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Urban Legend

The Castle of La Roche

Chapter I

Shadows of the Past

In the morning mist that shrouded the Castle of La Roche, a legend was about to come to life woven of love, betrayal, and ancestral mysteries.

The castle towers rose like stone sentinels, silent witnesses to the dramas that had unfolded within their walls over the centuries. Yet none would equal the one about to be written in blood and tears.

The Lord of La Roche, master of these lands, had summoned the bravest knights to a tournament of unprecedented grandeur, with his daughter's heart and hand as the prize, the fair Berthe de La Roche.

This trial was not merely a quest for glory; it promised union with the heiress of a vast domain. But behind this decision lay a secret the old lord guarded jealously: a war debt contracted years before, one that could only be honoured with his daughter's dowry.

In the apartments of the North Tower, Berthe de La Roche stood before the tall window, her gaze lost in the misty hills that undulated upon the horizon. At nineteen years of age, she embodied that delicate beauty of dawn roses, yet it was her soul that rendered her truly exceptional. Since childhood, she had taken refuge in the illuminations of courtly romances, dreaming of a love as pure as that of Lancelot for Guinevere, as passionate as that of Tristan for Iseult.

Her lady-in-waiting, Dame Mathilde, watched her with tenderness whilst brushing her mistress's long chestnut tresses.

— My sweet child, said the old lady in a gentle voice, are you still dreaming of your Prince Charming?

— Oh, Dame Mathilde, sighed Berthe, turning round, her hazel eyes bright with emotion. Is it so very wrong to believe in true love? To desire a heart that beats in unison with mine, rather than a title or a fortune?

The old attendant shook her head with a melancholy smile. She knew all too well the cruel world of noble alliances to share her young mistress's idealism.

That very evening, as the setting sun set the sky ablaze with gold and purple, the Lord of La Roche summoned his daughter to the great hall. Berthe went thither, her heart beating with a dull apprehension. Her father, seated in his imposing seigneurial chair, seemed to have aged ten

years. His hands, once firm and assured, trembled slightly as he held a goblet of wine.

— My daughter, he began in a grave voice, the time has come for you to take a husband. I have organised a grand tournament. The most valiant knights of the region shall compete to win your hand.

The blood froze in Berthe's veins. She knew that tone, that inflexible determination. Yet she took a step forward, her hands clasped together.

— Father, she murmured, I beseech you... Grant me time. I am not ready to...

— Time is a luxury we can no longer afford! he thundered, striking the armrest of his chair.

A heavy silence fell. The Lord of La Roche rose with difficulty and approached his daughter. For the first time, Berthe saw in his eyes not anger, but a profound weariness mingled with regret.

— My child, he continued more gently, you cannot understand the burden that weighs upon my shoulders. There are debts... obligations I must honour. This tournament, this marriage... it is our sole chance to preserve our name, our lands, your future.

Tears welled in Berthe's eyes, yet she held them back. A question burned upon her lips, a question she dreaded to ask.

— The Count of Monségure... shall he be amongst the suitors?

— He has been invited, as befits a man of his rank.

These words fell upon Berthe like a sentence of death. The Count of Monségure. The mere sound of his name made her feel ill. He was a man of some forty years, with a weathered face and boorish manners. He had coveted her for years, never missing an opportunity to make improper advances at banquets. His lecherous gaze followed her like an unwholesome shadow, and his compliments invariably sounded like veiled threats.

— Father, I implore you, she pleaded, her voice breaking. Not him. Never him. He is brutal, authoritarian—he frightens me. I could never...

— The tournament shall decide, her father interrupted in a tone that brooked no reply. The most valiant shall prevail. Thus it is. Now, go and prepare yourself. The tournament begins in three days.

Berthe left the hall, her heart broken. In the corridor, she collapsed against the cold stone wall, at last letting her tears flow freely. How could her father, who had loved her so dearly, who had told her tales of chivalric love when she was a child, deliver her thus?

That night, lying in her canopied bed, Berthe could not find sleep. She prayed to all the saints in paradise, imploring that a miracle might occur, that a true knight, worthy of her wildest dreams, might come to save her from this nightmarish fate.

She knew not that leagues away, her prayers were about to be answered... but in a manner she could never have imagined.

Chapter II

The Broken Oath

In the County of Salm, three days' ride from the Castle of La Roche, the Countess Alix de Salm stood before the hearth in her chamber, contemplating the flames that danced like demons in the gloom. She was of striking beauty: long hair black as a raven's wing, eyes of a deep green in which a keen intelligence shone, and a bearing that commanded respect. At five-and-twenty years of age, she was one of the most sought-after women in the kingdom.

But this evening, her heart was a raw wound that refused to heal.

In her hand, she clutched a crumpled parchment, a letter that had destroyed her world three weeks before. The words were branded in her memory like red-hot iron:

— My dearest Alix, duty calls me to higher destinies. I cannot honour our engagement. Understand that love, however sincere, cannot stand against the necessities of our rank. I am to compete in the tournament at La Roche. May the Lord grant you the peace I could not give you. Sire Alaric de Monfort.

Sire Alaric de Monfort. The man she had loved for three years. The man who, kneeling in the rose garden the previous summer, had sworn to her eternal love. The man who had asked for her hand before witnesses, sealing their promised union with a silver ring adorned with an emerald. The man who had betrayed her for a larger dowry.

Alix cast the letter into the flames and watched it be consumed. The first nights after this betrayal, she had wept. Then the pain had transformed into a cold, implacable rage. How could she have been so naïve? How could she have believed that love might triumph in this world of calculations and self-interest?

— My lady, ventured her lady's companion from the threshold, you should rest. This obsession is consuming you...

— Leave me! hissed Alix without turning.

Alone once more, Alix paced her chamber. Vengeance. The word echoed in her mind like a war drum. She wanted Alaric to suffer as she had suffered. She wanted to see him humiliated, vanquished, destroyed.

But how? She was merely a woman in a world of men. No knight would consent to bear her colours for such a motive. No political machination could quench her thirst for justice.

It was then that a terrible thought took root in her mind. A thought she had pushed away, but which returned ceaselessly, like a diabolical temptation.

In ancient tales, in the forbidden grimoires of her late father's library, she had read stories of dark pacts, of powers granted to those who dared defy divine law. Legends of accursed crossroads where one could summon forces older than Christendom itself.

Alix shivered. Was she truly prepared to cross that line? To damn her soul to satisfy her vengeance?

Her gaze fell upon the crucifix above her bed. Had God protected her from betrayal? Had the saints she had prayed to with such fervour spared her this pain?

— Since Heaven abandons me, she murmured in a trembling voice, I shall turn to Hell.

That night, beneath a moon veiled by sombre clouds, Alix de Salm secretly left her castle, wrapped in a black cloak. She made her way to the Crossroads of the Three Hanged Men, a sinister place where, it was said, three thieves had been executed and whose souls still wandered. The place was deserted, haunted by the cries of crows and the unsettling whisper of the wind through dead branches.

At the stroke of midnight, Alix traced a circle of salt upon the frozen ground. Her hands trembled, yet her voice was firm as she uttered the forbidden words, the incantations she had discovered in her father's grimoires. The wind rose suddenly, swirling about her like a living entity. The stars seemed to extinguish one by one.

Then, from the void, a voice arose. Neither masculine nor feminine, a voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

— Alix de Salm. You have called me, and I have come. What do you desire enough to offer your soul in exchange?

— I want vengeance. I want the strength to vanquish him who betrayed me. I want Alaric de Monfort to suffer as I have suffered.

— Vengeance has its price, Alix de Salm. Are you prepared to pay it?

— My soul is already damned by the pain he has inflicted upon me. What matter if I lose it in truth?

A low, terrifying laugh echoed through the night.

— Very well. I grant you the transformation. You shall become a knight, the most handsome and valiant the world has ever known. No man shall be able to defeat you in combat. You shall keep this form until you reveal your true identity to she or he who has conquered your heart. But know this: should this revelation lead to tragedy, your soul shall belong to me for all eternity. Do you accept this pact?

Alix hesitated for an instant. The terms of the pact were more complex than she had imagined. But the pain of betrayal was too raw, the thirst for vengeance too powerful.

— I accept.

The instant these words passed her lips, a searing pain coursed through her. Her body began to burn from within, as though every bone, every muscle were transforming. She fell to her knees, stifling a cry. The transformation seemed to last an eternity.

When at last the pain ceased, Alix rose slowly. She looked down at her hands... which were no longer her own. Larger hands, stronger hands, a man's hands. Her voice, when she attempted to speak, was deep and powerful. Her entire body had been transformed.

In the reflection of a puddle, she discovered her new countenance: masculine features of an almost surreal beauty, piercing blue eyes, a square and noble jaw. She had become Sir Alaric... a name she chose with bitter irony, taking that of her betrayer the better to destroy him.

The demonic voice echoed one final time:

— Go, Alaric. Your vengeance awaits you at the Castle of La Roche. But remember: the love you seek to destroy may well become your own affliction.

Alix, now Alaric, did not comprehend the meaning of this warning. All that mattered was the road to La Roche, to the tournament, to the destruction of him who had broken her heart.

Chapter III

The Tournament of All Destinies

The day of the tournament dawned in an explosion of colours and sounds. Banners snapped in the wind, bearing the coats of arms of the greatest families in the kingdom. Trumpets sounded, heralding the arrival of each knight. The courtyard of the Castle of La Roche was transformed beyond recognition into a theatre of glory and spectacle.

Several knights presenting themselves as suitors passed through the castle's heavy gates that day. Amongst them, the Count of Monségure, clad in massive, ornate armour, his imposing presence immediately commanding attention. He was a formidable warrior, a veteran of many battles, and his calculating gaze already searched for the gallery where Berthe would be seated.

Sire Alaric de Monfort was likewise present, resplendent in his golden armour, saluting the crowd with the assurance of a man accustomed to honours. He knew not that divine vengeance rode towards him.

But it was the arrival of the mysterious black knight that turned every head.

He appeared at twilight on the first day, as the sun tinged the sky with purple and gold. Mounted upon a destrier black as night, clad in sombre armour that seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it, he advanced towards the arena in stunned silence. His helm revealed nothing of his features, yet something in his bearing, in his very presence, commanded respect.

From the gallery of honour, Berthe observed the scene, her heart beating fast. She had spent the day watching the suitors parade past with a growing sense of despair. The Count of Monségure had won three jousts, crushing his opponents with a brutality that made her shudder. Each victory brought him closer to her, and the thought filled her with the desire to flee.

But when the black knight entered the arena, something changed within her. An inexplicable intuition, a shiver that was not of fear but almost of recognition.

— Who is he? she murmured to Dame Mathilde, seated beside her.

— No one knows, my lady. He has declared neither identity nor lineage. He calls himself simply Sir Alaric.

Sir Alaric. The name resonated strangely in Berthe's mind, like an echo of a life she had never lived.

