbol of arrogant opulence. Whilst the peasants of the region perished from hunger, crushed by taxes and misery, the Orléacs organised sumptuous banquets where the most exquisite dishes and rarest wines flowed freely.

Their magnificence reached its zenith each year during the traditional Christmas banquet, a celebration where notables and courtiers gathered, superbly ignoring the troubles shaking the nation. The château's halls, illuminated by hundreds of candelabras, resounded with peals of laughter and futile discussions of fashion, the arts, and court intrigues.

The Orléacs, with scarcely veiled contempt, sometimes spoke of the "wretches," those starving peasants, as inevitable but negligible nuisances. For them, the world of the aristocracy was eternal and unshakeable, indifferent to the torments of the common folk. The family revelled in this isolation, believing themselves untouchable, protected by their rank and riches, whilst outside, the Revolution inexorably wove its web.

That evening, beneath a sky darkened by heavy clouds, the Orléac manor shone with a golden light visible for miles around. Within, the great dining hall, adorned with garlands and glittering candles, overflowed with riches. The guests, bedecked in silks and jewels, laughed heartily, heedless of the echoes of anger rising from the villages nearby. The feast was sumptuous: roasted game, delicate pastries, and wines of the finest vintages were served without restraint. The air was saturated with heady perfumes,

mingling incense and spices from distant lands, whilst the music of violins enveloped the room in an intoxicating atmosphere.

But outside, the atmosphere was quite different. In the icy mist of the night, a crowd of villagers slowly gathered at the manor's boundaries. They had come from neighbouring hamlets, from deserted farms, from fields abandoned due to the famine that gnawed at them. Their faces were marked by fatigue, anger, and hunger. The opulence of the manor, its bright and festive windows, was an insult to their daily suffering. The contrast between their misery and the arrogant wealth of the Orléacs had become unbearable.

Guided by accumulated frustration and rumours of the excesses committed by the nobility, the villagers gathered, armed with pitchforks, staves, and a few lit torches. A murmur of revolt rose amongst them, gradually transforming into a clamour that echoed through the night. At first hesitant, they advanced towards the heavy gates of the estate, then, with a unanimous cry, they breached them, determined to put an end to the injustice.

When the first blows fell upon the massive doors of the manor, inside, no one heard them. Laughter drowned out the dull sound of fists striking wood. But the villagers, galvanised by their numbers and their rage, eventually broke down the château's doors. They gave way beneath the violence of the assault, and the crowd surged into the entrance hall, invading the space with irresistible force.

The peasants, their eyes filled with fury, penetrated the great hall where the celebration was in full swing. They beheld the tables groaning under the weight of victuals, the glittering candelabras, the Persian carpets covering the floor, and this only further inflamed their anger. The guests, caught unawares, rose in panic, retreating before the human tide advancing inexorably towards them. The aristocrats' cries of fear mingled with those of rage from the villagers, creating a brutal cacophony.

The peasants, exasperated by such contempt, overturned tables, trampled the banquets, and smashed everything in their path. Porcelain shattered, crystal goblets flew into fragments, candelabras were toppled, casting terrifying shadows upon the gilded walls of the manor. Some attempted to flee, but the enraged crowd was everywhere. The guests, stunned and terrified, collided with walls, unable to comprehend how their world, so comfortable and protected, could have collapsed in an instant. The Orléac

family, hitherto blinded by their own arrogance, found themselves face to face with the reality of a revolt they had never envisaged.

The servants who attempted to intervene were the first victims, slain without mercy by the furious villagers. Chaos seized the manor; guests panicked and tried to flee, but the exits were quickly blocked. Some were captured and beaten, whilst others managed to barricade themselves in bedchambers or drawing rooms.

Count Jean-Baptiste d'Orléac and his wife, Countess Lucie, were trapped in the great dining hall with their children and several guests. Refusing to yield, the Count attempted to negotiate with the assailants, promising them money and provisions. But his attempt was in vain. The villagers, drunk with rage, attacked him without mercy.

The Count was stabbed before his family, whilst the Countess was seized. She was reportedly dragged from the hall and executed in the manor's gardens, her body abandoned to the snow. Their children, aged ten and fourteen, hid beneath the great banquet table when the attack began. However, they were discovered by the villagers. Accounts differ as to their fate: some say they were spared and perished from cold whilst fleeing into the forest, whilst others claim they were locked in a room of the manor and there met their end, suffocated by the smoke of a fire set by some villagers in various parts of the building.

Several guests and servants were massacred in the ensuing chaos. Some were killed attempting to flee, whilst others were taken hostage, then executed in an outpouring of violence. Only a few managed to escape into the icy night, but few survived long in the snow-covered woods.

The Orléac family was literally annihilated that night, not only by the violence of the villagers but also by their own inability to understand and respond to the changes shaking the country. Their death, cruel and brutal, imbued the walls of Orléac Manor with a dark energy, making this place a symbol of the tragic end of an era and a family.

Following the tragedy, legends began to spread amongst the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages. It is said that the spirits of the Orléacs still haunt the manor. Witnesses claim to have heard children's weeping and cries of despair emanating from the ruins, especially during the cold nights of December. As the festive season approaches, at nightfall, when the air turns

to ice and snow begins to blanket the earth, Christmas carols rise mysteriously into the air, echoing all about the abandoned manor.

The rare souls who still find themselves nearby at that hour speak of a haunting melody that seems to insinuate itself into the mind, awakening deep fears, forgotten memories, or visions of the manor's tragic past. Some explorers, returned only just in time, recount having heard familiar voices calling to them from within the manor, urging them to enter, and long after leaving the premises, this auditory curse never leaves them.

The part of the manor that survived the fire is reputed to be haunted by the souls of the Orléacs, trapped in a limbo between worlds. It is said that on Christmas night, the rooms spared by the flames transform, showing rare visitors visions of the cursed banquet. Shadows move, chandeliers flicker, and voices whisper forgotten secrets.

Chapter II

The Shadows of the Ardennes

The story begins several weeks before Christmas. Mia, Sofia, and Théo, after several months of intense explorations in various abandoned places and their studies, decide to grant themselves a small weekend to unwind. Seated at their usual café, they discuss their plans for the holidays over steaming cups.

"Honestly, you two, we truly deserve a bit of rest," declares Mia, setting down her cup. "These past three months have been intense. I'm dreaming of a little calm, aren't you?"

Sofia nods enthusiastically. "Exactly! What if we found ourselves a lovely spot, far from everything, with just nature and the three of us? I know a little inn in the Ardennes, it's picturesque, and above all, it's quiet."

"The Ardennes?" repeats Théo, his eyes lighting up. "That's perfect! I remember we once talked about going there to explore some medieval ruins. But this time, we could truly relax. Perhaps even take a break from our ghost hunting, eh?"

Mia bursts out laughing. "A break? You, take a break? I don't believe you! But seriously, this getaway could be brilliant. Snow, walks, and mulled wine! And who knows, perhaps we might stumble upon something interesting... One can combine business with pleasure, can one not?"

"Yes, I see where you're heading, Mia," interjects Sofia with a knowing smile. "But promise me we'll truly take time to relax. We all need to disconnect a bit."

Théo wears a mischievous smile. "All right, all right, relaxation first. But if we happen upon an intriguing place... just a little exploration."

"Always on the same wavelength, Théo!" exclaims Mia.

Sofia sighs, but her smile betrays her affection. "I knew it... Very well, it's agreed. But we set limits. No nocturnal adventures this time. Agreed?"

"Agreed... well, unless the place is truly worth it!" retorts Théo, provoking general mirth. They all know they are incapable of resisting a good dose of adrenaline, even on holiday.

"It's decided then," resumes Mia. "I'll take care of booking the inn. Sofia, you find us some lovely hiking trails, and Théo... you, look into whether by chance there might be an old manor or something of the sort in the area. Just in case."

Théo rubs his hands with satisfaction. "With pleasure. You know me, I never leave without a good plan in mind!"

Several days after planning their getaway to the Vosges, Théo, ever in search of new challenges, happens upon a discussion in an urban explorers' forum. An anonymous user recounts the existence of Orléac Manor, reputedly haunted, and evokes the Christmas curse that surrounds it.

The post is filled with warnings and accounts from other urban explorers who had tried their luck but had all turned back, some mentioning inexplicable phenomena, others categorically refusing to say more. Several comments mention equipment malfunctions, batteries draining inexplicably, and that strange sensation of being watched. Excited by this discovery, Théo immediately saves the approximate GPS coordinates and sends the forum link to Mia and Sofia.

Several hours later, they meet around a table at their usual café. Anticipation gleams in the eyes of Théo and Mia, whilst Sofia displays a more reserved expression.

"Have you read what I sent you?" begins Théo, his eyes bright with excitement. "This manor is incredible! Apparently, no one has dared stay there more than a few minutes for years. Even the most seasoned urban explorers speak of it with wariness. It's a golden opportunity, is it not?"

Mia smiles, clearly enthused. "A haunted manor, and during the Christmas period no less? We cannot let this pass. I wonder what we might capture there... The photographs must be incredible!"

Sofia crosses her arms, a worried expression forming on her face. "Wait, are you serious? We said we were going to relax, not to risk our lives or end up with spirits clinging to us over the holidays. And besides... Christmas is supposed to be a peaceful time, not a moment to play ghost hunters."

"I know, Sofia, but that's precisely what makes the adventure even more exciting!" Théo attempts to convince her. "And it's not as though we're going to plunge directly into danger. We'll respect the basic rules of urban

exploration: we touch nothing, we damage nothing, we remain cautious. We can go slowly, just explore the accessible parts, reconnoitre the premises."

Mia supports his argument. "And besides, I can sense if the place is too dangerous before we enter. We could document the architecture, record ambient sounds... It's a unique opportunity to capture a place before it's completely ruined by time."

Sofia sighs deeply. "I don't know... all this seems like ill omen to me. A Christmas curse, these aren't things one should trifle with. We could simply focus on enjoying the scenery, going for walks and resting, could we not? Why complicate everything?"

"I understand your point of view, Sofia, truly," insists Théo gently. "But imagine the architecture of this eighteenth-century manor, the magnificent photographs we could take of those baroque façades before they collapse entirely, and what we might discover about local history. We're accustomed to handling these sorts of situations. And if it becomes too intense, we fall back. No reckless risks, I promise."

Mia places a reassuring hand on Sofia's. "We'll be careful, I promise you. We do nothing without ensuring it's safe. If we don't do this, we'll always know we let slip a chance to explore this magnificent manor."

Sofia looks at them in turn, hesitant. "You won't let this go, will you?"

Théo smiles gently. "Not really. But we'll respect your decision, whatever happens. If you don't feel up to it, we won't insist. But if you join us, we'll make sure it's an exploration we'll remember for all the right reasons."

A slight smile appears on Sofia's lips, a sign of her resignation. "All right... But at the slightest alarm, we leave, is that clear? No heroes, no foolish decisions. Christmas is in a few days; I want us all to come back in one piece."

"Deal!" exclaims Mia with enthusiasm. "And who knows, perhaps this adventure will be the most memorable of all. Prepare yourself, Sofia—we're going to experience something unique!"

"Splendid!" enthuses Théo. "Now, let's do a bit more research to be ready. I want to know everything about this manor before we set foot there."

To confirm the authenticity of the story, they embark on thorough research. They discover ancient articles in the digitised departmental archives, local

legends compiled by folklorists, and even an old newspaper cutting dating from the 1950s speaking of unexplained disappearances around the Christmas period.

Théo becomes fascinated by the macabre details of the cursed banquet and begins to trace an approximate plan of the manor from old cadastral maps, whilst Mia starts imagining the equipment necessary to document their exploration: camera for the architecture, audio recorder for ambient sounds, video camera for footage. With this new lead in mind, they decide to plan their trip combining relaxation and urban exploration.

Before departing, Mia, Sofia, and Théo organise a shopping day to equip themselves for their forthcoming adventure. They browse the aisles of a shop specialising in outdoor and exploration equipment, each searching for the essential elements for a safe exploration.

Mia examines a head torch attentively. "Look at this one! 1000 lumens, water-resistant, and with a battery that lasts for hours. We'll need this to avoid being caught off guard, especially if we're exploring after sunset. I'm taking two, just in case."

Sofia nods approvingly. "Yes, the nights are long in December. And with what awaits us, I'd rather see clearly what's happening around us."

Théo, rummaging through a gadget aisle, triumphantly holds up a device. "Look, I've found a POD motion detector. This thing detects variations in air movement as soon as one approaches it. It's super sensitive, perfect for spotting an invisible presence or movements we wouldn't see with the naked eye. Some urban explorers swear it even reacts to abnormal air currents."

"I already sense the place will be charged," reflects Mia aloud. "But we must be ready, better than ever. This manor could reveal things we've never seen, but it could also be even more dangerous than Tergnée. I'm also going to take spare batteries for all our devices."

Sofia, picking up thermal clothing, adds seriously: "I'm willing for us to go and see, but we must be ready to leave at the slightest sign of danger. This time, no reckless risks. We've all seen what these presences can do. And let's not forget: in urban exploration, the structure can be as dangerous as any legend. Rotten floorboards, unstable beams..."

"Sofia, always the most prudent," comments Théo with a mixture of amusement and caution. "But you're right. We can't afford to be caught off guard. This time, we're taking everything necessary to stay safe, even if it means overloading our bags. Dust masks too, given the probable state of the premises."

Mia picks up several extra batteries and adds them to her basket. "Exactly. I'd rather be overloaded with equipment than run out of power at a crucial moment. The manifestations won't wait for us to be ready, so let's prepare ourselves as best we can."

Sofia looks at her two friends with a hint of concern in her eyes. "This manor isn't just a simple haunted place. If the legends are true, what awaits us there could be far more intense than what we've already experienced, even at Tergnée."

"I know, Sofia," responds Mia with calm determination. "I already sense it... but that's why we're going. We're ready to face what we find. And whatever happens, we stay together, as always."

Théo displays a confident smile. "We're a team. This manor won't frighten us, we're here to understand, to document, not to flee."

Sofia sketches a slight smile, resigned but reassured. "All right... But at the slightest alarm, we leave. No heroes this time. Christmas is in a few days; I want us all to come back in one piece."

"And who knows," says Mia enthusiastically, "perhaps this adventure will be the most memorable of all. Prepare yourself, Sofia—we're going to have a splendid Christmas, something unique."

Back at their respective homes, each prepares their rucksack methodically. Mia ensures her cameras are fully charged and her lenses clean; she checks each setting, tests the night modes. She carefully packs her foldable tripod and her professional audio recorder.

Théo gathers his notebooks, his measuring equipment, a compass, and prints the cadastral plans he has found. Sofia, for her part, leaves nothing to chance: she prepares emergency food rations, a complete first-aid kit, safety ropes, an emergency whistle, and even bear spray, just in case. She also slips in a book on the local history of the Vosges, hoping to learn more during their stay. Each checks their mobile telephone, ensuring they have

downloaded offline maps of the region, as network coverage is likely to be capricious in these remote forests.

Chapter III

The Last Coffee

On the morning of their departure, Mia, Sofia, and Théo meet at their usual café, a small, welcoming establishment nestled at the corner of a cobbled street in their neighbourhood. This café, with its exposed brick walls and shelves laden with books and old photographs, has become their rallying point before each new adventure. The large bay windows allow the soft morning light to stream in, illuminating the small worn wooden tables where customers, still drowsy from waking, savour their breakfast.

As they cross the threshold, the scent of warm croissants, fresh from the oven, and freshly ground coffee fills the air, immediately enveloping the trio in an atmosphere of comfort. This place has something familiar about it, almost reassuring, contrasting with the excitement that vibrates in the air around them.

Mia breathes in deeply, savouring the moment. "Ah, nothing quite like a good coffee and the smell of croissants to start the day. I could almost forget what awaits us."

They choose their usual table, the one by the window, which affords them an unobstructed view of the still-quiet street. It is here that they have already planned so many of their escapades, each meeting marked by a similar anticipation, but this time, the excitement seems even more intense.

Sofia smiles as she contemplates the scene. "We shall miss all this, nothing beats a good little café of our own."

Théo bursts out laughing. "We could make it a ritual: a coffee, some croissants, and then, off we go into the unknown. It puts one in the mood immediately, don't you think?"

The waiter, who knows them well, approaches with a smile, setting before them three steaming cups and a basket of golden pastries.

"Ready for another expedition, friends?" he enquires with interest. "You look as though you have a grand adventure in mind this morning."

Mia gives him a knowing smile. "Oh, you cannot imagine... This time, we're off to the Ardennes. An abandoned manor, Christmas legends, it promises to be intense."

The waiter displays an intrigued expression. "The Ardennes, eh? Do take care, especially at this time of year. The forests can be as beautiful as they are dangerous."

Sofia gives him a reassuring wink. "Don't worry, we're always cautious. We shall return to tell you all about it over another coffee."

"With great pleasure, young folk," replies the waiter before moving away.

The trio immerses themselves in the enjoyment of their breakfast, but the excitement of departure is palpable. Each of the three friends is lost in thought, whilst sharing an animated discussion about what awaits them.

After a sip of coffee, Mia continues: "I've been thinking about some ideas for filming our arrival. I believe we could do a sequence where we capture the atmosphere of the snow-covered village before approaching the manor. It will immediately set the mood."

"Good idea," approves Théo. "We could also begin with a voiceover recounting the legend of the manor, to plunge the viewers directly into the mystery. You know, create a contrast between the calm of the village and the darkness of what awaits us."

Sofia nibbles a croissant whilst reflecting. "Yes, and then we could also interview some of the villagers, see if they have stories to tell about this place. It would give an authentic touch to our episode."

"Absolutely," confirms Mia. "And with the forest as a backdrop, we shall have breathtaking images. It's going to be a memorable episode."

Théo wears a pensive smile. "Speaking of memorable, we should also think about safety. The Ardennes in winter is not the same as our urban explorations. We must be ready for anything, especially with what we know about the manor."

Sofia nods firmly. "Exactly. No unnecessary risks this time, we must stay focused and be prepared for everything. Christmas is soon; I don't want us to end up stuck in a haunted manor."

Finishing their breakfast, all are aware that this tranquillity will not last long once they arrive on site. The waiter wishes them good luck one last time, before they rise, gathering their bags and preparing to leave.

Mia rises with determination. "Off we go, then. Next stop, the Ardennes. Ready for the adventure?"

"Always ready!" responds Théo with enthusiasm.

Sofia smiles. "Come on, let's go. The sooner we leave, the sooner we shall discover what awaits us."

They exit the café, leaving behind its comfortable warmth to face the unknown. Their hearts beat a little faster at the thought of what awaits them, but one thing is certain: they are ready for this new adventure.

Chapter IV

The Magic of the Village

After several hours by motor car, as dusk begins to fall, Mia, Sofia, and Théo make their way along the winding and narrow roads of the Ardennes villages. Their headlamps barely pierce the thick veil of mist that envelops the forest, and the trees, heavy with snow, lean as if to whisper forgotten secrets. The landscape is at once magnificent and unsettling.

Mia, Sofia, and Théo finally arrive in the small village where their inn is located. The village, nestled in the heart of the Ardennes, seems straight out of a fairy tale. Strings of lights are suspended between the houses, creating a shower of twinkling stars that illuminate the cobbled streets. The shop windows, decorated with care, display Christmas scenes with fir trees adorned with coloured baubles, wooden figurines depicting miniature villages, and smiling Father Christmases.

Street lamps, wrapped in golden garlands, cast a soft light upon the freshly fallen snow, which crunches beneath the footsteps of the few passers-by bundled up in their coats. Crossing through the village, they can see the inhabitants busy in their homes, their silhouettes outlined behind windows decorated with fir wreaths and electric candles. A children's choir, gathered near the small stone church, sings Christmas carols, adding a joyful melody to the peaceful atmosphere of the village.

Sofia observes the decorations with wonder. "It's so beautiful... It's as though the entire village has been transformed for Christmas. It's truly magical."

Mia appreciates the view whilst driving. "Yes, it almost makes one forget that we're here to explore a haunted manor. The atmosphere here is soothing, almost unreal."

Théo looks around, amused. "They've really pulled out all the stops. It's pleasant to see so many festivities... before plunging into something darker tomorrow."

Finally, after traversing the illuminated streets, they arrive at the inn, situated slightly apart from the village. The façade of the inn is decorated with the same care as the rest of the village: a large Christmas wreath, adorned with red ribbons and pine cones, hangs upon the solid wooden

door. Garlands of fir, interlaced with small white lights, frame the windows, and lanterns lit with candles create a warm and welcoming atmosphere. A small Christmas tree, decorated with red and gold baubles, stands proudly at the entrance, adding an extra festive touch.

The proprietor of the inn, a gentleman of a certain age with a warm smile, opens the door before they can even knock. He is dressed in a red woollen waistcoat, reminiscent of the colours of Christmas.

"Welcome, and a Merry Christmas in advance!" he greets them with enthusiasm. "Come in, come in, don't stay out in the cold. The inn is ready for you, and a good meal awaits."

They enter the inn, immediately enveloped by a pleasant warmth and the intoxicating scent of burning wood and Christmas spices. Within, the magic of Christmas is even more present: garlands of fir and Christmas baubles decorate the ceiling beams, and a large tree, magnificently adorned with twinkling lights and handcrafted decorations, occupies a corner of the sitting room. Christmas stockings hang from the fireplace, where a fire crackles merrily, casting a golden glow upon the stone walls. The dining room table is already laid with a red tablecloth, scented candles, and napkins folded in the shape of fir trees.

Mia contemplates the interior, filled with wonder. "It's even more beautiful inside... One truly feels the spirit of Christmas here. It's going to be difficult to leave for exploring after this."

Sofia nods with a smile. "I know... I could almost let myself be convinced to stay here the entire visit. It's so warm and welcoming."

The proprietor leads them to their rooms, where even there, the spirit of Christmas has infiltrated. Branches of fir and scented candles are arranged upon the chests of drawers, and each room has a small string of lights hung around the bed frame. The beds are covered with thick red woollen blankets, adding a festive and cosy touch.