Beneath her helm, Alix observed the arena with conflicting emotions. The transformation had granted her far more than the appearance of a man: she now possessed supernatural strength, a mastery of arms that surpassed that of any mortal warrior. Yet she also discovered something unexpected: freedom. As a man, she could walk without being scrutinised, speak without being interrupted, exist without being constantly judged upon her appearance or virtue. It was intoxicating and terrible in equal measure.

Her gaze swept the crowd until she found what she sought: Alaric de Monfort, her former betrothed, he who had betrayed her. He stood near his mount, adjusting his armour, unaware of the fate about to befall him.

Yet as she prepared to enter the lists, her gaze was drawn to the gallery of honour. A young woman stood there, clad in a gown of deep blue that enhanced the brightness of her eyes. Berthe de La Roche.

Alix felt something tighten in her chest. The young woman was beautiful, certainly, yet it was not her beauty that captivated. It was the sadness in her eyes, the resignation mingled with hope that could be read upon her countenance. It was the reflection of a soul that, like her own, had suffered, that dreamt of something better.

— No, murmured Alix to herself. Do not allow yourself to be distracted. You have come for vengeance, not for...

But the words died upon her lips. Something had just changed. The diabolical pact had begun to weave its web, far beyond what Alix could have imagined.

The tournament promised to be a trial wherein the fate of several lives would be sealed by iron and blood.

Chapter IV

The Clash of Blades

The first jousts followed one upon another in a clash of metal and the roar of the crowd. The Count of Monségure, as anticipated, swept aside his opponents with brutal efficiency. Every knight he faced ended unhorsed in the dust, sometimes even wounded. The crowd acclaimed his strength, yet Berthe shuddered at each victory. She perceived in these displays of power not bravery, but the barely contained violence of a man accustomed to taking what he desired.

Alaric de Monfort, her former betrothed, likewise distinguished himself. More elegant than Monségure, he combined technique and strength with a grace that earned him the admiration of the ladies of the court. Yet beneath her helm, Alix, disguised as the black knight, watched him with a mingling of rage and contempt. Every smile he bestowed upon the crowd, every graceful salute, rekindled the wound of betrayal.

Then came the moment when Sir Alaric, the mysterious black knight, entered the arena for his first joust.

His opponent was a massive knight, renowned for having taken part in the Crusades. The man saluted the crowd with confidence, certain of victory against this unknown challenger. Yet the instant the trumpets gave the signal, something extraordinary occurred.

The black knight charged with a speed that defied the laws of nature. His destrier seemed to fly rather than gallop. The lance struck with surgical precision, and the crusader was hurled from his mount like a leaf in a tempest. The stunned silence that followed was swiftly replaced by thunderous cheering.

Berthe rose from her seat, her heart pounding. She had never witnessed such a display of mastery. This was not the brutality of Monségure, nor the calculated elegance of Monfort. This was something altogether different, something almost supernatural.

— By all the saints, murmured Dame Mathilde. Who is this man? An angel or a demon?

— I know not, replied Berthe, her eyes fixed upon the black knight calmly returning to his place. Yet I have the strangest feeling that my destiny is bound to his.

The days that followed confirmed the black knight's overwhelming superiority. He faced and vanquished all his opponents with disconcerting

ease. Yet what fascinated the crowd most was his silence. Unlike the other knights who puffed out their chests and paraded after their victories, Sir Alaric remained distant, almost melancholic. He attended not the banquets, sought not the company of the nobles. He seemed to bear an invisible burden.

The fifth day of the tournament brought the confrontation Alix had awaited with feverish impatience: her duel against Alaric de Monfort, the man who had betrayed her.

When the names of the combatants were announced, a murmur rippled through the crowd. Alaric de Monfort, the handsome golden knight, against the mysterious black warrior. It would be a spectacle to remember.

Monfort entered the arena with his customary assurance, saluting the nobles in the stands. Yet when his gaze met that of the black knight, something in those piercing blue eyes made him shiver. There was an intensity there, a barely contained fury that was not that of a mere opponent.

Beneath her helm, Alix trembled, not from fear, but from a rage so pure it was almost painful. At last. At last, she would make him pay for his betrayal. The demonic magic coursing through her veins amplified her every emotion, transforming her resentment into a destructive force.

The trumpets sounded. The two knights charged.

The clash was titanic. The lances shattered in an explosion of wooden splinters, yet neither knight fell. The crowd roared with excitement. They made another pass, then another. Each time, the blows were of unprecedented violence, yet both adversaries held firm.

At length, the herald of arms announced that the combat would continue with swords.

What followed was a deadly ballet of terrifying beauty. Monfort was an excellent swordsman, yet the black knight moved as though he could anticipate every attack. Blow after blow, parry after parry, the dance continued beneath the burning sun. Sweat ran beneath their armour, muscles burned, yet neither would yield.

Then, in a movement of lightning speed, Sir Alaric delivered a thrust that sent Monfort's sword flying. The black knight's blade came to rest at his opponent's throat.

The silence was absolute. The crowd held its breath.

Alix gazed upon the man she had loved, now at her mercy. She could have slain him. A single movement, and all would be ended. Vengeance would be accomplished.

Yet something stayed her hand. It was not pity. It was something deeper a sudden realisation: to kill him would be too simple, too swift. She wanted him to suffer as she had suffered. She wanted him to live with the weight of his defeat, with the humiliation of having been bested by a stranger.

— Live with your shame, she murmured in a voice that Monfort alone could hear. And remember that you were vanquished by the one you betrayed.

Monfort's eyes widened. That voice... there was something familiar about it, something that stirred a buried memory. Yet before he could comprehend, the black knight withdrew his sword and turned away.

The crowd erupted in cheering. The black knight had defeated one of the finest warriors in the kingdom.

In the gallery of honour, Berthe felt something break within her. It was not disappointment at seeing Monfort vanquished, but rather a strange certainty: this mysterious knight had just offered her a hope she had believed lost.

Chapter V

The Final Combat

On the seventh day, the tournament reached its climax. Only two suitors remained in the lists: the Count of Monségure and the mysterious Sir Alaric. The final that lay ahead promised to be legendary.

The Count of Monségure, frustrated at having a rival of such calibre, had spent the night sharpening his weapons and preparing his strategy. He would not fight honourably. He would prevail, by whatever means necessary. This girl and her dowry were his by right.

Berthe, for her part, had not closed her eyes. She had prayed throughout the night, imploring heaven that the black knight might triumph. For the first time since the announcement of the tournament, she dared to hope. Even though she knew not the identity of this mysterious warrior, she felt that he represented her last chance to escape Monségure.

Dawn broke in an explosion of blood-red colours. Storm clouds gathered upon the horizon, as though the very sky sensed the drama about to unfold.

The two knights entered the arena to the deafening cheers of the crowd. The Count of Monségure, massive and intimidating in his iron armour, raised his sword towards the stands in a theatrical gesture. Sir Alaric, silent as ever, contented himself with a sober salute in the direction of the gallery where Berthe sat.

This simple gesture set the young woman's heart racing. There was something in that salute that resembled a promise.

The trumpets sounded.

The combat that ensued was of unprecedented violence. Monségure fought with the rage of a wounded boar, unleashing powerful blows that would have shattered any other opponent. Yet the black knight dodged, parried, and riposted with an almost supernatural grace.

Beneath her helm, Alix felt the demonic magic pulsing through her veins, multiplying her strength and reflexes tenfold. Yet she also discovered something unexpected: she was fighting no longer solely for vengeance, but to protect the young woman who watched from the gallery. Berthe, whom she knew not, yet who had mysteriously become important to her.

The Count of Monségure, sensing that he was losing the advantage, resolved to resort to guile. In an apparently clumsy movement, he cast a

handful of sand into his opponent's eyes. The crowd howled its indignation, but the damage was done.

Temporarily blinded, Sir Alaric staggered backwards. Monségure seized the opportunity and delivered a massive blow that should have been fatal.

Yet something extraordinary occurred.

Without seeing, guided solely by magically heightened instinct, the black knight parried the blow. Then, in a movement of perfect fluidity, he counter-attacked. His sword traced an arc and struck Monségure's armour with such force that the count was hurled to the ground in a metallic crash.

The point of the sword came to rest upon the vanquished count's throat.

The silence that followed was absolute. Even the crows seemed to have fallen mute.

— I... I yield, stammered Monségure, all his grandeur fled.

The black knight withdrew his sword and straightened. The Lord of La Roche rose from his seat, his hands trembling.

— Sir Alaric, unknown amongst us, by your bravery and valour, you have won the right to wed my daughter, Berthe de La Roche!

The crowd erupted in cheers. The trumpets sounded. The banners fluttered in the wind.

Yet in Alix's heart, a tempest raged. She had won. She had accomplished her vengeance by humiliating Monfort and preventing Monségure from claiming Berthe. But now she found herself facing a situation she had not foreseen: she was to wed this young woman.

And most terrifying of all, she no longer knew whether she wished it from duty... or from desire.

Chapter VI

The First Glance

That very evening, a banquet was held in honour of the victor. The great hall of the castle had been decorated with a magnificence worthy of the royal court. Tapestries depicting scenes of chivalry adorned the walls, the tables groaned beneath the most refined dishes, and the minstrels played their finest melodies.

Alix, still concealed beneath her masculine appearance, was seated at the table of honour. She had removed her helm for the first time in public, revealing the face that magic had bestowed upon her: features of an almost surreal beauty, hypnotic blue eyes, a noble jaw, and black hair that framed her face with elegance.

An admiring murmur rippled through the assembly. The mysterious black knight was not only the most valiant, but also the most handsome of warriors.

Berthe made her entrance some moments later, escorted by her father. She wore a gown of deep green silk that enhanced her hazel eyes and chestnut hair. Pearls were woven through her tresses, and an emerald pendant adorned her neck. She was of a simple yet striking beauty.

When their gazes met, something electric passed between them.

Alix felt her heart miss a beat. It was the first time she had truly seen Berthe at close quarters. The young woman was not merely beautiful; there was in her eyes a gentleness, a sensitivity that spoke directly to the soul. Yet also something deeper: a quiet strength, a dignity that had not been broken despite the ordeal she had endured.

Berthe, for her part, felt troubled in a manner she had never known. This knight, her saviour, emanated something indefinable. There was in his eyes a depth that suggested he had suffered, that he knew pain. And something else besides, something she could not identify yet which resonated within her like a familiar echo.

— My daughter, said the Lord of La Roche in a voice laden with emotion, here is Sir Alaric, your future husband.

Berthe made a graceful curtsey. Alix rose and bowed respectfully.

— Lady Berthe, said Alix in a voice she strove to keep deep and masculine, it is an immense honour that is bestowed upon me this evening.

The voice was deep, certainly, yet there was within it a gentleness, a musicality that surprised Berthe. This was not the rough voice of Monségure nor the arrogance of Monfort. This was something different.

— The honour is mine, my lord, replied Berthe. You have saved me from a fate I dreaded. For that, I shall be eternally grateful.

The Lord of La Roche smiled, pleased to see his daughter so gracious, and left them to sit side by side.