Sofia sighs with contentment. "I could fall asleep here at once. This is exactly what I needed."

After settling into their respective rooms, they come down for dinner. In the dining room, the atmosphere is both festive and intimate. The proprietor serves them a traditional Christmas meal: a hot pumpkin soup, followed by roast turkey accompanied by winter vegetables, and to finish, a homemade

Yule log. All is accompanied by mulled wine perfumed with cinnamon and cloves.

Théo savours a sip of mulled wine with delight. "This is truly perfect. I could almost wish to extend our stay just to enjoy the atmosphere."

Mia smiles. "We could... but we all know why we're here. Tomorrow, the manor awaits us. But tonight, let us enjoy this Christmas magic."

The proprietor, passing near their table, gives them an enigmatic smile. "The magic of Christmas is strong here... but do not forget, it can sometimes conceal secrets. Rest well; tomorrow is another day."

Their thoughts then drift towards the exploration that awaits them, but for the moment, they allow themselves to be lulled by the festive atmosphere of the inn, savouring each moment of this anticipated Christmas evening.

The following morning, the trio awakens beneath the gentle glow of daylight filtering through the curtains of their rooms, revealing an immaculate snow-covered landscape outside. The inn is enveloped in a soothing silence, interrupted only by the faint crackling of the fire still smouldering in the fireplace below. After a calm and comforting night, Mia, Sofia, and Théo feel rested and ready for the exploration that awaits them.

Mia stretches, still wrapped in the blankets. "This is exactly what I needed... A good night's sleep and I feel ready to face the manor."

Sofia opens the window of her room slightly to feel the fresh air. "It's magnificent outside... The snow is even more beautiful this morning. It looks like a veritable postcard landscape."

As for Théo, he smiles whilst contemplating the view. "I couldn't dream of a better setting. It's going to be an intense day, but I'm glad to have been able to recharge here."

They all meet up and descend together to the dining room, where the proprietor awaits them with a benevolent smile. The room is already filled with the appetising aroma of breakfast. On the table: fresh bread, golden pastries, butter, homemade jams, honey from a local beekeeper, scrambled eggs, smoked ham, and local cheeses are arranged with care, forming a copious buffet that contrasts with the rigour of the winter outside.

The proprietor welcomes them warmly. "I hope you slept well. You shall need your strength for the day ahead. Help yourselves; everything is ready."

Sofia admires the table with relish. "It's magnificent. I believe I could spend hours here tasting everything."

Mia laughs softly. "Let's make the most of it, but let's keep in mind that we have a manor to explore."

Théo takes a plate. "She's right. Best to fill up now. One never knows how long we shall be there."

They settle at the table, savouring each bite of this morning feast. The discussions are quieter, each absorbed in their thoughts, anticipating what awaits them at the manor. The rays of the winter sun timidly pierce through the clouds, illuminating the freshly fallen snow outside and adding a touch of serenity to the atmosphere.

Sofia gazes through the window, pensive. "The weather is perfect. It's cold, but the sky is clear. That should make our exploration easier."

Mia sips her coffee. "It's ideal. We shall be able to film in full daylight, which will help us capture the details of the manor. And then, if something manifests itself, we shan't miss it."

Théo arranges his notes methodically. "We have everything we need. We prepared our equipment well last night; all is ready. There's nothing left but to go."

Once their breakfast is finished, they thank the proprietor of the inn for his hospitality and go up to collect their belongings. Their bags are full of equipment: cameras, POD detector, head torches, and provisions for the day. Excitement mingles with a slight apprehension as they head towards the exit.

The proprietor accompanies them to the door, a smile still present on his face, but with a gleam in his eyes that suggests he perhaps knows more about the manor than he lets on.

The proprietor adopts a softer tone. "Be careful out there. The manor has a long history, and certain secrets reveal themselves only to those who know how to listen... or to look carefully."

Mia smiles at him gratefully. "Thank you for everything. We shall take care."

Sofia feels a slight shiver run through her. "We shall return this evening to tell you what we've discovered."

Théo displays his usual confidence. "We shan't miss a thing, I promise you."

They climb into the motor car, the tyres crunching slightly on the fresh snow as they pull away from the inn. The village is still peaceful, the Christmas decorations twinkling softly beneath the pale morning light.

Chapter V

The Approach to the Manor

Taking the road towards the manor, the landscape gradually becomes wilder and more isolated. Houses become scarce, giving way to a more savage nature. The snow-covered firs grow more imposing, and the road seems to lead them ever deeper into another world.

Mia keeps her hands steady on the steering wheel. "This is where it truly begins. We're heading into the unknown."

Sofia gazes through the window, troubled. "I can already feel the difference. It's as though the air is becoming heavier, more intense as we approach."

Théo examines the map attentively. "The manor isn't far now. Prepare yourselves; things are about to become interesting."

The road becomes more winding, and the silence inside the motor car is disturbed only by the faint sound of the engine and the crunch of snow beneath the tyres. Each is lost in thought, anticipating what they shall discover in the old manor. The landscape, increasingly wild, seems to guide them towards their destiny, each bend bringing them a little closer to the enigma they have come to unravel.

Mia fixes her gaze on the road with concentration. "It's so calm... almost too calm. Do you feel it too?"

Sofia glances through the window, ill at ease. "Yes... it's as though time has stopped here. It's beautiful, but there's something strange in the air."

Théo considers the shadows cast by the trees. "It adds to the atmosphere, does it not? It's as if the forest itself wished to tell us something. We must be close now."

After a final curve, an imposing silhouette emerges through the trees. Orléac Manor appears suddenly, dark and majestic, rising from the snow like a slumbering beast.

The edifice stands as a monument to aristocratic decay. Its baroque façade, once a symbol of elegance and power, now bears the stigmata of more than two centuries of abandonment. The stone walls, of a grey-blue hue characteristic of local quarries, are deeply fissured, traversed by cracks that serpent like black veins upon a diseased body. Ivy has invaded the façades,

its green tendrils insinuating themselves into every interstice, slowly tearing away the mortar and stones, as if nature itself were attempting to erase all trace of this accursed dwelling.

The mullioned windows, once adorned with coloured stained glass, are now but gaping orbits, empty and menacing. Some still retain shards of glass clinging to frames of rotted wood, which gleam faintly in the winter light like broken teeth in a fleshless jaw. Others are entirely devoid of glass, allowing the wind to whistle through the abandoned rooms, producing a mournful melody that resonates in the oppressive silence of the forest.

The ornamental ironwork balconies, once magnificently wrought and gilded with gold leaf, are now consumed by rust. The railings hang precariously over the void, some having collapsed entirely, lying in the snow below like metallic bones. The great French windows that once opened onto them swing limply in the wind, their rusted hinges producing sinister creaks that seem to echo like the laments of souls in torment.

The slate roof, once perfectly aligned, is now pierced in several places. Entire sections have collapsed, revealing the oak framework blackened by time and damp. The dormer windows, which once illuminated the attics, are caved in or entirely destroyed. The monumental chimneys, crowned with their sculpted stone cowls, still rise proudly towards the sky, but several display alarming fissures, and one has partially collapsed, its stones strewn across the roof below.

Mia slows the motor car, captivated by the vision. "There it is... It's even more impressive than I imagined. And those broken windows... It's as though the manor has wept all the tears of its history."

The main entrance is preceded by a monumental flight of steps whose stone treads are cracked and covered in moss. The columns that once majestically framed the porch are eroded, their Corinthian capitals barely recognisable.

The massive oak door, several metres in height, is deeply flaked, its varnish having vanished long ago. Planks nailed across it vainly attempt to bar entry, but several have given way, torn off by time or by unwelcome visitors of old.

Sofia whispers, impressed. "It's... sinister. It's as though the manor is watching us. And this silence, it's as if it's waiting for something."

The motor car halts before a broad wrought-iron gate, once gilded but now consumed by rust. The bars are twisted, some completely torn away, as if an immense force had violated them. The stone pillars supporting the gate are surmounted by sculptures depicting heraldic eagles, but erosion has transformed them into grotesque and menacing creatures, their beaks and talons now resembling demonic claws.

Behind the gate stretches what was once a formal French garden. The geometric pathways are still visible beneath the snow, but they are overrun by wild vegetation. The meticulously maintained flower beds have vanished, replaced by brambles and undergrowth that seem to have taken possession of the grounds. The fountains, once fed by the natural springs of the forest, are dry, their basins broken and filled with dead leaves and snow. The stagnant water that remains in some of them forms a greenish, frozen film.

Statues stand here and there in the abandoned garden, vestiges of a bygone era. Depicting mythological figures, nymphs, fauns, and ancient deities, they are now covered in moss and lichen. Their features have been effaced by erosion, lending them spectral and tormented expressions. Some have toppled, lying in the snow like stone corpses, their broken limbs scattered about them. Others still stand, but in disturbing poses, as if attempting to flee an invisible danger.

They alight from the motor car, and the winter cold strikes them immediately, biting their faces and enveloping them in an icy mist with each breath. The snow crunches beneath their footsteps, amplifying the deafening silence that reigns around the manor.

Théo observes the manor with a gleam of excitement in his eyes. "It's exactly as I hoped. This place is charged with history; one can feel it. We could capture incredible things here."

Mia shivers, but not solely from the cold. "Yes, there's something heavy in the air... This manor has secrets to reveal, but it won't give them up easily."

A light wind whistles through the cracks in the walls, producing an almost human sound, like a plaintive murmur. Tatters of ivy, stirred by the wind, sway slowly, adding an almost living dimension to the edifice.

Sofia crosses her arms against the cold. "Perhaps we should begin by exploring the exterior, see if we can find another entrance. I don't know why, but this door... I have a bad feeling about it."

Théo looks around methodically. "Agreed. Let's take the time to go round. And then, we shall film everything. Every detail counts."

They advance cautiously through the snow, circling the manor to explore its surroundings. Dead trees, black and twisted, emerge from the frozen ground like vegetal spectres. The atmosphere is so dense that it is almost difficult to breathe, each step bringing them a little closer to the shadows of the past.

Suddenly, as they skirt the east wing of the manor, Mia stops abruptly. Her hand instinctively comes to rest upon the frozen wall.

"Wait..." she murmurs, her eyes closed.

Sofia and Théo freeze immediately, knowing this expression. When Mia enters this state, it is because she perceives something invisible to others.

"There is so much pain here..." Mia continues, her voice trembling. "I can almost hear echoes of the past. Screams, weeping... This place is like an open wound that has never healed."

At that very moment, the POD detector that Théo holds in his hand emits a sharp beep. The lights flash frantically, detecting an inexplicable movement in the still air.

"Do you see that?" exclaims Théo in a low voice, showing the device. "It's detecting something, but there's nothing around us."

Sofia shivers violently. "That gives me chills. We really should be careful... Who knows what we might awaken by poking about here."

Théo puts away the device with a mixture of caution and excitement. "That's why we're here. To discover these stories, to see what this manor has to show us... but I agree, we proceed with care."

The trio continues their exploration, the shadow of the manor weighing upon them like a silent threat. The snow begins to fall softly once more, gradually covering their tracks, as if the manor were attempting to erase them from its history.