The banquet proceeded in an atmosphere of celebration, yet for Alix and Berthe, the outside world seemed to fade away. They exchanged furtive glances, shy smiles. Each time their hands brushed whilst reaching for a cup or a piece of fruit, an electric charge coursed through them.

— Tell me, Sir Alaric, Berthe ventured at last, whence do you come? Your accent suggests the Northern lands, yet your style of combat is unique.

Alix hesitated. Lying had become second nature since her transformation, yet something in Berthe's eyes made her wish to be honest.

— I come from afar, she replied cautiously. From a place where wounds of the soul run deeper than those of the body.

Berthe nodded gently, understanding more than Alix would have wished.

— I understand suffering, she murmured. I too have known the betrayal of those in whom I had placed my trust. My father, whom I love nonetheless, was prepared to deliver me to the Count of Monségure for reasons I do not entirely comprehend.

Alix felt something break within her chest. This young woman, like herself, had been wounded by those she loved. They shared the same pain, the same solitude.

— Perhaps, said Alix softly, we are two wounded souls who have found one another.

Berthe raised her eyes to her, and in that gaze, Alix saw something that terrified and enchanted her in equal measure: hope. A fragile hope, yet real.

The evening continued, yet something irrevocable had occurred. The vengeance Alix had so desired was beginning to lose its importance. In its place grew a sentiment far more dangerous, far more devastating.

She was falling in love.

The days that followed the tournament were at once the most beautiful and the most tormenting of Alix's life. The wedding was planned for the

following week, and each moment spent with Berthe wove a bond ever deeper, ever more impossible to sever.

The Lord of La Roche, relieved and delighted by the outcome of the tournament, had insisted that the young betrothed should come to know one another. Thus, each afternoon, Alix and Berthe strolled through the castle gardens, accompanied at a respectful distance by Dame Mathilde.

These walks became the most precious moments for the two women, even though one remained ignorant of the other's true nature.

One particularly radiant afternoon, as they walked along an avenue bordered by flowering rose bushes, Berthe stopped before a bush of white roses. She plucked one delicately and turned towards Alix.

— Do you know what white roses symbolise, my lord? she asked with a shy smile.

— I confess I do not, admitted Alix. Pray enlighten me, my lady.

— Purity, sincerity... and new beginnings. Berthe held out the flower to Alix, their fingers brushing in the exchange.

Alix took the rose, her heart constricted. Sincerity. The word echoed within her like a condemnation. She who lived in the most absolute falsehood, who concealed not only her identity but her very nature.

— Berthe, she said softly, using her Christian name for the first time without title. May I ask you a question?

— Of course.

— Are you afraid? Of this marriage, of me, of the unknown that I represent?

Berthe reflected for a moment, her gaze losing itself in the horizon where the sun was beginning its descent.

— I ought to be afraid, she admitted. You are a mystery, a man whose family I know not, whose past I know not, whose true face beneath the mask you wear I know not. And yet... She turned towards Alix, her hazel eyes bright with sincere emotion. When I look upon you, I feel not fear. I feel... hope. As though, for the first time in my life, I might be myself with someone.

These words struck Alix like dagger blows. Berthe was offering her precisely what she had always desired: acceptance, understanding, love without judgement. And she was doing so in complete ignorance of the truth.

— And you, Alaric? asked Berthe gently. Are you afraid?

Alix closed her eyes for an instant. How to answer without lying further? How to express the terror that grew within her with each passing moment?

— I am afraid, she confessed, her voice trembling slightly. I fear I shall not be worthy of your expectations. I am afraid that the truth of who I am... of what I am... shall destroy what we are building together.

Berthe gently placed her hand upon Alix's.

— We all have secrets, she murmured. Parts of ourselves that we hide from the world. But true love—is it not precisely accepting the other in their entirety? Even their shadows?

If only you knew, thought Alix in despair. If only you knew the extent of my shadows.

That evening, as Alix returned to her apartments in the West Tower that had been assigned to her, she found herself before a mirror. Her reflection gazed back at her: this man she had become, this lie made flesh.

She placed her hand upon the cold glass.

— What have I done? she murmured to her reflection. I came for vengeance, and now... now I am a prisoner of my own trap.

A low, terrifying laugh echoed through the chamber. Alix spun round, her heart pounding. In the shadow near the hearth, a silhouette took shape, as black as a starless night.

— A prisoner of your own trap, repeated the demonic voice. How poetic. Is that not precisely what I foretold?

— What do you want from me? hissed Alix. Our pact is clear. I keep this form until I reveal my true identity to she who has conquered my heart.

— Precisely. And you have already breached the terms of our agreement.

— How so? I have revealed nothing!

— You have allowed your heart to be conquered. Berthe de La Roche has won what you had lost: your love. And according to our pact, you must reveal the truth to her.

Alix felt the blood freeze in her veins.

— No, she murmured. Not yet. I am not ready...

— Time is no longer yours, Alix de Salm. The wedding approaches. And with it, the moment of truth. Remember: if your revelation leads to tragedy, your soul shall belong to me for all eternity.

The shadow vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving Alix alone in the oppressive silence of her chamber. She collapsed upon the floor, her head in her hands.

The trap was closing. Whatever she did henceforth, she was condemned.

Chapter VII

The Week of Preparations

The days preceding the wedding were a whirlwind of feverish activity. The Castle of La Roche was being transformed into a vision from a fairy tale. Servants ran hither and thither, hanging garlands of flowers, polishing the silver, preparing the most refined dishes.

The Lord of La Roche, despite the debts that tormented him, had resolved to organise the most sumptuous nuptials the kingdom had ever witnessed. It was his way of making amends to his daughter, of compensating for the fact that he had nearly delivered her to Monségure.

One evening, he summoned Berthe to his private library. The young woman found him seated by the hearth, holding in his trembling hands a miniature portrait of a woman of great beauty.

— Mother, murmured Berthe, recognising the portrait. You are thinking of her?

— Every day, he replied in a broken voice. Your mother was my star, my reason for living. When she died bringing you into the world, a part of me died with her.

Berthe knelt beside her father, resting her head upon his knees as she had done in childhood.

— My child, he continued, stroking her hair, I must tell you the truth. The debts of which I spoke... they are not financial. During the war against the Saracens, I made a terrible oath. To save the lives of my men, I promised a cruel lord that I would give him my daughter in marriage.

Berthe straightened abruptly, her eyes wide.

— Who? she breathed. Who was this man?

— The Count of Monségure.

The blood froze in Berthe's veins.

— That is why you organised the tournament, she murmured. To honour your oath whilst giving me a chance to escape that fate.

— I hoped that another knight would defeat him, confessed her father. I could not break my oath, but I could at least give you a chance. And God heard my prayers. He sent you Sir Alaric.

Berthe clasped her father's hands.

— Father, you ought to have told me sooner. I would have understood.

— I did not wish you to hate me. You are all that remains to me of your mother. Tears now flowed freely down his cheeks. Be happy, my child. With Sir Alaric, be happier than I ever was.

That night, Berthe wept in Dame Mathilde's arms. She wept for her father and the burden he had borne alone. She wept with relief at having escaped Monségure. And she wept with joy at the thought of wedding Alaric, this mysterious man who had awakened in her feelings she had believed possible only in romances.

The Wedding Day

The wedding day dawned in an explosion of golden light. The sky was of a pure blue, without the slightest cloud, as though paradise itself were blessing this union. The bells rang out in full peal, their joyous melody resounding throughout the valley.

The castle was transformed beyond recognition. Banners in the colours of La Roche flew from every tower. The gardens had been turned into an earthly paradise, with avenues of rose petals leading to the chapel, fountains adorned with white lilies, and arches of flowers beneath which the bride and groom would pass.

In her chamber, Berthe was surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, who helped her prepare. Her gown was a masterpiece of white silk embroidered with silver thread, depicting motifs of roses and doves. A veil of fine lace rested upon her hair, held in place by a crown of orange blossoms. She was breathtakingly beautiful.

— My lady, you are magnificent, murmured Dame Mathilde, tears in her eyes. Your mother would be so proud.

Berthe gazed at herself in the mirror and saw not a resigned bride, but a woman radiant with hope and love. For the first time in her life, she was marrying by choice, by desire, by a feeling that both surpassed and elevated her.

In the West Tower, Alix was enduring a very different torment. Clad in her bridegroom's attire—a tunic of black velvet embroidered with gold thread, she contemplated the day that lay ahead with a mingling of intense joy and absolute terror.

She was about to wed Berthe. She was about to pronounce vows that, in her heart, were sincere. Yet these vows were founded upon a colossal lie. And this evening, on the wedding night, she would have to reveal the truth.

The pact was clear: she must reveal her true identity to she who had conquered her heart. And Berthe had conquered her heart, beyond any doubt.

— How will she react? murmured Alix to her reflection. How could she possibly accept such deception?

But it was too late to retreat. Fate had been set in motion, and nothing could now stop it.

The ceremony took place in the castle chapel, magnificently decorated for the occasion. The stained-glass windows cast rainbows of coloured light upon the assembly. The air was fragrant with incense and flowers.

When Berthe made her entrance upon her father's arm, an admiring murmur ran through the gathering. She advanced slowly towards the altar, her gaze fixed upon Alaric who awaited her, and in her eyes shone a love so pure, so complete, that Alix felt her heart break.

The priest began the ceremony, his solemn voice resonating beneath the stone vaults.

— Dearly beloved, we are gathered here on this blessed day to unite in the sacred bonds of matrimony Sir Alaric and Lady Berthe de La Roche.

The vows were exchanged. When Alix's turn came to promise love and fidelity, her voice trembled with emotion.

— I, Alaric, take thee, Berthe, to be my wife, and give myself to thee to love thee faithfully, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

In pronouncing these words, Alix knew them to be true. She loved Berthe, with a love deeper than anything she had ever known. And it was precisely this that rendered the situation so tragic.

Berthe spoke her own vows in a clear, assured voice, her eyes never leaving Alaric's.

— I love you, she murmured as the priest blessed their union. More than words can say.

When their lips met for the nuptial kiss, Alix felt the entire world fade away. There was nothing but this instant, this moment of perfection where all seemed possible.

Yet deep in her soul, she knew that this moment was as fragile as a dream at dawn, destined to shatter with the light of day.

The banquet that followed was sumptuous. The tables groaned beneath the most refined dishes: roasted swans, boar en croûte, tarts with candied

fruits, mead, and wines of the finest vintages. The minstrels played, the jesters amused the company, and joy seemed to reign unchallenged.

Yet for Alix, each passing instant was a step closer to the inevitable revelation.

As the sun sank towards the horizon, tinting the sky with purple and gold, the dreaded moment arrived. It was time for the newlyweds to retire to their apartments in the castle's high tower.

Chapter VIII

The Night of Revelation

The bridal chamber was a splendour. Perfumed candles diffused a soft, golden light. The canopied bed was covered with sheets of white silk strewn with rose petals. Incense burned gently, filling the air with an intoxicating fragrance. Everything had been prepared for a night of love and passion.

Yet for Alix, it was a chamber of torture.

Berthe entered first, escorted by her ladies who prepared her for the night. They removed the heavy wedding gown and clothed her in a nightdress of fine linen, almost transparent. Her hair was loosened, cascading over her shoulders in silken waves.

— Be not afraid, my lady, murmured Dame Mathilde, kissing her forehead. Love shall guide you.

Once alone, Berthe sat upon the edge of the bed, her heart beating with anticipation and a slight apprehension. She waited, listening to the sounds of the castle as it settled for the night.

Then the door opened, and Alaric entered.

Alix's heart beat so hard she feared it might burst. She advanced slowly into the chamber, closing the door behind her. Berthe rose, a shy smile upon her lips.

— My husband, she murmured. Alone at last.

Alix approached, each step costing her a superhuman effort. She halted a few paces from Berthe, drinking in the sight of this woman she loved more than her own life.

— Berthe, she began, her voice strangled with emotion. There is something I must tell you. Something I ought to have told you from the very first day.

Berthe's smile wavered slightly.

— What is it? You frighten me...

— I too am afraid, confessed Alix. I fear the truth shall destroy what we have built together. But I can no longer live in falsehood. Not with you. You deserve the truth, the whole truth.

She drew a deep breath. It was now or never. The terms of the pact were clear: she must reveal her true identity.

— My name is not Alaric. I am not... I am not what you believe.

As she spoke these words, she felt the magic begin to dissipate. The pain was searing, as though every cell in her body were being torn apart and reformed. She fell to her knees, gasping.

Berthe rushed towards her, but stopped short, her eyes wide with horror and incomprehension. Before her eyes, Alaric's body was changing. The masculine form was shrinking, the features of the face softening, the shoulders becoming more slender.

When the transformation was complete, it was no longer Sir Alaric who stood before her, but a woman. A woman with long black hair, intense green eyes, a face of heartrending beauty.

Alix de Salm.

— My name is Alix, she murmured, tears streaming down her cheeks. I am... I was the Countess of Salm. I made a pact with the devil to avenge myself upon the man who had betrayed me. I came to this tournament disguised as a knight, driven by hatred and the desire for vengeance. But I had not foreseen... I had not foreseen falling in love with you.

The silence that followed was absolute. Berthe stared at her, her face passing through a succession of emotions: shock, disbelief, betrayal, anguish.

— No, she murmured, stepping back. No, this cannot be. This is a nightmare. This is not real...

— It is the truth, sobbed Alix. Everything was false. The appearance, the name, the...

— Everything was false, repeated Berthe, her voice rising in hysteria. Everything you told me, everything you made me feel... it was a lie!

— No! cried Alix, rising to her feet. Not the love! My feelings for you are the only true thing in this entire story. I love you, Berthe. I love you with all my being. That is why I could no longer lie to you.

But her words fell into the void. Berthe continued to retreat, shaking her head, tears streaming down her face.

— You deceived me. You made me believe... you made me believe I had found my soulmate. My Prince Charming. And all of it... all of it was nothing but an illusion. A cruel jest.

— Berthe, I beseech you, hear me...

— No! screamed Berthe. How could I believe a single word from your lips? You are a liar! A creature of the devil!

These words struck Alix like dagger blows. She saw in Berthe's eyes no longer the love that had shone there moments before, but disgust, revulsion.

Berthe rushed towards the door, but Alix caught her, grasping her arm.

— Let me go! sobbed Berthe. I never wish to see you again! I cannot... I cannot live with this shame! With this betrayal!

She wrenched herself free and ran towards the window. In her distress, she had but one thought: to flee, to escape this unbearable reality.

Alix realised too late what Berthe was about to do.

— No! Berthe, no!

She rushed towards the window, but her fingers grasped only empty air. Berthe had climbed over the sill and cast herself into the void, preferring death to the horror of what she had just learned.

Alix's scream rent the night. She looked down at Berthe's broken body lying in the courtyard below, and felt her world collapse.

It was not vengeance she had obtained. It was damnation.

The demonic voice echoed through the chamber, triumphant.

— Your revelation has led to tragedy, Alix de Salm. According to the terms of our pact, your soul belongs to me henceforth. For all eternity.

Alix did not reply. She gazed upon Berthe's body below, and an absolute certainty seized her. She could not live in a world where Berthe did not exist. She could not bear this burden of guilt.

— If my soul already belongs to you, she murmured, then it matters not where I go now.

Without hesitation, she climbed upon the window ledge.

— My love, she murmured, gazing one last time upon the starlit sky. Forgive me. I come to join you.

And she let herself fall into the void, joining in death she whom she had loved in life.

Chapter IX

The Bloody Dawn

Dawn rose over the Castle of La Roche in a silence of death. The first light of day revealed the horror of the night.

It was a servant who discovered them first: two bodies entwined at the foot of the great tower, as though, even in death, they had sought to be reunited. Blood had formed a dark pool around them, yet upon their faces, strangely, there was no pain. Rather a kind of peace, as though death had been a deliverance.

The servant's cries awakened the entire castle. People rushed to the windows, and horror spread like wildfire. The day of celebration had become a day of mourning.

The Lord of La Roche came running down, his heart already broken before he had even seen the scene. When he discovered the body of his only daughter, she for whom he had organised the tournament, she whom he had wished to protect from the Count of Monségure, he let out a howl that froze the blood of all who heard it.

— No! No! Not her! Not my child!

He collapsed beside Berthe's body, taking her in his arms, cradling her as he had done when she was a child. His tears mingled with his daughter's blood.

Then his gaze fell upon the other body. That of a woman with black hair, clad in the garments of Sir Alaric. Confusion mingled with grief.

— Who... who is this woman? he asked in a broken voice.

It was an old man, a minstrel who had travelled throughout the kingdom, who recognised the face.

— It is the Countess Alix de Salm, my lord. She was said to have been missing for weeks.

The mystery began to unravel, piece by piece. In the bridal chamber, they found a letter that Alix had written just before her final transformation, a letter explaining everything: the betrayal of Alaric de Monfort, the demonic pact, the vengeance that had transformed into love, and the inevitable tragedy that had ensued.

The Lord of La Roche read the letter with a trembling hand, and when he had finished, he understood. His daughter had died not by accident, but from despair. She had died upon discovering that the love of her life was an illusion.

— What have I done? he murmured. In seeking to save her, I led her to her doom.

The Count of Monségure, upon learning the news, departed the castle without a word, aware that his oath had finally been honoured, but in a manner he could never have imagined. Death had claimed Berthe before he could do so.

The two women were buried together, despite the protestations of the Church, which refused to inter a suicide in consecrated ground. But the Lord of La Roche, in his infinite grief, overruled the regulations. He had a crypt built apart, beneath the great tower from which they had thrown themselves.

— They loved one another, he told the protesting priest. Let them rest together for eternity.

Upon the tombstone, he had engraved a simple yet heartrending epitaph:

Here lie Berthe de La Roche and Alix de Salm,

Two souls who loved beyond all lies,

Two hearts united in death as they could not be in life.

May God grant them the peace the world denied them.

The months passed, then the years. The Lord of La Roche died some years later, his heart broken by the loss of his only daughter. The Castle of La Roche passed from hand to hand, each new owner discovering the tragic legend attached to it.

But something strange began to occur.

On nights of the full moon, the castle's inhabitants reported inexplicable phenomena. Whispers carried upon the wind, like two female voices conversing softly. Vaporous silhouettes glimpsed at the summit of the great tower, holding hands, gazing towards the horizon.

Some swore they had seen, at dawn, two women dancing in the gardens where Alix and Berthe had walked in life. Their crystalline laughter echoed through the morning air before fading with the first rays of the sun.

The souls of Alix and Berthe, it seemed, could not find rest. Bound by a love that had transcended death itself, they wandered the castle, prisoners of a

mystical limbo. Neither in heaven nor in hell, but in a purgatory of their own creation.

Some said it was the demonic pact that held them. Others claimed it was their love itself, so powerful that it refused to be dissolved by death.

With time, the castle fell into ruins. Wars, pillaging, gradual abandonment transformed the magnificence of old into a vestige of the past. The walls crumbled, the roof collapsed in places, nature reclaimed its domain.

But the apparitions continued. Generation after generation, the legend was passed down. The Castle of La Roche became renowned as one of the most haunted places in the kingdom. The adventurous, the curious, and those who sought to pierce the mysteries of the beyond came to explore its ruins.

And always, on moonless nights, two silhouettes could be glimpsed at the summit of the great tower. Two women holding hands, gazing towards the horizon as though awaiting something. Deliverance, perhaps. Or simply the acceptance of a love that had defied all laws, divine and human.

The legend of the Castle of La Roche thus became both a warning and a testament. A warning of the dangers of vengeance and falsehood. A testament to the power of true love, capable of transcending even death and damnation.

The years transformed into centuries. The world changed, evolved, modernised. But the Castle of La Roche remained, silent guardian of a tragic love story.

And to this day, those who dare venture into its ruins by night report the same phenomena: whispers, shadows, presences. As though Alix and Berthe still waited, prisoners of an eternal love, hoping perhaps that one day, someone would come to free their tormented souls.

Or perhaps they do not wish to be freed. Perhaps they have found in this eternal haunting a form of union that life had denied them. An imperfect union, certainly, but a union nonetheless.

For in the end, what is love if not the refusal to accept separation? What is true love if not this obstinate determination to remain together, against all odds?

The Castle of La Roche stands still, a testament of stone and mystery to a bygone age. And within its crumbling walls still echoes the memory of a love that refused to die, of a passion that defied time itself, of a tragedy that became legend.

Chapter X

Mia and the Shadows of the Past

The Present Day.

The autumn light bathed the university campus in a golden softness, casting long shadows across the ancient cobblestones. Russet leaves swirled in the cool breeze, creating a visual symphony that contrasted with the bustle of student life. It was one of those days when nature herself seemed to celebrate change, when every breath of air carried the promise of new beginnings.

Amidst this autumnal effervescence, Mia was crossing the great central courtyard for the first time. Her ebony hair cascaded over her shoulders, framing a face of delicate features in which shone eyes of a brown so deep they seemed almost black. There was something intense in her gaze, a depth that betrayed sufferings few people her age ought to have known.

At twenty-two, Mia bore the weight of a grief that refused to heal. Two years had passed since the car accident that had torn her mother from life, two years during which she had desperately sought answers that reality could not provide. The accident had been brutal, inexplicable. A lorry had struck their vehicle on a road they took every week. Her mother had died instantly. Mia, miraculously spared, had kept only physical bruises.

But the wounds of the soul refused to scar over.

Her mother had not been merely a parental figure to Mia. She had been her confidante, her best friend, her spiritual guide. Together, they had explored the mysteries of the esoteric, devouring ancient works on pagan rituals, communication with the beyond, the magic of crystals and herbs. What, for many, would have seemed strange or disturbing was for them a sacred bond, a shared quest to understand the invisible forces that govern the world.