As they progress along the north façade, where the damage from the fire of 1793 is still visible, a series of strange phenomena begins to manifest. The temperature drops abruptly by several degrees, their breath transforming into a thick white mist.

Sofia stops dead. "It's getting colder and colder... Something strange seems to be happening here. Do you feel it too?"

Mia remains concentrated, all her senses on alert. "Yes... the air is charged. There's something... a presence perhaps. Let us remain on our guard."

Théo surveys the surroundings with heightened vigilance. "It's as though the entire place is watching us. It's as if the manor wished to test us before letting us enter."

It is at this precise moment that a distant sound begins to pierce the silence. At first barely audible, it seems to mingle with the wind, a melodious murmur floating in the icy air. Mia stops suddenly, raising her hand to signal absolute silence. All three strain their ears, seeking to identify what they hear.

Mia whispers, troubled: "Do you hear that? It sounds like... singing."

The notes gradually become clearer, revealing what appear to be Christmas carols. Soft and harmonious, the voices seem to come from everywhere at once, enveloping the trio in a melody as fascinating as it is unsettling. The words are indistinct, but the music is strangely bewitching, like a lullaby calling to those who hear it, inviting them to penetrate the depths of the manor.

Sofia retreats instinctively, visibly troubled. "That's impossible... where could it be coming from? There's no one else here."

Théo's eyes widen in disbelief. "This isn't normal. These carols... they shouldn't be here. It's as though they're drawing us somewhere."

Inexorably, all three feel themselves drawn towards the manor. The singing intensifies, resonating in the air like an irresistible call. The voices, at once gentle and sinister, seem to toy with their minds, plunging Mia, Sofia, and Théo into a state of confusion and fascination. Their feet seem to move of their own accord, guided by the melody, leading them almost against their will towards the dark and imposing entrance of the manor.

Mia struggles internally, trying to resist, but feeling herself irresistibly pushed forward. "It's as though something is manipulating us... We must remain lucid... but it's so difficult..."

Sofia's eyes become slightly glazed, her will wavering. "I cannot concentrate... It's as though these voices are insinuating themselves into my head, bewitching me... we must be careful..."

Théo fights to maintain control of himself. "We must stop... but I cannot... it's as if these songs are forcing us to advance."

The closer they draw to the manor, the more insistent and insidious the singing becomes, filling the air with an almost palpable intensity. Their minds waver between reality and illusion, each step bringing them a little closer to the darkness of the manor. At the same moment, new paranormal manifestations occur: the branches of the dead trees begin to tremble though no wind blows, casting dancing and grotesque shadows upon the snow. A first-floor window briefly illuminates with an orange glow, as if a candle had just been lit within, before extinguishing at once.

Suddenly, Mia stops abruptly, planting her feet firmly in the snow. She closes her eyes, concentrating all her energy to repel the grip of the singing. Her body trembles with the effort, beading with perspiration despite the glacial cold.

"No!" she cries in a firm voice that echoes in the silence. "We must pull ourselves together. These are but illusions. We must regain control..."

Her determination seems to break the spell. Sofia and Théo, feeling Mia's strength, manage to shake off their torpor. The singing, though still present, seems to recede slightly, as if the darkness itself were retreating before their collective will.

Sofia catches her breath, panting. "That was... that was so powerful. We cannot let ourselves be caught like that. This manor is dangerous; it's playing with our minds."

Théo gradually regains his composure, shaking his head to dispel the last mists of the enchantment. "Yes, but now we know what to expect. Let's stay focused. That was merely a warning. But it only confirms that this place is special... and dangerous."

They gather together, taking a moment to recentre themselves and prepare for what follows. The manor stands before them, imposing and dark, seeming to challenge them to enter. But this time, they are ready to confront what it conceals. The singing, though still present in the background like a persistent murmur, no longer controls them. They are no

longer mere visitors drawn by a melody; they are determined explorers, ready to uncover the secrets of Orléac Manor, whatever the dangers may be.

Chapter VI

In the Bowels of the Manor

Having regained their senses and dispelled the enchantment of the singing, Mia, Sofia, and Théo now stand before the massive door of the manor. Snow falls gently around them, creating an atmosphere almost silent, as though the world were holding its breath in anticipation of their next move. The wooden door, immense and intimidating, is adorned with ancient ironwork, rusted by time. Barely visible carvings seem to recount a forgotten story, sinuous patterns that lose themselves in the grain of the wood. The air is glacial, and even standing so close together, they can feel the cold emanating from the stone that forms the thick walls of the manor.

Mia observes the door attentively, a growing sense of unease within her. "This is not merely a door... it's like a barrier. As if it were placed here to keep something inside."

Sofia nervously rubs her hands together to warm them, but the cold she feels comes as much from within as from without. "Or to prevent something from getting out. But we cannot turn back now."

Théo places his trembling hand upon the wrought-iron handle, feeling the frozen metal bite into his palm. "No, we are here to discover the truth. Whatever lies hidden behind this door, we must confront it."

With a sinister creak that resonates like a cry of agony, the door opens slowly under Théo's pressure. The air that escapes from the manor is frozen, laden with an unwholesome dampness, as if the interior had not breathed for centuries. An odour of dust, mouldering wood, and something more ancient, more difficult to define, a sickly sweet and nauseating scent of decay, floats towards them, turning their stomachs. They exchange an anxious glance, their faces pale in the declining light, then enter together into the manor, their bodies tense with apprehension.

Their footsteps echo upon the cold stone floor, each sound amplified by the oppressive silence of the place, as if the manor itself were listening to their progress. The daylight, already faint outside, is almost entirely absorbed by the darkness that reigns within, leaving only shifting shadows to dance upon the dilapidated walls, creating the illusion of spectral silhouettes watching them.

Mia lights her head torch with a trembling hand, the beam of light barely piercing the thick darkness. "It seems as though this manor has not seen light for decades... Perhaps longer."

Sofia sweeps her gaze across the room, her breathing quickening despite herself. "It's even worse than I imagined. It's like a tomb... a place frozen in time."

The first room they enter is a grand entrance hall, once magnificent but now in ruins. Crystal chandeliers hang precariously from the ceiling, covered in cobwebs thick as funeral veils; their pendants glimmer faintly under the light of their head torches, casting ghostly reflections upon the walls. The walls, covered in tapestries once sumptuous, are now faded and torn, silent witnesses to the passage of time. A broad fireplace, black with soot and dried blood, dominates the far end of the room, but no warmth seems to have emanated from this space for more than a century.

Théo whispers almost, as if fearing to awaken something. "This was clearly a place of wealth and power... but all that seems so distant now."

Suddenly, a slight noise is heard in the darkness, a distinct creak, as if something heavy were moving on the floor above. The three friends freeze instantly, their hearts beating in unison, listening intently. Silence falls once more, but the tension is palpable, electric. Sofia grips Mia's arm, her knuckles whitening under the pressure.

At that same moment, the temperature drops abruptly by several degrees. Their breath becomes visible, forming clouds of condensation that float in the frozen air. An uncontrollable shiver runs down Théo's spine.

Mia murmurs softly, her hypersensitive senses on maximum alert. "There is something here... something that was waiting for us. Let us stay close and proceed cautiously."

They cross the hall with calculated slowness, venturing ever deeper into the bowels of the manor. The floor creaks ominously beneath their feet, the echoes resonating through the deserted corridors like warnings. The doors they pass are closed, some half-smashed, their wooden panels shattered, revealing rooms plunged into a darkness even more profound, so impenetrable it seems almost solid.

As they advance, the singing they had heard outside seems to resume, but this time more distant, like an elusive murmur threading between the walls.

These voices, which had seemed so bewitching outdoors, now possess an almost plaintive quality, like trapped souls desperately seeking to be heard. The melodies overlap, creating a discordant cacophony that grates upon the nerves.

Sofia shivers violently, despite herself. "Those carols... it's as though they come from another time, another world. We shouldn't follow them, yet they seem to be calling us." Her voice trembles slightly.

Théo grits his teeth, striving to appear determined despite the fear beginning to insinuate itself within him. "Whatever they are, they shan't stop us. We must discover what lies hidden here."

Suddenly, behind them, a door slams violently, the noise resounding like a thunderclap in the oppressive silence. They spin round in an instant, their head torches sweeping frantically through the darkness, but there is no one. The corridor through which they came now seems different, darker, the shadows having gained ground.

"What was that?" gasps Sofia, her hand instinctively seeking Mia's.

"The wind..." Théo attempts to reassure himself, but his voice lacks conviction. "It must be the wind."

Mia shakes her head slowly, her face grave. "No. It is not the wind. They know we are here. They want us to know that we are not welcome... or perhaps they want us to stay."

Chapter VII

The Corridor of Souls

They reach a grand stone staircase, whose steps remain intact despite the passage of time. The carved stone balustrades, though covered in dust, still display intricate patterns: scenes of banquets and celebrations that contrast cruelly with the morbid atmosphere of the place. Yet upon closer inspection, Théo notices something strange: certain sculptures appear to have been defaced, faces scratched until rendered unrecognisable, as if someone had wished to erase their identity.

Mia observes the sculptures with a mixture of respect and sadness. "This place must have been magnificent, once. Every detail was considered, every piece carved by hand... but now, all this seems dead."

They ascend the steps with caution, the dust and debris grinding beneath their weight, as if the staircase itself were protesting against their intrusion. Halfway up, a step gives way slightly beneath Sofia's foot; she lets out a stifled cry, caught just in time by Mia. Their hearts pound furiously, adrenaline coursing through their veins.

"Take care!" breathes Théo, his voice tense. "This manor is as dangerous structurally as it is... spiritually."

At the top, a long corridor stretches before them, lined with closed doors. The air is colder here, almost glacial, and a fine mist seems to rise from the floor, creeping like a serpent, enveloping their ankles. Shadows move along the walls, independent of their movements, gliding silently like spectres.

Sofia stops dead, paralysed by fear. "This corridor... it's as though something awaits us at every door. I don't like this." Her breathing becomes ragged, almost panicked.

Théo advances cautiously, his torch methodically sweeping every corner. "We shall go slowly, room by room. We mustn't miss anything."

They begin to open the doors one by one, revealing dusty chambers where beds are still made, as if their occupants had only just departed. Abandoned drawing rooms where glasses still sit upon tables, half-filled with a black and coagulated liquid. Libraries where books are now reduced to heaps of mouldering paper, their pages consumed by damp and time. Each room

seems to tell a story of decadence and abandonment, a once-flourishing life now reduced to rotting memories.

In one of the chambers, Sofia glimpses something that freezes her with dread: children's toys scattered upon the floor, a porcelain doll whose glass eyes seem to stare at them, and a small rocking horse that, inexplicably, sways gently, producing a rhythmic creaking that pierces the silence.

"The children..." murmurs Sofia, her voice breaking. "Oh my God, the children were in this room." Tears well at the corners of her eyes.

Suddenly, the rocking horse stops dead, as if an invisible hand had just seized it. A child's laugh, crystalline yet disturbing, echoes through the room before fading away. The three friends retreat hastily, Sofia stifling a sob.

"Let us leave here," says Théo in a colourless voice, quickly closing the door.

At last, they reach a door at the end of the corridor, more imposing than the others, adorned with sculptures depicting banquet scenes. A strange aura seems to emanate from this door, an almost palpable energy that makes the air vibrate around it, as if it concealed something of particular importance, or of particular danger.

Mia breathes deeply, attempting to calm the frantic beating of her heart. "It is here. I feel it. What we are seeking... it lies behind this door." A cold sweat beads upon her brow.

Sofia hesitates, her voice betraying her mounting anguish. "Are you certain we are ready? We don't know what we shall find in there." Her hands tremble visibly.

Théo places his hand upon the handle, taking a deep breath to summon his courage. "We came for this. We must know. If it is here that everything happened... it is here that everything shall be revealed."

Chapter VIII

The Hall of the Massacre

As the door opens slowly with a lugubrious creak, Mia, Sofia, and Théo discover a great hall plunged into darkness, save for a faint pallid glow that steals through the half-open shutters. Their head torches sweep the room, revealing details that chill the blood. It is the dining hall, a place that must once have been the heart of sumptuous receptions, but which is now frozen in a state of sinister dilapidation.

The long table, once magnificently laid for banquets, is covered with a thick layer of dust that resembles a shroud. The overturned chairs, some shattered, bear witness to violent agitation. Plates of fine porcelain are scattered upon the floor, smashed into a thousand pieces. Crystal goblets, miraculously intact, still sit upon the table, containing a blackened and coagulated liquid that might be wine... or dried blood.

Tarnished silver candlesticks still stand in place, their melted candles frozen in eternal stillness, forming stalactites of wax that hang like skeletal fingers.

The walls are covered with dark wood panelling, carved with pastoral scenes now barely visible beneath the grime. What remains of the tapestries hangs like weary shrouds, torn and stained with great brownish marks that bear a terrible resemblance to ancient bloodstains. The ceiling, adorned with frescoes depicting angels and cherubim, is now blackened with soot and pierced in several places, revealing the rotted beams of the floor above.

Mia stops abruptly at the threshold of the room, her body stiffening as if struck by an electric shock. Her gaze fixes upon an undefined point, her pupils dilating abnormally. A wave of intense cold passes through her, far more violent than that felt in the other rooms, as if thousands of ice needles were piercing her skin.

Her fingers tremble uncontrollably, but not from the cold. She senses a presence, no, several presences... a multitude of tormented spirits, frozen in an instant of terror and unbearable pain.

Her voice emerges almost as a hoarse murmur, low and trembling. "It is here... it is here they died. I... I can feel them, all of them. They are still here, trapped in this room, condemned to relive this cursed night again and again."

Sofia and Théo exchange a deeply anxious glance, their faces pale in the flickering glow of the lamps. They know that when Mia speaks with such intensity, she is profoundly connected to what has occurred, plunged into the darkest layers of the past. Théo swallows with difficulty, his throat constricted with anguish.

Sensing the tension mounting to an unbearable level, Théo takes the decision to bring out his POD detector. His hands tremble slightly as he places the device at the centre of the room, upon the accursed table. If something lurks here, the POD will warn them. The device immediately emits a dull beep, then another, the rhythm accelerating progressively.

Mia closes her eyes, allowing her sensations to guide her despite the terror rising within her. Suddenly, images begin to invade her mind with unheard-of violence, fragments of that fateful night parading like a waking nightmare. She sways slightly, Sofia rushing to support her.

Christmas lights twinkle in her vision, garlands of fir adorned with red ribbons, candles by the hundred illuminating the hall. Laughter resonates, crystalline and carefree, the merry murmurs of guests in garments of silk and velvet. She sees the Orléac family, proudly seated at the table, the Count at its head, smiling with arrogance, Countess Lucie at his side, resplendent in her gown embroidered with threads of gold. The children, a boy of fourteen and a girl of ten, laugh delightedly, their cheeks rosy with pleasure.

Her voice grows weaker, almost in a trance, each word costing her visible effort. "They were here... around this table. The celebration was in full swing. The musicians played Christmas airs, the wine flowed freely, succulent dishes followed one another. They suspected nothing... then everything changed in an instant."

She takes a few faltering steps into the room, drawing nearer to the table as if attracted by an invisible force. With each movement, the images become more precise, clearer, more real. She sees the faces of the guests suddenly freeze, laughter dying in their throats. A dull sound resounds in the distance, then cries of anger rise like a surging wave.

At that same moment, the POD activates violently, its lights flashing frantically, emitting a series of piercing beeps that make Théo and Sofia start. The temperature of the room drops even more abruptly, their breath

now forming thick clouds of condensation. A sensation of oppressive presence fills the space, as if dozens of invisible eyes were watching them.

Mia's hands clench, her nails digging into her palms. "The crash... the doors bursting open violently, torn from their hinges. The villagers invade the hall like an enraged human tide, brandishing pitchforks, axes, kitchen knives. Their faces are distorted by hatred and hunger, their eyes gleaming with a savage light. They scream, demanding justice, demanding vengeance for all the humiliations endured."

The visions become ever more intense, ever more unbearable. Mia sees the banquet transform into an appalling carnage. The guests rise in panic, overturning chairs, trampling decorations. Some attempt to flee towards the windows, others rush towards the side doors, but the exits are blocked by the frenzied mob.

Suddenly, in the real room, the sound of breaking glass resonates. One of the goblets on the table explodes spontaneously, its fragments scattering upon the dusty wood. Sofia lets out a stifled cry, retreating instinctively. Théo points his torch in all directions, seeking a rational explanation that does not come.

"Something is happening!" gasps Théo, his voice rising to a higher pitch under the effect of fear. "They are here, they are with us!"

Mia continues, almost suffocated by the intensity of the vision, tears now streaming down her cheeks. "The floor... the floor is covered in blood. It flows between the floorboards, forming dark and viscous pools. The Christmas decorations, the fir garlands, the golden ribbons, everything is splattered with red. The screams... the screams are deafening, desperate. Men plead, women shriek, children weep in terror."

In the room, the phenomena intensify. Massive shadows now move along the walls, taking quasi-human forms. One of them seems to approach Sofia, who retreats until she presses herself against the wall, paralysed with terror. Her breathing becomes erratic; her heart beats so loudly she can hear it echoing in her ears.

"Mia, stop!" pleads Sofia in a broken voice. "Please, come out of it!"

But Mia cannot stop. The images continue to surge, implacable. She now sees Countess d'Orléac rushing towards her children, her arms outstretched in a desperate gesture of maternal protection. Her face is distorted by

absolute terror, her widened eyes reflecting the horror unfolding around her. She attempts to hide them beneath the table, but it is already too late.

"No... no..." moans Mia, her body trembling with all its being. "She tries to protect them, but they tear her away from them. They drag her by the hair; she screams, she struggles. Her hands claw at the floor, leaving bloody traces. The children reach out their little arms towards her, crying 'Mamma! Mamma!' but she is carried off, disappearing into the human mass."

At that same instant, a glacial gust sweeps through the room, so violent that it makes the flames of their head torches flicker. An inhuman moan resonates in the air, a sound that seems to come from everywhere at once, a mixture of sobs and cries of pain that makes the hair stand on end. The POD now emits a continuous, piercing sound, its lights flashing chaotically.

"Lord..." murmurs Théo, his legs threatening to give way beneath him. "What is that? What is happening?"

Mia slowly turns her head towards the table, and it is there that she sees him: Count Jean-Baptiste d'Orléac. Or rather, his spectral apparition. He is there, standing near the table, clad in his festive attire stained with blood. His face is of a cadaverous pallor, his empty eyes staring into the void. A gaping wound traverses his chest, from which black and thick blood still seems to flow. His lips move, forming silent words, an eternal supplication that shall never be heard.

"The Count..." breathes Mia, her voice barely audible. "I see him. He is there, before me. He falls... he falls to the floor, his eyes wide with stupefaction. His hands reach towards his children, but he cannot reach them. Blood gushes from his mouth, splattering the white tablecloth. He tries to speak, to call them, but only gurgles emerge. The light leaves his eyes..."

Sofia now sobs openly, unable to bear the violence of these revelations. Théo joins her, taking her in his arms, both trembling with fear and horror.

The visions continue to parade mercilessly. Mia sees the children, huddled beneath the table, their bodies wracked with sobs. The boy of fourteen courageously attempts to protect his little sister, holding her tight against him. Their festive garments, their velvet and lace attire, are soiled with dust and tears. They tremble with terror, praying in low voices, imploring God to spare them.

"The children..." moans Mia, her voice breaking. "They are discovered. Brutal hands seize them, tear them from their hiding place. They scream, they struggle, but they are so small, so fragile. They are dragged from the hall. The little girl reaches out her arms towards her father's body, calling 'Papa! Papa!' but no one listens. Their fate... I cannot see... it is too dark, too confused. Smoke... cold... suffocation..."

Suddenly, another phenomenon occurs. The chairs around the table begin to move slightly, as if invisible guests were taking their places. The grinding of wood against the floor resonates in the heavy silence. A plate slides by itself across the table, falling to the floor with a deafening crash.

"We must get out!" cries Théo, his voice panicked. "Now! It is no longer safe!"

But Mia remains frozen, as if hypnotised by the visions. She now sees the final scene in all its horror. The hall is strewn with bodies; the floor is a pool of blood. The servants who attempted to defend their masters lie there, their open eyes staring at the ceiling. The guests who could not flee are sprawled upon the floor, some still clinging to the curtains they had tried to scale. The great table, symbol of so many joyous celebrations, is now overturned, shattered, its legs pointing skyward like accusing fingers.

And then, at last, silence. A heavy, thick silence, as brutal as the violence that preceded it. A deathly silence that falls upon the room like a shroud. Only the crackling of flames beginning to spread through other parts of the manor disturbs this terrifying calm.

Mia whispers almost, tears streaming freely down her face. "They... they lost everything here. Their lives, their dignity, their humanity. It is as if their souls remained, clinging to this instant of absolute terror, unable to depart, condemned to relive this nightmare eternally."

The vision begins at last to dissipate, but Mia remains frozen for a long moment still, as if still absorbing the residual energies of the hall, as if the weight of all this suffering were inscribing itself in her flesh.

Slowly, trembling, she turns her gaze towards Sofia and Théo. Her eyes gleam with an anxious, haunted light, as if she had seen the gates of hell open.

Her voice emerges broken, barely a hoarse whisper. "They have not departed... they are still here, trapped in this accursed Christmas night."

They want us to know, to understand what they endured. The pain... the pain is so intense that it has permeated the walls, the floor, the very air. This manor has become their eternal prison."

Sofia approaches quickly to support her, taking her by the shoulders. "Mia... I know it is difficult, but we must stay focused. They are here with us, and that is not very reassuring. We must find a way to help them... or to leave."

Théo retrieves the POD, which continues to emit erratic signals, his hands trembling violently. "It is here that everything began... and perhaps it is here that everything can end. We must find what keeps them here, what prevents them from departing, before..."

He does not finish his sentence, but all understand: before they themselves become prisoners of this accursed place.