After her death, Mia had plunged ever deeper into these studies. She had inherited her mother's esoteric library: dozens of leather-bound volumes, their pages yellowed by time, covered with handwritten annotations. Each evening, in her small student room, she read these texts by candlelight, seeking a way, any way, to communicate with her mother's spirit.

Was she at peace? Did she suffer? Was there something beyond death, or only the void?

These questions haunted her day and night. She had chosen to study psychology in the hope of understanding the workings of grief, the

mechanisms of the mind when confronted with loss. But the academic textbooks, with their cold theories and clinical studies, did not answer the existential thirst that consumed her.

That day, crossing the campus to attend her first lecture, Mia wore around her neck the lavender scarf her mother had given her for her twentieth birthday. The fabric, soft and familiar, had become her talisman, her link to the past. She touched it automatically in moments of stress, as though drawing courage from the memory of she whom she had lost.

Her path led her towards an ancient stone fountain at the centre of the courtyard, a baroque monument whose water had ceased to flow years ago. It was there that she caught sight of them.

Sofia and Théo stood near the fountain, deep in animated conversation. Their gestures were lively, their voices carried the excitement of those who share a common passion.

Sofia was tall, almost imposing at five feet nine inches. Her blonde hair, cut in a bob with almost surgical precision, framed a face of Nordic features. Her ice-blue eyes had the peculiarity of seeming to analyse every detail of her surroundings. She wore a beige polo-neck jumper and impeccably pressed jeans, an outfit that reflected her orderly and pragmatic personality.

At twenty-three, Sofia was in her final year of psychology. She had specialised in the study of belief phenomena and the psychological mechanisms that lead people to believe in the paranormal. Her thesis, which she was preparing with determination, concerned cognitive biases in the perception of supernatural experiences. For Sofia, every ghost was merely pareidolia, every premonition merely a coincidence amplified by the brain.

This rigorous scepticism had not arisen by chance. As a child, Sofia had grown up in a family where her father, a respected physician, and her mother, a biology professor, valued the scientific method above all else. The rare occasions when she had expressed curiosity about less rational subjects, she had been gently but firmly re-educated in the principles of critical thinking.

Yet, despite her avowed scepticism, Sofia had developed a fascination for urbex, the urban exploration of abandoned places. Not to hunt ghosts, but to understand why so many people associated these locations with the paranormal. She saw in them a perfect laboratory for studying the psychology of fear and suggestion.

And then there was Théo.

At twenty-five, Théo embodied that generation which had grown up with technology as its mother tongue. Of medium height, he possessed the natural ease of confident people. His tousled brown hair, his eternal denim

jacket adorned with patches of rock bands, and his trainers worn down to the sole gave him the air of a likeable rebel. But it was his gaze that betrayed him: lively, intelligent, constantly analysing and calculating.

Having graduated in computer science two years previously, Théo worked as a freelance developer, which gave him the freedom to organise his time as he wished. And he wished it in rather particular fashion: during the week, he coded applications for various clients; at weekends, he explored abandoned buildings.

Urbex had become far more than a hobby for Théo. It was an obsession. He had begun at sixteen, breaking into a disused factory near his home. The adrenaline of exploration, the melancholic beauty of forgotten places, the impression of being an archaeologist of the contemporary world... all of it had hooked him instantly.

Since then, he had explored dozens of sites: abandoned psychiatric hospitals, ruined castles, deconsecrated churches, deserted amusement parks. He documented each exploration with his high-tech equipment: GoPro cameras, drones, electromagnetic wave detectors, audio recorders. Then he edited videos which he posted on his modestly followed YouTube channel.

He had met Sofia at a conference on the psychology of urban spaces. Their friendship had been born of an animated debate on the question of whether places could be 'haunted' by past emotions. Théo defended the idea of a sort of memory of places; Sofia refuted it with scientific arguments. Neither had convinced the other, but they had discovered a mutual respect and a fascinating complementarity.

That day, they were discussing their next expedition—an old abandoned prison two hours' drive from the university.

Chapter XI

The First Encounter

— I'm telling you, the shots will be incredible, Théo was asserting with enthusiasm. I've seen photos of the isolation ward, it's completely creepy. The metal beds are still there, rusted, with the straps...

— It's precisely that kind of setting that amplifies psychological projection phenomena, replied Sofia. People see these objects charged with a history of suffering, and their brains automatically fill in the blanks with frightening images. It's fascinating from a cognitive standpoint.

— You always bring everything back to psychology, smiled Théo. Can't you simply appreciate the thrill of adventure?

— Adventure and scientific understanding are not incompatible, retorted Sofia with a half-smile.

It was at that moment that Théo noticed Mia. She stood a few metres away, apparently lost, consulting her telephone with an expression of confusion. Something in her posture, in the way she seemed both present and absent, caught his attention.

Théo had this particular faculty of sensing people. He could not explain it rationally, but he sometimes perceived things in others, hidden depths, buried wounds. And looking at this young woman with ebony hair, he sensed something unusual. A sadness, certainly, but also a fierce determination, a thirst for something indefinable.

— Wait a moment, he murmured to Sofia.

Without waiting for her reply, he approached Mia with his most welcoming smile.

— Hello! he called out warmly. You look lost. Are you new on campus?

Mia looked up, surprised to be thus addressed. Her first reflex was to withdraw into herself, a habit acquired over two years of solitary grief. But something in this young man's sincere smile put her at ease.

— Er... yes, she stammered. My name is Mia. It's my first day. I'm looking for the psychology building...

— Psychology! exclaimed Théo. What a coincidence! He turned towards Sofia, who had joined them. Sofia here is in her final year of psychology. Sofia, may I introduce Mia.

Sofia extended her hand with a professional smile, her analytical gaze already scanning this newcomer.

— Pleased to meet you, Mia. Welcome to the faculty. What year are you in?

— Second year, replied Mia, gaining slightly in confidence. I... I took a gap year after the first. For personal reasons.

A brief silence fell. Sofia, with her keen psychological intuition, immediately perceived that there was a story behind those words. Théo, for his part, sensed the weight of sadness emanating from Mia.

— Well, said Théo to break the silence, you've fallen in with the right people. Sofia can guide you for everything concerning lectures. And I... I'm Théo, by the way, I'm your man if you need anything in computing. Or if you're looking for adventure.

The word 'adventure' resonated strangely in Mia's mind. She knew not why, but it awakened something within her, a distant echo of the time when she and her mother would set off for weekends exploring megalithic sites or visiting villages reputed to be haunted.

— Adventure? she repeated, intrigued. What sort of adventure?

Théo's eyes lit up. Sofia rolled hers, knowing exactly what was coming next.

— Well, began Théo with the enthusiasm of a child speaking of his favourite game, Sofia and I practise urbex. Urban exploration of abandoned places. Ruined castles, disused factories, forgotten hospitals... that sort of thing.

Mia's heart leapt. Ruined castles. Forgotten places. These were precisely the sort of locations where, according to her mother's books, the veil between worlds was at its thinnest, where spirits found it easiest to manifest.

— You... you really explore these places? she asked, trying to contain her excitement. Have you ever experienced anything... strange?

Sofia intervened before Théo could reply, her tone slightly protective.

— Defining 'strange' is complex. We've seen things that might seem unusual, but which always have a rational explanation. Draughts that slam doors, reflections of light, sounds caused by structural degradation...

— Oh, come on, Sofia, interrupted Théo with a wink. You can't deny that certain atmospheres are really peculiar. That time in the abandoned asylum when all our equipment stopped working simultaneously...

— Electromagnetic interference caused by faulty electrical wiring, retorted Sofia. I showed you the analysis.

— Perhaps, smiled Théo. But it was still creepy.

Mia listened to this exchange with fascination. Sofia represented the rational scepticism she herself had sometimes tried to adopt to ease her pain. Théo embodied that openness to the unexplained which resonated with her own beliefs. And together, they explored precisely the places that drew her.

It was too perfect to be a coincidence. Her mother would have said it was destiny, that the universe orchestrates necessary encounters.

— I... I should very much like to accompany you one day, said Mia with a shyness that barely concealed her enthusiasm. If you'd have me, of course.

Théo and Sofia exchanged a glance. They had never taken a complete novice on an exploration. It was potentially dangerous, and a certain experience was required to navigate these unstable environments.

But something in the intensity of Mia's gaze, in the sincerity of her request, touched Théo. And Sofia, despite her pragmatism, was intrigued by this young woman who seemed to bear an invisible weight upon her shoulders.

— Very well, said Théo. But you'll have to follow our rules to the letter. Safety first.

A smile illuminated Mia's face, the first true smile she had worn in months. Without knowing it, she had just taken the first step towards an adventure that would change the course of her life.

Chapter XII

The Weaving of Bonds

The weeks that followed this first encounter were marked by a particular alchemy between the three young people. What had begun as a simple campus acquaintance swiftly transformed into a deep, almost necessary friendship.

They fell into the habit of lunching together in the cafeteria. Their table, near the large bay window overlooking the park, became their unofficial headquarters. The conversations there were animated, oscillating between student banalities and far deeper discussions.

One day, as they shared the cafeteria's bland sandwiches, Mia at last found the courage to speak of her mother. It was not premeditated. The words simply escaped, released by the atmosphere of trust they had created.

— My mother died two years ago, she said in a voice soft yet firm. In a car accident.

The silence that followed was not awkward. It was a respectful silence, one that honours the gravity of a confession.

— I'm sorry, Mia, murmured Sofia with a sincerity unusual in her. That must be... impossible to overcome.

Mia nodded, touching her lavender scarf automatically.

— That's why I took that gap year. I... I could no longer function. Every day was a battle. But my mother and I shared a common passion. The esoteric, the mysteries of the beyond, ancient rituals. She left me her entire library, books several centuries old. Since her death, I've been studying them every evening, searching...

She stopped, not knowing how to formulate this impossible quest.

— You're searching for a way to contact her, Théo guessed gently. To know whether she is... somewhere.

Mia's eyes filled with tears, but she smiled through them.

— Yes, she admitted. I know it might seem mad...

— It's not mad, Théo interrupted. It's human. When we lose someone we love, we would do anything to have even just a sign, proof that something remains.

Sofia remained silent for a moment, her scientific mind at war with her human empathy. She knew that, from a psychological standpoint, this kind of quest was a form of grief denial. But she also saw the sincere pain in Mia's eyes, and something in her refused to wound her with rational arguments.

— Listen, Mia, she said at last. I don't believe in the paranormal. I think our perceptions can deceive us, that our brains are capable of creating experiences that seem real but are not. But... I respect your need to search. And if our explorations can help you in some way, then I agree for you to come.

This moment of shared vulnerability sealed their friendship in a definitive way. They were no longer mere acquaintances, but a trio united by their complementary differences: Mia the believer, Sofia the sceptic, Théo the bridge between two worlds.

One sunny October afternoon, as they enjoyed their customary lunch break, Mia voiced the idea that would change everything.

— What if... she began hesitantly, nervously toying with her fork. What if, instead of simply exploring abandoned buildings, we attempted something more... significant?

Théo raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

— What do you mean by significant? he asked.

— A place with a history, a legend. Somewhere where something tragic occurred, where lives were shattered. She looked at her two friends with a new intensity. A haunted castle.

Théo's eyes lit up instantly.

— A haunted castle! he exclaimed. That's brilliant! Imagine the possibilities for documentation... the footage would be incredible!

Sofia, as might be expected, was more reserved.

— A haunted castle, she repeated sceptically. You mean a place people believe to be haunted. Because technically...

— Yes, yes, I know your speech, Théo interrupted with a laugh. Ghosts don't exist, scientifically proven and all that. But admit the idea is exciting! A castle with a real history, perhaps historical documents, archives... It would be our most ambitious exploration!

Sofia sighed, but a smile formed on her lips despite herself.

— All right, she conceded. But on one condition: we do thorough research beforehand. I want to know the real history of the place, not just the sensationalist legends.

— Deal! cried Théo.

Mia felt a wave of excitement wash over her. This was exactly what she needed: a place charged with energy, somewhere the veil between worlds might be thin enough to permit a connection. Perhaps, just perhaps, she would at last find there a sign from her mother.

In the days that followed, the trio threw themselves into intensive research. Each evening after lectures, they gathered in the university library, their laptops open, navigating between websites, urbex forums, historical archives, and blogs specialising in local legends.

Sofia had established a list of strict criteria: the location had to be legally accessible (or at least without too much legal risk), structurally stable (no question of collapsing into ruins), and sufficiently isolated to avoid problems with the local authorities.

Théo, for his part, searched for technical information: plans if possible, reports on the state of the buildings, testimonies from other urban explorers.

Mia, meanwhile, immersed herself in legends, ghost stories, eyewitness accounts. She sought a place whose history resonated with her, somewhere a romantic tragedy had unfolded. Something told her that such a place would be charged with a particular energy.

After several days of fruitless research, it was Mia who found it. It was late one evening, as she was scrolling for the umpteenth time through a forum on regional legends. A post, dated a few months earlier, spoke of a forgotten castle in the hills, about two hours' drive from the university.

The Castle of La Roche.

Her heart raced as she read the legend associated with it. A tragic love story between two women in the Middle Ages. A tournament. A demonic pact. A wedding night that had ended in blood. Ghosts said to haunt the place still, seeking the peace they had never found in life.

It was perfect. Too perfect.

— You lot! she typed in the WhatsApp group they had created. I think I've found it. Look at this!

She sent the link. A few minutes later, her phone began vibrating with their enthusiastic responses.

The following day, they met earlier than usual for an emergency meeting at their regular table. Mia had printed everything she could find about the castle: historical articles, extracts from legends, even a few photographs taken by ramblers who had ventured into the area.

They spread it all across the table like detectives planning an investigation.

— Right, began Sofia, adjusting her glasses. The Castle of La Roche. Built in the thirteenth century, abandoned since the seventeenth after a fire. Technically private property, but the current owner lives abroad and no longer looks after it. From what I've read, the local authorities turn a blind eye to visitors as long as they don't cause any damage.

— Structurally? asked Théo, ever pragmatic.

— The outer walls are solid, replied Sofia. But we'll need to be careful with the staircases and floors inside. Several collapses have been reported over the years.

Théo nodded, already making a mental list of the equipment they would need.

— And the legend? he asked, turning towards Mia.

Mia's eyes shone as she began to recount the story she had read and reread a dozen times.

— It's the story of Berthe de La Roche and Alix de Salm. Berthe was the only daughter of the lord of the castle. Her father organised a grand tournament to find her a husband. But one of the suitors, Alaric de Monfort, was already betrothed to Alix de Salm. When Alix learnt of it, consumed by jealousy and despair, she made a pact with the devil to transform herself into a knight and compete in the tournament.

Sofia frowned.

— A pact with the devil. Of course. Because apparently, in the Middle Ages, that was the solution to every problem.

Mia ignored the sarcasm and continued.

— Transformed into a knight, Alix won the tournament and Berthe's hand. But on their wedding night, she had to reveal her true identity. Berthe, shocked and desperate, threw herself from the top of the tower. And Alix followed her. Their bodies were found entwined at the foot of the great tower the following morning.

A respectful silence fell. Even Sofia, despite her scepticism, was touched by the tragedy of the story.

— Since then, Mia continued in a soft voice, it's said that their ghosts haunt the castle. Witnesses have reported seeing two female silhouettes at the top of the tower at dawn. Others have heard weeping, whispers. Some speak of an intense presence in the bridal chamber where it all happened.

Théo whistled softly.

— That's a powerful story. Truly. And visually, the castle could be incredible.

— Historically, interjected Sofia, there was indeed a Lord of La Roche in the thirteenth century. The archives mention the death of his daughter, but the circumstances are unclear. As often happens, the legend has probably embellished a real tragedy.

— Whatever the exact historical veracity, said Mia with passion, what matters is that people died there in pain and despair. If their spirits have remained, it's because they're searching for something. Peace, perhaps. Or simply to be heard.

They looked at one another, and in that shared glance, the decision was made without a word being spoken.

— So it's decided? asked Théo. The Castle of La Roche?

— It's decided, replied Mia and Sofia in unison.

They did not yet know that this decision would change the course of their lives irrevocably. That the Castle of La Roche was not merely an abandoned place to explore, but a nexus of ancient energies, a place where the boundaries between worlds were indeed thinner.

Chapter XIII

The Guardian of Legends

It was a Friday evening, three days before their planned expedition. They had arranged to meet at the Café de l'Horloge, a century-old establishment nestled in a cobbled alleyway in the old quarter. The place was exactly as its name suggested: dominated by an immense wall clock with visible mechanism, whose regular ticking created an atmosphere at once soothing and slightly unsettling.

The walls were covered with old photographs, yellowed maps, and heterogeneous objects that told hundreds of stories: a rusty sword, a Venetian mask, framed letters whose ink had faded with time. The scent of roasted coffee mingled with the more subtle one of old books and polished wood.

It was the sort of place where time seemed suspended, where one could easily imagine medieval conspirators or romantic poets conversing until dawn.

The trio had settled at a table near the fireplace, surrounded by their notes and maps. Mia had brought one of her mother's books, a grimoire bound in black leather that dealt with rituals of protection and communication with spirits. Sofia had printed a complete dossier on the castle's history, with chronologies, family trees, and architectural analyses. Théo, for his part, had spread diagrams of his technical equipment across the table.

— Right, let's recap, said Sofia, sipping her cappuccino. We leave Monday at dawn. Estimated journey: two hours. Expected arrival around eight o'clock. We explore all day and leave before nightfall.

— Why not stay the night? asked Mia. It's often at night that phenomena are most intense, isn't it?

— Because it's also at night that accidents are most frequent, retorted Sofia. Reduced visibility, falling temperatures, fatigue... Not to mention that, legally, it's riskier. No, we do the exploration by day, we document everything, and we go home.

Mia seemed disappointed but did not insist. Théo, meanwhile, was checking his equipment list for the fifth time.

— Torches, check. Cameras, check. EMF detectors, check. First aid kit, check...

It was at that moment that they noticed the old man.

He was seated alone at a table in the darkest corner of the café, so still that one might have taken him for part of the décor. His silver hair was swept back, revealing a face marked by the years but whose eyes, of a faded blue almost transparent, shone with surprising acuity. He wore a long grey wool coat and held between his gnarled hands a cup of steaming tea.

But what caught their attention was his gaze. He was watching them with a disturbing intensity, as though he could read their every thought.

After several minutes of heavy silence, the old man rose slowly, leaning on a carved cane representing a coiled serpent. He approached their table with a gait surprisingly assured for his apparent age.

— Forgive my intrusion, he said in a gravelly but clear voice. I could not help overhearing your conversation. The Castle of La Roche, is it not?

The three friends exchanged a surprised look. Sofia, ever wary, was the first to respond.

— Indeed. Do you know the place?

An enigmatic smile formed on the old man's lips.

— Know it? Oh, young lady, I know the Castle of La Roche better than anyone in this town. Might I join you for a moment? I have a story to tell, and you seem the sort of people who know how to listen.

Mia, intrigued and excited, immediately made room.

— Of course! Please, sit down.

The old man settled with care, resting his cane against the back of the chair. His eyes came to rest upon each of them in turn, as though weighing them up.

— My name is Édouard Mercier, he began. I am eighty-seven years old, and I have spent my life collecting the stories of our region. The legends, the myths, the testimonies... all that ordinary people dismiss as superstition.

— Are you a historian? asked Sofia.

— Not in the academic sense. Let us say I am a... keeper of memory. His gaze lost itself for an instant in the distance. The Castle of La Roche... it is a particular place. Very particular.

— We know the legend, interjected Théo. Berthe and Alix, the tournament, the demonic pact...

— Ah, you know the public version, replied Édouard softly. But there are details... nuances that only true seekers know.

He paused, took a sip of his cooled tea, and began his tale in a measured voice that seemed to carry the weight of centuries.

— The story that is generally told is simplified. The truth is far darker, far more tragic. The Lord of La Roche did not organise that tournament simply out of a desire to marry off his daughter. He had contracted a war debt years before, a debt he had to honour by delivering Berthe to a brutal and cruel man: the Count of Monségure. The tournament was his way of circumventing this obligation whilst technically honouring it.

Mia listened, fascinated. This version corresponded almost exactly to what she had read in her most in-depth research.

— As for Alix de Salm, continued Édouard, she was not simply jealous. She was truly in love with Alaric de Monfort, who had betrayed her for Berthe's larger dowry. The pact she made with... let us call them the dark forces... was not merely for vengeance. It was also an act of absolute despair.

— But the demonic pact, interjected Sofia sceptically, that's surely a later invention, isn't it? A way of explaining tragic events that people of the time couldn't understand...

Édouard looked at her with a sad smile.

— Young lady, you have a scientific mind. That is admirable. But let me tell you this: I visited the Castle of La Roche once in my life, sixty years ago. Once was enough. What I felt there, what I saw there... He shivered despite the warmth of the café. There are places on this Earth where the normal laws do not quite apply. Where the veil between worlds is thinner. The Castle of La Roche is one of those places.

— What did you see? asked Mia, her breath short.

Édouard looked at her for a long moment before answering.

— Two silhouettes at the top of the East Tower. At dawn, exactly as the legend tells. They were holding hands, gazing at the horizon. When I blinked, they had vanished. But it was not a hallucination, young lady. I was with two friends, and all three of us saw the same thing.

An impressed silence fell. Even Sofia seemed shaken, though she tried to maintain her mask of rationality.

— But that is not all, continued Édouard in a graver voice. The legend says that Berthe and Alix died in despair, bound by an impossible love. Which is true. But it does not say why their spirits cannot find rest.