Mia nods weakly, still under the shock of her vision and the deafening sound of the POD that still echoes in her ears. She feels the weight of their mission growing considerably heavier. This manor, this hall, these are places of absolute pain and despair. But they are also places of secrets, secrets which, if discovered, might at last free the souls trapped in this eternal tragedy... or condemn them to remain forever.

They advance cautiously through the hall, their torches illuminating the morbid details of the past, each shadow seeming to conceal a new danger. They know now that they are not alone, that the ghosts of the Orléac family and their guests watch them from the obscure recesses, perhaps awaiting a deliverance that never came, or perhaps seeking to draw them into their eternal torment.

One final phenomenon freezes them with dread: upon the dusty table, there where Mia saw the Count die, a bloody handprint slowly appears, drawing itself in the dust as if traced by an invisible hand. Then another. And another still. As if the dead themselves were seeking to communicate, to leave one last mark of their tormented existence.

In the oppressive silence that follows, they distinctly hear a murmur, barely audible but undeniably real: "Help us..."

Chapter IX

The Banquet Rediscovered

Mia, Sofia, and Théo continue to traverse the dining hall, feeling the weight of past tragedies that permeate every corner of the manor. Yet rather than allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the heaviness of these emotions, they concentrate upon their mission: attempting to bring peace to the tormented souls that have remained trapped in that fateful night.

Mia, still guided by her visions, approaches the centre of the hall, there where the spirits of the Orléac family seem most present. She closes her eyes, gently placing her hands upon the dusty table, as if to establish a direct link with the souls attached to it. The moment her palms make contact with the ancient wood, a wave of energy passes through her, warm and luminous, so different from the darkness she had felt before.

Suddenly, a new vision imposes itself upon her, but this time it is not tinged with horror and violence. On the contrary, it is a scene of pure joy and happiness that unfolds before her eyes. The dining hall transforms before her gaze: the dilapidated walls regain their lustrous panelling, the torn tapestries become sumptuous once more, the crystal chandeliers sparkle with a thousand lights. It is the manor as it was before the tragedy, in all its baroque splendour.

The great table, now covered with an immaculate white linen cloth embroidered with threads of gold, groans beneath the most exquisite dishes. Chased silver platters overflow with game roasted to perfection: golden pheasants, whole boars adorned with caramelised apples, quails stuffed with dried fruits. Pyramids of candied fruits glisten like edible jewels. Delicate pastries, chocolate éclairs, fruit tartlets, meringues light as clouds, form artistic compositions. Crystal carafes contain deep red wines and golden white wines, their reflections dancing in the light of hundreds of candles illuminating the room.

Garlands of fresh fir adorn the walls, interlaced with ribbons of red and gold velvet. Branches of holly with their scarlet berries decorate the candelabras. At the centre of the table stands a spectacular composition: a miniature silver fir tree, surrounded by figurines representing the Nativity, the whole strewn with glittering sequins that catch the light like fresh snow.

And then, Mia sees them: the Orléac family, alive, radiant, happy. Count Jean-Baptiste, in his midnight blue velvet coat embroidered with silver threads, laughs heartily, his beaming face bearing no trace of the terror that will soon mark his final moments. Countess Lucie, resplendent in her emerald silk gown adorned with precious lace, her hair swept up and decorated with pearls, smiles tenderly whilst watching her children. Her eyes sparkle with that particular light that mothers have when they contemplate what they hold most precious in all the world.

The children, Alexandre, fourteen years of age, dressed in an elegant French-style suit, and little Marguerite, ten, in her red velvet dress trimmed with white lace, laugh delightedly whilst listening to the amusing stories of a guest. Their cheeks are rosy with pleasure, their eyes shine with excitement. Alexandre twirls his little sister to the sound of the music, and her crystalline laughter fills the hall with a melody more beautiful than any Christmas carol.

The guests, some thirty nobles and notables from the region, all dressed in their finest attire, converse merrily. The ladies, in their gowns of shimmering colours, delicately wave their ivory fans. The gentlemen, in silk garments and powdered wigs, raise toasts to success and prosperity. The servants, in impeccable livery, move with silent grace, refilling glasses and presenting dishes with pride.

In a corner of the hall, a small ensemble of musicians, two violinists, a cellist, and a harpsichordist, plays traditional Christmas airs. The music rises, soft and harmonious, mingling with the conversations and laughter. A choir of village children, invited specially for the occasion, intones carols, their pure voices rising towards the ceiling adorned with frescoes depicting angels and cherubim.

The Count rises, raising his crystal goblet filled with Burgundy wine. His voice resounds through the hall, warm and generous: "My dear friends, on this blessed Christmas night, I raise my glass to the health of all! May this year that draws to a close have been prosperous for each of you, and may the one to come be even more so! To our families, to our friendships, and to the joy that brings us together on this sacred day!"

"To Christmas!" respond all the guests in chorus, raising their glasses in a melodious chiming.

The Countess leans towards her children, tenderly stroking their hair. "This is the most beautiful Christmas we have ever had," she murmurs with visible emotion. "May God keep us always together, in this joy and this love."

Little Marguerite nestles against her mother, her eyes sparkling. "Mamma, will all Christmases be as beautiful as this one?"

"Yes, my treasure," replies the Countess, kissing her upon the forehead. "As long as we are together."

Mia, witness to this scene, feels tears streaming down her cheeks. It is no longer pain that grips her, but a pure emotion, a mixture of joy and sadness. She sees these souls as they truly were: not arrogant and contemptuous aristocrats, but human beings capable of love, laughter, tenderness. A family who, that evening, asked only to celebrate together the magic of Christmas.

The vision lingers a moment longer, showing the guests rising to dance an elegant gavotte, the children applauding with enthusiasm, the Count embracing his wife with evident affection. Then, gently, the image begins to fade, but instead of giving way to the horror of the massacre, it dissolves into a golden light, warm and soothing.

Mia opens her eyes again, her face bathed in tears. Sofia and Théo look at her with concern, but she smiles at them through her weeping.

"I saw them," she murmurs in a voice strangled with emotion. "I saw them happy, before everything changed. It was magnificent... They loved each other so much. The Countess, the Count, the children... They wanted only to celebrate Christmas together, as a family. They deserve to find that joy again. They deserve peace."

Sofia places a comforting hand upon Mia's shoulder, her own eyes glistening with tears. "Then let us help them find it."

Théo nods with determination. "That is why we are here. To give them back what they lost."

Chapter X

The Liberation of Souls

Mia takes a deep breath, gathering all her energy and compassion. She places her hands upon the table once more, and this time, Sofia and Théo come to stand at her sides, also placing their hands upon the ancient wood, forming a circle of intention and will.

Mia speaks in a soothing voice, filled with tenderness and respect. "You are no longer alone... We are here for you, to liberate you from this suffering that has held you for so long. You knew joy, love, the beauty of Christmas. It is this memory that you must carry with you, not the violence and pain. You may at last rest in peace."

At these words, the Christmas carols that had hitherto resonated so sinisterly begin to change. Their tones become softer, less oppressive, as if the spectral voices were beginning to find a certain peace. The melody that had haunted the walls of the manor for more than two centuries transforms into something sublime, a celestial choir that uplifts the soul.

A gentle warmth begins to spread through the room, contrasting with the glacial cold that had reigned before. The light from their head torches seems to mingle with a new glow, warmer, golden and sparkling, emanating from nowhere and everywhere at once. Luminous particles, resembling glittering snowflakes, begin to float in the air, creating a fairy-tale atmosphere.

Sofia adds gently, her voice trembling with emotion: "It is Christmas... a moment of peace, of reconciliation, of forgiveness. Let this spirit carry you far from this place of pain. You deserve to find the light again, to find those you loved. Your children await you. Your family awaits you."

The Christmas carols now transform into a veritable melody of redemption, the voices blending harmoniously in a silent prayer for peace. Mia, still in profound contact with the spirits, feels a wave of pure emotion, no longer of fear or pain, but of immense gratitude and relief. The souls of the Orléacs and their guests seem to understand that their time of suffering is at last drawing to a close.

Théo, tears in his eyes, concludes with deep emotion: "You have suffered for far too long. Let this Christmas be the last, not of sorrow, but of light and

joy. Go to those you loved; find again the happiness you once knew. Be free at last."

As Théo's words resound in the air, now gentle and luminous, something truly magical occurs. The silhouettes of the Orléacs, hitherto invisible or barely perceptible, begin to take clear shape in the aether, illuminated by a golden light that seems to come from the depths of the past and the heights of heaven at once.

Count Jean-Baptiste and Countess Lucie appear first, hand in hand, their faces radiant with peace and gratitude. They no longer bear the marks of their violent death, but are dressed in their finest festive attire, as they were during that last happy Christmas. Their children, Alexandre and Marguerite, stand beside them, their small hands in those of their parents, their faces lit by a serene smile.

Around them, the silhouettes of the other victims gradually take shape: the guests, the servants, all those who perished that night. They are no longer tormented ghosts, but liberated souls, ready to depart. Each of them displays an expression of indescribable relief, as if an immense weight had just been lifted from their shoulders.

Mia opens her eyes and looks directly at them. The members of the Orléac family are no longer victims chained to their tragedy, but appeased souls, ready to undertake their final journey. A sad but infinitely peaceful smile forms upon the Count's face, and his lips silently shape the words: "Thank you... thank you infinitely."

Countess Lucie inclines her head slightly in a sign of profound recognition, one hand upon her heart. Her eyes, which had known such terror, now shine with a pure and serene light. The children, who had trembled with fear beneath the banquet table, now appear joyful and carefree, as if they were about to set off on a marvellous adventure.

Little Marguerite even gives a small wave to Mia, a radiant smile illuminating her childish face. Alexandre places a protective hand upon his sister's shoulder, and for the first time in more than two centuries, he seems at peace with his role as elder brother.

Mia murmurs, moved to tears, a tear flowing freely down her cheek: "Thank you for allowing us to help you. May this Christmas night be that of your liberation. Go towards the light. Go and find peace and eternal love."

The image of the family and their guests slowly dissipates, progressively, like morning mist chased away by the rising sun. They ascend towards a brilliant light, of a dazzling golden white, which fills the entire hall with an almost divine radiance. The silhouettes become translucent, then merge entirely into this celestial light, carrying with them all the pain, all the suffering, all the despair that had permeated these walls for so long.

The carols, which had haunted the walls of the manor for centuries like a funeral lament, transform into a gentle final melody, a hymn of liberation and gratitude. The voices rise in a crescendo, reaching a sublime beauty, then fade gently, like a candle peacefully consuming itself, leaving behind not darkness, but a remanent and warm light.

The dining hall, previously plunged in shadow and decrepitude, now seems bathed in a soft and comforting radiance. The very dust seems to sparkle in the light, transformed into golden sequins. The air, which had been heavy and oppressive, is now light and pure, perfumed with a subtle aroma of fir and Christmas spices.

The trio remains motionless for a long moment, absorbing this extraordinary grace. The manor, which had been a place of such suffering, a tomb for souls in torment, is now purged of its darkness. The atmosphere is serene, almost joyful, as if the manor itself were thanking the three friends for having brought peace to its tormented inhabitants. The walls seem to breathe again, freed from a burden centuries old.

Sofia smiles through her tears, her face radiant with profound joy. "They are at peace at last... It is the most beautiful thing we have ever done. It is the most beautiful gift we could have offered them."

Théo wipes away his own tears, displaying an expression of immense relief. "We have given them a true Christmas, the one they were never able to complete. They can depart at last, and this manor can find its tranquillity. The curse is lifted."

Mia murmurs with tenderness, placing her hand one last time upon the now-appeased table: "Merry Christmas, to them and to us all. May their journey be gentle, and may the light guide them for evermore."

The manor, once dark and menacing, guardian of terrible secrets and unspeakable suffering, now stands as an old protector who may at last rest. The spirits are free, and the magic of Christmas has, for once, brought peace where there was only pain and despair.

Having liberated the tormented spirits of the Orléac family, Mia, Sofia, and Théo remain a moment longer in the dining hall, absorbing the peace and serenity that now fill the space. The atmosphere, once so heavy and oppressive as to be almost suffocating, has become light and comforting, as if the manor itself had at last found rest after two centuries of agony.

Mia, still deeply moved by the experience, turns to her friends with a radiant smile, her eyes bright with tears of joy. "I have never felt anything so pure... They have truly departed in peace. It is the most beautiful Christmas gift we could have offered them. And that they have offered us in return."

Sofia smiles through her own tears, clasping Mia's hand. "And perhaps they have left us a gift too... This peace, this light... I feel filled with a warmth I had not felt for a long time. It is as though their gratitude envelops us."

Théo displays a peaceful smile, his face reflecting a profound sense of accomplishment. "It is a Christmas we shall never forget. We have done something truly significant. The manor is no longer a place of pain... it has become again what it should always have been: a dwelling filled with love and life."

They make their way together towards the exit, traversing the corridors of the manor which now seem transformed. The menacing shadows that had followed them upon their arrival have completely vanished, replaced by a soothing radiance, almost ethereal, that envelops every corner.

The cobwebs seem less oppressive, the dust less dismal. Even the old walls, which had seemed on the point of collapsing beneath the weight of their tragic history, have regained a certain dignity, as if the manor wished to show them its profound gratitude.

Chapter XI

The Christmas Gift

As they cross the threshold of the entrance door, an extraordinary surprise awaits them, a spectacle that leaves them speechless.

The snow, which had been falling gently, has intensified, covering the landscape with a thick, immaculate white mantle that sparkles beneath the light of the full moon like millions of diamonds. But what truly captures their attention, what stops them in their tracks in absolute wonder, is the manor itself.

It no longer resembles in the least the dilapidated and sinister edifice they had seen upon their arrival, that monument to decay and despair. Before them stands a magnificently restored building, resplendent in all its eighteenth-century glory, as it must have been in its most glorious days.

The windows, once shattered and dark as dead eyes, now glow with a warm and golden light, as if hundreds of candles had been lit in every room, creating a terrestrial constellation rivalling the celestial stars. The light escaping from them casts golden rectangles upon the immaculate snow, tracing fairy-tale patterns.

The walls, rid of their deep fissures and sinister dilapidation, have become smooth and majestic once more. The grey-blue stone sparkles beneath the frost like a precious jewel set in the white casket of the snow. The ivy that had invaded the façades so morbidly has vanished, leaving in its place the pure elegance of baroque architecture.

Christmas garlands, sparkling with a thousand golden and silver lights, majestically adorn the façade. They wind around the columns, frame the windows and doors, creating a décor worthy of the grandest celebrations. Wreaths of fresh fir, decorated with red ribbons and gilded pine cones, hang at every window. Suspended lanterns cast a dancing light that makes the snow glitter.

The great door of solid wood, previously flaked and condemned with planks, is now perfectly restored, its gleaming varnish reflecting the moonlight. It seems to invite one to enter for a grand celebration, adorned with a magnificent wreath of fir branches, holly, and mistletoe, the whole strewn with bright red berries and ribbons of golden velvet.

The ironwork balconies, previously rusted and collapsed, are now perfectly wrought, gilded with gold leaf, each decorated with strings of lights that hang like curtains of stars. The monumental chimneys rise proudly, intact, expelling white smoke that ascends in graceful spirals towards the starlit sky.

The garden itself has been transformed. The mossy and broken statues are now perfect, depicting nymphs and fauns in all their classical beauty. The dried-up fountains flow once more, their crystalline water sparkling in the moonlight, forming graceful arcs that fall in a musical cascade. Around them, beds of white Christmas roses and branches of holly create a fairy-tale winter garden.

Sofia's eyes widen; she raises a hand to her mouth in a gesture of utter disbelief. "It's... it's impossible. The manor... it's like new! No, better than new! It's magical, absolutely magical!"

Théo contemplates the scene with profound wonder, his eyes bright with tears of joy. "They are showing us what it was... what it has become again, even if only for an ephemeral moment. It is their way of saying thank you. It is their final gift."

Mia smiles through her tears, an expression of pure happiness illuminating her face. "It is their Christmas gift to us... They want us to see the manor as they loved it, as it was in their happiest memories. We have brought peace, and they offer us a final glimpse of their joyous past, of those moments of perfect happiness before everything changed."

The three friends remain there, motionless, absorbed by the supernatural beauty of the manor, allowing themselves to be permeated by the magic of the moment. The wind blows gently, carrying with it the last echoes of the Christmas carols, no longer bewitching and sinister, but comforting and sweet, like a lullaby from the past to thank them. One can almost hear the chiming of glasses, the laughter of the guests, the music of the violins.

A translucent silhouette briefly appears at one of the windows, that of little Marguerite, joyfully waving goodbye, her radiant smile visible even at this distance. Then she disappears into the light, free at last.

Sofia murmurs, her hands joined as if in prayer: "Thank you for this wonderful gift. We shall never forget it. Never."

The manor, gleaming in all its restored splendour, stands before them as a timeless vision, a powerful testament to the power of reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace. They know that this vision will not last for ever, that it is a final gesture of gratitude from the liberated spirits, an ephemeral but precious gift. Yet they shall keep the memory of it engraved for ever in their hearts and souls.

In respectful silence, the trio finally turns upon their heels and moves away from the manor, their hearts light and filled with the authentic warmth of Christmas. The snow crunches softly beneath their steps, but the cold that had bitten them so fiercely upon their arrival now seems mild, almost pleasant, like a benevolent caress. The sky is perfectly clear, of a deep blue-black, and the moon lights their path with its silver glow. The stars twinkle like a multitude of little celestial gifts, forming constellations that seem to dance just for them.

As they reach their motor car, Mia cannot help but cast one last glance towards the manor. The vision persists still, the building sparkling with a thousand lights in the winter night, as if to bid them a final farewell, as if to tell them that all is well now.

Mia smiles through her tears of joy, raising a hand in a gesture of farewell. "Merry Christmas, to all of you... and thank you for this most precious gift. You are free at last. Go in peace. Go towards the eternal light."

They climb into the motor car, their hearts appeased and filled with profound joy, and gently depart from the estate. The manor, guardian for so long of terrible secrets and unimaginable suffering, is henceforth a symbol of redemption and hope, illuminated by the true magic of Christmas.

As they drive away along the snow-covered path, the silhouette of the manor fades progressively into the mist and distance, but the memory of its restored beauty, of its renewed splendour, shall remain engraved in their memories for ever as the most precious of treasures. The lights twinkle one last time, then gently extinguish, like candles blown out at the end of a long vigil.

For Mia, Sofia, and Théo, this Christmas has become a moment of true magic, an instant out of time when the past met the present in perfect communion, when peace at last triumphed over darkness, when love vanquished hatred, and when the light of Christmas shone brighter than ever, capable of dispelling even the most ancient and profound shadows.

As their motor car vanishes into the starlit night, carrying with it three souls transformed by this extraordinary experience, Orléac Manor remains there, silent and at peace for the first time since 1793, watching over the slumbering forest like a benevolent guardian, at last freed from its curse, at last reconciled with its tragic past.

And somewhere, in a plane of existence that only spirits can know, the Orléac family at last celebrates their true Christmas, the one they should have had, surrounded by light, love, and eternal peace.

Chapter XII

The Return to the Inn

Having departed from Orléac Manor, Mia, Sofia, and Théo drive in silence, each lost in thought, still profoundly wonderstruck by what they have just experienced. The road, covered with a layer of snow sparkling beneath the silver light of the moon, seems to guide them gently towards the inn, as if it knew their need for refuge and warmth. The air is glacial outside, but within the motor car, a comforting warmth envelops them, a direct reflection of the inner peace they feel after having accomplished their mission.

Mia, her hands resting upon the steering wheel, drives with a serenity she has never known before. Her mind returns ceaselessly to those images of the happy banquet, those radiant faces of the Orléac family before the tragedy. She thinks of little Marguerite waving farewell at the window, of that childish smile at last freed from all fear. A tear of joy rolls down her cheek, which she quickly wipes away with the back of her hand.

She finally breaks the silence, her soft voice carrying all the weight of the emotion she feels.

"This Christmas... it is more than I could ever have imagined. You know, I have always sensed presences, energies, but never... never had I felt anything so pure, so beautiful. I feel so fortunate to have experienced this with you."

Sofia, seated in the rear, gazes at the stars through the window, their brightness seeming even more vivid this night. She thinks of the Orléac children, of their terror transformed into peace, of that golden light that carried them away.

"It is as though everything makes sense now," she murmurs pensively. "All our explorations, all our doubts, all those nights when we wondered whether what we were doing truly mattered... We were destined to be there, this evening. We have truly done something good, something that surpasses anything we had done before. I know I shall never forget this night. Never."

Théo, in the passenger seat, stares at the road before them, his mind replaying the scene of the spirits' liberation. He sees again the Count and

Countess holding hands, their faces at last at peace. A satisfied smile illuminates his face.

"It is certain. This Christmas shall remain engraved in our memories for ever. We have liberated souls imprisoned for more than two centuries, brought peace where despair once reigned... and we have received a gift that no one else will ever be able to understand. That vision of the restored manor... it was their way of saying thank you."

He pauses, then continues in a more reflective voice: "You know, Mia, when you described that happy banquet, when you told us of their laughter, their love... it changed everything for me. They were no longer merely victims of a historical tragedy. They were people, human beings who loved, who laughed, who simply wanted to celebrate Christmas with their family. That makes their liberation even more... precious."

Mia nods, her eyes shining. "Exactly. That is what makes everything so powerful. We did not merely liberate them from a cursed place. We allowed them to remember who they truly were, before that horrible night. We gave them back their humanity, their joy."

The motor car approaches the inn, whose warm lights stand out through the light mist of the night like beacons in the darkness. The village seems asleep, enveloped in the peaceful and sacred silence of Christmas night. Within, the inn is more welcoming than ever, as if it had been awaiting them.

The flames in the fireplace dance merrily, casting a golden and flickering light upon walls decorated with garlands and Christmas wreaths. The comforting scent of spiced mulled wine and fresh gingerbread floats in the air, reminding Mia, Sofia, and Théo that, despite the extraordinary intensity of their adventure, they remain within the warm heart of Christmas.