— Why? breathed Mia.

— Because their story is not finished. The pact Alix made had precise terms: if her revelation led to tragedy, her soul would belong to the devil

for eternity. The tragedy occurred. But Alix, in her final act, chose to follow Berthe into death. That choice created a bond that transcends even demonic law. Their souls are trapped, neither in heaven nor in hell, but in a limbo. They are waiting.

— Waiting for what? asked Théo, captivated despite himself.

Édouard looked at all three of them with an almost painful intensity.

— No one truly knows. Perhaps they are waiting for someone to hear their complete story. Perhaps they seek redemption. Or perhaps... perhaps they are simply waiting for someone to understand that they truly loved each other, despite everything.

He rose slowly, taking up his cane.

— I have told you what I know. Now let me give you a word of advice. If you truly go to the castle, be respectful. Do not treat that place as a mere ruin. Souls suffer there. And above all... He paused dramatically. Beware the emotions you bring with you. The castle has a way of amplifying what you feel. Fears become terror, regrets become obsession, grief becomes despair. Do not let your own demons consume you.

His gaze came to rest particularly on Mia, as though he could see the mourning she bore.

— You in particular, young lady. You are searching for someone you have lost, are you not? The castle might give you what you seek... or it might show you things you are not ready to see.

Mia felt her blood run cold. How could he know?

Without waiting for a reply, Édouard Mercier inclined his head respectfully.

— Good luck, my young friends. And remember: certain doors, once opened, are very difficult to close again.

He made his way towards the exit with a slow but assured step, leaving behind him a heavy silence and an atmosphere charged with unease.

After his departure, the trio remained silent for long minutes, digesting what they had just heard.

Chapter XIV

The Final Preparations

The weekend passed in a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Old Édouard's words echoed in their minds, adding a new dimension to their exploration.

Sofia, true to herself, had spent Saturday rationalising the entire experience. She had even written a long text in her journal on the psychological mechanisms of suggestion and anxious anticipation. The old man, according to her, was probably a talented storyteller who had perfected his tale over the years, adding just enough mysterious details to captivate his audience.

But even she could not deny the shiver she had felt when Édouard had spoken of his visions at the top of the tower.

Théo, for his part, had redoubled his efforts in preparing his equipment. He had tested and retested each device, checked every battery, organised his bag according to a meticulous system. He had also created a detailed plan for the exploration, with precise objectives for each area of the castle.

His main objective: to document as much as possible. Videos, photographs, EMF readings, audio recordings. If something paranormal occurred, he wanted to have the proof. And if nothing happened, well, he would at least have superb footage of an abandoned medieval castle.

As for Mia, she had spent the weekend immersed in her mother's grimoires. She had copied several protection rituals, prepared a small bag with purified crystals, sage, consecrated salt, and her dowsing rods. She had even brought a photograph of her mother, slipped into the inner pocket of her jacket, close to her heart.

On Sunday evening, unable to sleep, she had sat before her window, watching the almost full moon. She had spoken to her mother, as she often did.

— Mum, she had murmured into the silence of the night. If you can hear me, if you're somewhere out there... give me a sign tomorrow. Anything at all. Just so I know you're at peace. That you're not alone.

The moon had not answered, of course. But somewhere in the night, an owl had hooted, and Mia had chosen to see it as an omen.

The dawn of Monday broke in an explosion of pastel colours. The sky was a delicate pink streaked with gold, presaging a fine autumn day. But there

was in the air an unusual freshness, almost biting, that made one shiver despite warm clothing.

They had arranged to meet at six o'clock in the morning in the university car park. Mia was the first to arrive, as at their initial meeting. She wore several layers of clothing, her lavender scarf clearly visible around her neck. Her rucksack, strangely voluminous for a day's exploration, contained all her esoteric paraphernalia.

Sofia arrived a few minutes later, impeccable as always. Her bag, organised with military precision, contained her first aid kit, her notebook, several pens of different colours, and a professional-quality head torch. She had also brought provisions for a picnic, because even during an exploration of a haunted castle, one had to think of practical matters.

Théo was the last to arrive, but for good reason. His car was filled to the brim with equipment. In the back, carefully arranged, could be seen tripods, cameras, detectors of every kind, cables, and even a small foldable drone.

— Are you preparing an expedition to the North Pole or what? joked Sofia, seeing all this gear.

— One can never be too prepared, replied Théo with a smile. And if we really film something extraordinary, I want it to be with the best equipment possible.

They loaded the last bags and settled into the car. Mia in front with Théo, Sofia in the back surrounded by technical equipment. The engine started with a reassuring purr, and they left the car park as the sun was just beginning to peep above the rooftops.

The journey began in relative silence, each lost in their own thoughts. The town gradually gave way to countryside. Buildings were replaced by fields, wide roads by winding lanes bordered by ancient trees.

It was Mia who broke the silence.

— Can you imagine if we really discover something? she said, her gaze lost in the passing landscape. If the ghosts of Berthe and Alix are really there... it would be the proof I've been seeking for so long. Proof that death is not the end.

Sofia, from the back, intervened gently.

— Mia, I don't want to crush your hope, but... you need to be prepared for the possibility that we find nothing. That the castle is simply an abandoned castle with a fine legend.

— I know, replied Mia. But even if we find nothing paranormal, at least I shall have tried. At least I shan't have spent my life wondering.

Théo nodded whilst keeping his eyes on the road.

— Whatever happens today, we'll experience it together. That's what matters. We're a team.

The conversation drifted to lighter subjects. They spoke of their lectures, their plans for the future, films they had seen recently. But beneath this apparent normality, each felt a growing tension as they approached their destination.

After about an hour and a half on the road, the landscape began to change. Cultivated fields gave way to dense forests. Villages became rarer, houses older. They were entering a region where time seemed to have stopped several centuries before.

Then, as they followed a particularly winding forest track, Théo slowed and pointed through the windscreen.

— Look.

In the distance, emerging from the morning mist that still clung to the trees, they glimpsed the imposing silhouettes of the towers of the Castle of La Roche.

Even from afar, the castle emanated an undeniable presence. Its grey stone walls, its towers collapsed in places, its empty windows like hollow eye sockets... all of it created a vision at once majestic and unsettling.

Mia felt her heart quicken. A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold ran down her spine. It was truly there. The place where Berthe and Alix had lived their tragedy. The place where perhaps, just perhaps, she would at last find the answers she sought.

They parked the car in a small clearing away from the road, hidden from prying eyes. Théo cut the engine, and for a moment, all three remained motionless, contemplating the castle through the trees.

— Right, said Sofia at last in a voice she meant to be firm. We check one last time that we have everything, and we go.

They got out of the car and began to equip themselves. Head torches, rucksacks, technical equipment. Mia attached her dowsing rods to her belt and touched one last time the photograph of her mother in her pocket.

The path leading to the castle wound through dense forest. The trees oaks and beeches centuries old, formed a natural vault above their heads. The ground was carpeted with dead leaves that crunched beneath their feet. A stream murmured somewhere to their left, adding a soothing melody to their walk.

After about fifteen minutes' walk, the forest opened abruptly onto a vast clearing. And there, rising before them in all its fallen glory, stood the Castle of La Roche.

It was more impressive than they had imagined. The outer walls, though partially collapsed, still reached a considerable height. Four towers rose at the corners, one of which, the East Tower was almost intact. A great wooden door, half rotted, hung askew on its rusted hinges.

Ivy and moss had invaded the stones, creating a tableau of melancholic beauty. Crows circled above the ruins, their cawing echoing in the morning air.

They stood motionless for a moment, absorbing the view.

— Wow, murmured Théo. It's... it's magnificent.

— Yes, agreed Sofia. And structurally, it looks more stable than I feared. The East Tower seems particularly well preserved.

Mia said nothing. She was staring at the castle with an almost painful intensity. Something in this place was calling to her, drawing her towards it. It was as though the castle itself recognised her quest, her desperate need for answers.

Théo took out his equipment and began taking photographs and videos of the exterior. Sofia consulted her notes on the structure one last time. And Mia closed her eyes, murmuring a short prayer of protection her mother had taught her.

— Ready? Théo asked at last.

Mia and Sofia nodded.

Together, they approached the great door. The ancient wood groaned as they pushed it, as though protesting against this intrusion after decades of solitude.

Beyond the threshold, darkness awaited them.

They switched on their lamps and crossed the threshold, unaware that in passing through this door, they were leaving behind not only the daylight, but also the reassuring certainty of the rational world they knew.

The Castle of La Roche had welcomed them. And it would not let them leave unchanged.

Chapter XV

The Threshold of Darkness

The passage from the outside world to the interior of the castle was like crossing an invisible membrane between two realities. The instant they set foot beyond the threshold, a transformation occurred. The temperature dropped abruptly, as though the mild warmth reigning outside had no right to enter these ancient walls. A damp cold, almost palpable, coiled around them like a living entity.

Mia was the first to notice it. She stopped dead, one hand on her lavender scarf, the other held out before her as though to feel the very air.

— Can you feel that? she murmured, her voice barely audible. It's as though... as though the castle were breathing.

Sofia frowned, her analytical mind already at work.

— It's the thermal mass effect, she explained, though her voice lacked its usual conviction. Old stones retain the cold. It's scientifically explicable.

But even she could not ignore that something in this cold seemed... intentional. As though the castle itself were testing them, gauging their courage.

Théo, already in documentation mode, took out his camera and began filming. His hand trembled slightly, but he strove to keep the lens steady.

— Monday, nine-thirty a.m., exploration of the Castle of La Roche, he said in a voice he meant to be professional. We have just crossed the main entrance. The temperature has dropped by approximately ten degrees. The architecture is... impressive.

They found themselves in a vast entrance vestibule. The ceiling, incredibly high, vanished into the darkness above their heads. Massive columns, some cracked but still standing, supported what remained of the vault. The floor, once covered with marble flagstones, was now a patchwork of broken stones, earth, and vegetation that had infiltrated over the centuries.

The light filtering through the broken windows created shifting patterns on the walls, casting shadows that seemed to dance and move of their own accord. Stained-glass windows, once magnificent, were now merely fragments of colour clinging to twisted lead frames.

Mia closed her eyes for an instant, breathing deeply. It was a technique her mother had taught her: open your senses, let the energy of a place fill you.

And what she sensed here was... complex. There was pain, certainly, centuries of pain impregnated in every stone. But there was also something else. Expectation. Hope, perhaps.

— This place is alive, she murmured, opening her eyes again. Not physically, but... energetically. There are so many stories here. So many lives that have intertwined.

Sofia looked at her with that mixture of scepticism and curiosity that characterised her.

— Mia, I respect your beliefs, but... you realise that what you feel could simply be your anticipation, don't you? Your brain projecting what you want to find?

Mia smiled gently, without taking offence.

— Perhaps. Or perhaps your scepticism is your way of protecting yourself from something you cannot explain.

Théo intervened before the discussion became too philosophical.