The proprietor welcomes them with a benevolent smile, almost conspiratorial, his eyes twinkling with a wisdom that suggests he knows, that he has always known, they would accomplish something special. Perhaps others before them had attempted, without success. Perhaps he had waited a long time for someone to finally succeed.

He gives them a warm wink. "You look as though you have lived through a memorable adventure. I can see it in your eyes, that particular light. Come in; you must be frozen and exhausted. A good hot chocolate awaits you, and a little mulled wine to celebrate this Christmas as it ought to be celebrated."

Mia gives him a smile filled with gratitude. "Thank you... You were right; this night has been... magical. More than magical, even. Transformative."

The proprietor nods slowly, as if he understood perfectly. "The manor is at peace now, is it not? I can feel it. The very air is different."

"Yes," replies Sofia softly. "They are free now. Free at last."

They settle near the crackling fireplace, sinking into the soft armchairs with a sigh of relief. The proprietor brings them steaming cups of velvety hot chocolate topped with whipped cream, and glasses of mulled wine spiced with cinnamon and cloves.

The flames crackle softly, casting dancing shadows upon the walls, and gentle Christmas music, traditional carols played upon the harp, floats in the air like a blessing, adding a note of perfect serenity to this moment of well-deserved rest.

The trio, though physically weary, is filled with a profound satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment that transcends mere pride. The manor, the liberated spirits, and the magnificent vision they received are memories they shall carry with them for ever, engraved in their souls like invisible but indelible tattoos.

Sofia wraps her hands around her warm cup, savouring the heat that diffuses through her palms. "I believe this is the most perfect Christmas I have ever experienced. And yet, it was not the gifts, nor the feast, nor even the decorations. Everything we went through... the fear, the anguish, the terrible visions... it was all for this moment, here, together. To know that we truly made a difference."

She pauses, her eyes gleaming in the firelight. "You know, when we were in that dining hall, when the POD was triggered and the phenomena began... I was so frightened. I truly believed we would not get out of there. But now, I realise that fear was part of the process. We had to feel a little of what they had felt to truly understand, to truly be able to help them."

Théo smiles, nodding with conviction. "Yes, we did more than we hoped. Far more. This Christmas is not merely a simple holiday marked on the calendar. It is a powerful reminder of what we can accomplish together when we unite our strengths, our talents, our compassion. And of the power of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation."

He looks at his friends with affection. "Each of us had a role to play. Mia, with your visions, your sensitivity to energies. Sofia, with your caution, your wisdom, your grounding in reality. And I... well, I hope I contributed my part. Together, we were complete. Together, we were strong enough to confront two centuries of pain and transform it into light."

Mia sets down her cup and looks at her two dearest friends, her eyes sparkling with emotion. "I am so grateful to have you at my side. Not just this evening, but always. This Christmas... it is our common victory, our shared memory, our story to tell. And more than that... it is proof that light can always triumph over darkness, if one has the courage to believe in it."

She takes a sip of hot chocolate, then continues in a softer, almost meditative voice: "Do you know what strikes me most? It is that the Orléacs were not so different from us, in the end. They simply wanted to be happy, to celebrate with those they loved. Their tragedy could have befallen us in any era. It reminds me how precious life is, how much every moment with the people we love matters."

Their discussion continues long into the night, punctuated by the soothing crackle of the fire and the soft laughter that accompanies their memories of the evening. They relive each moment: the arrival at the manor, the bewitching carols, the terrifying exploration, the paranormal phenomena, the vision of the massacre, then that of the happy banquet, and finally, the magnificent liberation of the spirits.

The inn, with its warm atmosphere and festive decorations, becomes the perfect refuge after their extraordinary adventure. They allow themselves to be enveloped by this authentic Christmas atmosphere, savouring each moment with a heightened awareness of its preciousness.

The proprietor passes by from time to time, refilling their cups, adding a log to the fire, smiling that smile that says: "I know, I understand, you have done something beautiful."

Finally, late in the night, exhausted but fulfilled, they retire to bed, each carrying with them the memory of this extraordinary evening.

Chapter XIII

The Departure from the Ardennes

The following morning, after a night of deep and restorative sleep, the kind of sleep that comes only after having accomplished something truly important, they awaken with the soft, rosy light of the winter dawn flooding their rooms. The inn is still peaceful, bathed in the sacred calm of Christmas morning. Through the windows, they can see the fresh snow that has continued to fall during the night, covering the village with an immaculate mantle, as if the entire world had been purified whilst they slept.

They take breakfast together, one last time in this inn that shall remain for ever associated with their adventure. The proprietor has prepared a feast: golden, crisp croissants, fresh bread, homemade jams, fragrant honey, perfectly cooked eggs, smoked ham, and creamy café au lait. Yet more than the food, it is the company, the camaraderie, the feeling of having shared something unique that makes this meal unforgettable.

After breakfast, they prepare their belongings with a certain melancholy. To leave means closing this chapter, returning to everyday life. But they also know that what they carry with them can never be taken away.

The proprietor, still smiling, accompanies them to the door. A spark of profound satisfaction gleams in his eyes, as if he knew that his little inn had played a part in something greater.

"You have brought something special here," he says softly. "I feel it in the air, in the light. The manor sleeps at last in peace, and it is thanks to you. You are always welcome should you ever pass this way again. Merry Christmas to you, my friends."

Mia shakes his hand warmly. "Thank you for everything... for your hospitality, for your silent wisdom, for guiding us without saying so. You have made this Christmas even more unforgettable."

Sofia kisses him on both cheeks in the French manner. "We shall return, I promise."

Théo gives him a fraternal embrace. "Take care of yourself. And thank you for believing in us."

They climb into the motor car, their hearts light yet filled with a gentle nostalgia, and take the road home. The journey is calm, almost meditative, each one reflecting upon the unique experience they have just lived, turning it over and over in their minds like a precious jewel examined from every angle.

The snow falling gently seems to accompany them, like a final sign of blessing from that magical night. The flakes dance before the windscreen, creating a hypnotic spectacle. The road winds through snow-covered forests, then slumbering villages, then white fields stretching as far as the eye can see.

Mia drives slowly, without haste, wishing to prolong this moment of transition between two worlds. "You know," she says pensively, "I wonder whether we shall be able to tell this story to anyone. Who would believe us? Who could truly understand what we experienced?"

Théo reflects for a moment. "Perhaps it is not meant to be told. Perhaps it is our secret, our personal treasure. Something we keep for the three of us, that binds us for ever."

Sofia shakes her head gently. "No, I think we must share it. Not the details, perhaps, but the message. That peace is possible, even after the worst tragedies. That forgiveness can liberate. That love is stronger than hatred. People need to hear that, especially now."

Mia smiles. "You are right. We shall find a way. Perhaps a video, an article, something that captures the essence of what we experienced without betraying the sacredness of the moment."

Approaching the city, the Christmas decorations illuminate the streets with their bright and joyful colours, recalling the universal warmth of the festive season. Shop windows sparkle, trees shine in the squares, families stroll bundled up in their coats. The trio observes all this with new eyes, a renewed appreciation for these simple moments of happiness.

The trio is serene, profoundly at peace, knowing that what they have experienced together has changed them for ever. They are no longer quite the same people who departed a few days earlier. They are wiser, more compassionate, more conscious of the fragility and beauty of life.

Sofia watches the lights pass by through the window, a dreamy smile upon her lips. "One might say this Christmas shall go down in the annals, mightn't one? In our personal annals, at any rate."

Théo laughs softly. "That is certain. It was not merely an ordinary Christmas with gifts beneath the tree and turkey with chestnuts. It was... a true adventure, a mission accomplished, a story that shall remain with us for ever. A story we shall perhaps tell to our grandchildren one day, hoping they believe us."

Mia takes a deep breath, feeling her heart overflow with gratitude and satisfaction. "This night... this night when we made a difference, when we brought peace to tormented souls, when we transformed pain into light... It is the most beautiful gift one can give. And the most beautiful gift one can receive."

She pauses, searching for the right words. "You know, during all those years when I have had these gifts, these visions, this sensitivity to energies... I have often wondered why. Why me? Why this ability that sometimes frightens me as much as it fascinates me? Now I know. It was for this night. To be able to see what no one else could see, to feel what no one else could feel, and to use this gift to do good."

Tears of joy stream down her cheeks. "And I could never have done it without you two. You are my strength, my anchor, my reason to continue. I love you both so much."

Sofia leans forward from the back seat, placing a hand upon Mia's shoulder. "We love you too. And we shall always be there, for the next adventure, whatever it may be."

Théo nods with emotion. "Always. It is the three of us against the world, against the darkness, for the light."

Chapter XIV

Reunions and Promises

Arriving home in the late afternoon, as the winter sun is already beginning to set, they park and remain seated in the motor car for a moment, reluctant to break the magical bubble that still surrounds them.

Finally, they alight, retrieve their belongings, and stand there in the snow that continues to fall gently, looking at one another with affection and gratitude.

They embrace in a long hug, all three together, forming a circle of warmth and friendship in the winter cold. It is an embrace that says all that words cannot express: the gratitude, the love, the pride, the joy, and the absolute certainty that they have accomplished something extraordinary together.

"Merry Christmas, my friends," murmurs Mia.

"Merry Christmas," reply Sofia and Théo in unison.

They part at last, each returning home with a full heart and a soul at peace. But this Christmas, this one, shall remain engraved in their memories, not for the material gifts or the sumptuous feasts, but for the true magic they experienced together, for the good they accomplished, for the lives they changed, those of the Orléacs, but also their own.

This Christmas, they know they have touched something eternal, something that transcends time and space. They have been the instruments of a transformation, the witnesses of a miracle, the artisans of a long-awaited peace.

And each year, when they see the first snows fall and hear the first Christmas carols resound in the frozen air, they shall remember that night at Orléac Manor, where the magic of Christmas shone brighter than ever, where love vanquished hatred, where light triumphed over darkness, and where three friends proved that even the most ancient wounds can be healed by compassion, courage, and faith in human goodness.

This story, their story, shall become their guiding star, their constant reminder that good exists in the world, that peace is possible, and that sometimes, in the darkest moments, the light of Christmas can guide us towards redemption.

And now, dear reader, as you close this book, as you leave the world of Orléac Manor to return to your own, we hope that you shall carry with you a little of this light, a little of this magic.

For Christmas is not merely a date upon the calendar, nor a tradition to be observed. Christmas is a state of mind, an opening of the heart, a possibility of transformation. It is the moment when we may choose to forgive, to heal, to reach out to those who suffer, to believe in goodness even when all seems dark.

As Mia, Sofia, and Théo discovered, each of us possesses the power to make a difference, to bring peace where chaos reigns, light where darkness persists. Sometimes it takes but a little courage, a little compassion, and the will to see beyond appearances.

So, in this Christmas season and for all the days to come, may you find your own Orléac Manor, that place within yourself or around you that needs healing, and may you have the courage to bring your light to it.

May the magic of Christmas illuminate your path, may peace dwell in your heart, and may love guide your every step.

Merry Christmas to you all, dear readers, and may this celebration be for you a moment of light, joy, and peace restored.

— *The End* —