— Right, we can debate metaphysics later. For now, we have a castle to explore. I suggest we start by doing a complete circuit of the ground floor to get our bearings.

They both agreed. Théo took the lead, his torch sweeping methodically before them. Sofia followed, her notebook already open, drawing a rough plan of the premises. Mia brought up the rear, her senses alert, attentive to the slightest change in atmosphere.

The vestibule led to several passages. The one on the left led to what must have been the great banqueting hall. The door, massive and partially detached from its hinges, opened with a lugubrious creak when Théo pushed it.

The hall that revealed itself before them was breathtaking, even in its advanced state of dilapidation. It must have measured at least twenty metres long by ten wide. The ceiling, miraculously still intact in places, was decorated with frescoes whose colours, though faded, hinted at their past splendour.

— Look at that, breathed Sofia, pointing towards the ceiling. Those are hunting scenes. And there, that looks like a tournament.

Théo zoomed in with his camera on the paintings.

— This is incredible. These frescoes probably date from the fourteenth century. If we could document this properly, it would be of immense historical value.

Along the walls, one could still see traces of what had been tapestries. Rusted hooks hung at regular intervals, some still supporting scraps of rotted fabric. At the far end of the hall, an immense fireplace, large enough for a man to stand inside, gaped like a black mouth.

But what truly captivated their attention was the long table that still occupied the centre of the room. Or rather, what remained of it. The wood, attacked by centuries and damp, was crumbling in places, but the structure still held miraculously together.

Mia approached slowly, her hand brushing the rough surface without quite touching it.

— This is where they gathered, she murmured. The nobles, the knights, the suitors. This is where Berthe must have sat, knowing she would soon be given in marriage.

She closed her eyes, letting her gift express itself. And suddenly, for a brief instant, she saw them. Not clearly, not as sharp images, but rather as impressions, echoes of the past. Silhouettes in motion, laughter, the sound of cups clinking together. And in the midst of it all, a young woman with chestnut hair, beautiful but sad, staring fixedly at her goblet of wine without drinking it.

— She was afraid, said Mia, opening her eyes again. Berthe. She was terrified at the thought of marrying the Count of Monséguire.

Sofia, who was taking notes, stopped and looked at her.

— How can you know that?

Mia hesitated. How to explain what she felt without seeming mad?

— I... I sense it. It's difficult to explain. It's as though strong emotions leave an imprint. And the fear Berthe felt here was... intense.

Théo, who was still filming, intervened.

— Sofia, I know you're sceptical, but you have to admit that Mia has a gift for... reading places. Whether it's psychological or paranormal, it's still impressive.

Sofia did not reply immediately. She was observing Mia attentively, noting the evident sincerity in her eyes, the way her entire body seemed to resonate with the place. As a trainee psychologist, Sofia knew how to recognise emotional authenticity. Mia was not play-acting.

— I'm not saying you're lying, Mia, she said at last. I'm just saying that our brains are capable of constructing very convincing narratives from fragmentary information. You know Berthe's story. Your mind is filling in the gaps.

Mia smiled sadly.

— Perhaps. Or perhaps science does not yet have all the tools to understand what is really happening.

They continued their exploration of the hall. Théo documented every angle, every architectural detail. Sofia took measurements, noted the orientation of the windows, the layout of the room. And Mia... Mia listened. Listened to the whispers of the past that echoed within these walls.

Chapter XVI

The Forgotten Library

A narrow corridor, its walls lined with mould, led from the great hall towards the depths of the castle. The air here was colder still, almost glacial, and their breath formed small clouds of vapour. The ceiling, low and vaulted, gave a claustrophobic impression that set all their senses on alert.

Théo walked at the head, sweeping the way with his lamp. The walls here were different. More ancient still than those of the banqueting hall. The stones bore strange markings, symbols carved into them that neither Sofia nor Théo could identify.

Mia stopped before one of them, tracing the outline with her finger without touching the stone.

— These are protection signs, she murmured. Ancient runes, probably pagan. They were carved long before the castle became Christian.

— You can read that? asked Théo, impressed.

— Not exactly. But my mother and I studied many symbolic systems. These runes... they speak of barriers. Of protection against what comes from beyond.

A shiver ran through the group. If protections had been deemed necessary, it was because something had justified this precaution.

The corridor finally opened onto a massive oak door, remarkably well preserved. Unlike the other doors they had encountered, this one was intact, as though it had been protected from the degradation of time.

— The library, said Sofia, consulting her notes. According to the archives, the castle possessed one of the largest collections of manuscripts in the region.

Théo pushed the door, which opened with a spectral creak. And what they discovered left them speechless.

The room was immense, circular, with a domed ceiling that rose to at least ten metres in height. But it was not the architecture that stunned them. It was the shelves.

From floor to ceiling, on three levels accessible by spiral staircases, stretched row upon row of shelving. Almost all were empty. The books had

vanished long ago, pillaged, burnt, or simply devoured by time and damp. Only a few scattered volumes remained here and there, their cracked leather covers bearing witness to a glorious past.

But even empty, the room was magnificent. Frescoes adorned the dome, depicting allegorical scenes: Wisdom holding a book, Justice with her scales, Truth emerging from a well. And everywhere, carved into the wood of the shelves, ran motifs of vines and fantastical beasts.

— It's... magnificent, breathed Sofia, for once forgetting her scepticism. Imagine what this room must have been. All those books, all that knowledge...

Mia advanced slowly, as though hypnotised. Her heart constricted at the sight of so much destroyed beauty, so much lost knowledge. She approached a shelf and caressed the ancient wood.

— Berthe came here, she murmured, her eyes half-closing. I can sense her. She loved to read. This was her refuge, far from the pressures of the court, far from scrutinising eyes.

A fleeting vision crossed her mind. A young woman in medieval dress, seated by a window now broken, an open book upon her lap. The sunlight haloed her chestnut hair. She was reading, yet her eyes were sad, as though even the most beautiful stories could not console her for her reality.

— She read courtly romances, continued Mia, her voice taking on a strange quality, almost distant. Stories of pure love, of noble knights. She dreamt of living those stories. She did not want an arranged marriage. She wanted... she wanted to love and be loved in return.

Théo filmed in silence, capturing every word, every expression on Mia's face. Sofia, for her part, was torn between fascination and concern. Mia's gift, whatever it was, seemed to be amplifying in this castle.

Suddenly, a noise made them all start. A crack, then something fell to the floor with a dull thud. They spun round abruptly.

On the floor, about five metres from them, lay a book. An old volume that had not been there seconds before.

— What the... how...? stammered Théo, his lamp trained on the book.

Sofia, regaining her composure, approached cautiously.

— It must have fallen from a shelf. The vibration of our footsteps, perhaps...

But her voice lacked conviction. The book had fallen from a completely empty shelf, at a spot where no volume was visible.

Mia knelt beside the volume. It was an ancient manuscript, bound in leather of a brown almost black. With reverent gestures, she opened it. The pages, despite their age, were astonishingly well preserved.

— It's in Old French, she said. A collection of love poetry.

She turned a few pages, then stopped short. Between two leaves, someone had slipped a bookmark. A simple ribbon of blue silk, astonishingly well preserved.

— Look at the poem, she murmured.

Sofia and Théo leaned over to read. The text, in its medieval French, was difficult to decipher, but the general meaning was clear:

*Love stronger than iron and stone,
Truer than oaths of knights,
May my heart find light,
Beyond walls and shutters.
May the seeking soul see,
May the broken heart find peace,
In the shadows of despair,
True love never ceases.*

A heavy silence fell. It was too precise, too perfect to be a coincidence.

— It's a message, murmured Mia, tears in her eyes. They're trying to communicate. Berthe and Alix. They want us to know their love was real.

Sofia bit her lip. Her rational mind searched desperately for an explanation. But faced with the evidence, even her scepticism wavered.

Théo, for his part, had resumed filming, his camera trembling slightly in his hands. Something had just happened. Something none of them could explain rationally.

Chapter XVII

Mia's Gift Awakens

After the incident with the book, the atmosphere within the group had changed. Even Sofia, with all her scepticism, could no longer entirely deny that something unusual was occurring in this castle. And that something seemed to have a particular connection with Mia.

They decided to return to the great entrance vestibule, that central hub from which the castle's various corridors led. It was time to make a decision about the next stage of their exploration.

— We have a choice of three directions, summarised Théo, consulting the rough plan they had drawn. To the left, we've already explored the banqueting hall and the library. In the centre, a grand staircase leads up to the upper floors. And to the right... He paused. To the right, there's another corridor. Our research suggests it leads to the private apartments and the East Tower.

The East Tower. Where it had all ended. Where Berthe and Alix had leapt into the void.

Mia felt something drawing her in that direction. It was like a silent voice calling to her, an almost physical necessity to go there. But she hesitated. Was she truly ready to face what might await her?

— I think we should use the dowsing rods, she said finally. Let the energy of the place guide us.

She took from her bag the two hazel-wood rods her mother had bequeathed her. They were simple objects in appearance, two Y-shaped branches, but they had belonged to her grandmother before her mother, and probably to others before her. They were worn by decades of use, polished by the touch of many hands.

Sofia looked at the rods with a mixture of curiosity and doubt.

— You know that, scientifically, there's no proof that dowsing works, don't you? she said gently. The movements of the rods are caused by involuntary micro-movements of the hands. It's the ideomotor effect.

Mia smiled patiently.

— I know what science says. But I've seen these rods work all my life. My mother used them to find water, to locate lost objects, to... sense energies.

And even if it's just my subconscious guiding my hands, it's still a valid tool. My intuition can know things my conscious mind is unaware of.

It was an argument Sofia could not completely refute. In psychology, she had studied how the unconscious could perceive and process information that the conscious mind missed. If Mia's rods were simply a way of expressing this unconscious knowledge...

— All right, she conceded. Let's try.

Mia positioned herself at the centre of the vestibule, holding the rods before her. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, seeking to calm her mind and open her senses.

It was a technique her mother had taught her since childhood. It was not simply a matter of holding the rods and waiting. One had to enter an altered state of consciousness, connect to the energy of the place, become receptive.

— Berthe, Alix, she murmured. If you are there, if you can hear me... show me the way. Guide me towards what I must see.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The rods remained motionless in her hands. Sofia and Théo watched in silence, holding their breath.

Then, suddenly, Mia felt something. A tingling in her palms, a warmth that seemed to emanate from the rods themselves. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but she recognised it. It was the sign.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the rods began to move. It was not a sudden or dramatic movement. It was rather as though they were being drawn gently, inexorably, in a particular direction.

Towards the right. Towards the corridor leading to the East Tower.

— There, breathed Mia, opening her eyes again. They want us to go there.

Théo exchanged a glance with Sofia. There was apprehension in their eyes, but also a new determination. They had come this far. They could not retreat now.

— Then let's go, said Théo, tightening his grip on his camera. But we stay together. And at the first sign of trouble, we leave. Agreed?

Mia and Sofia nodded. Together, they entered the corridor on the right, guided by a force they did not understand but could no longer ignore.

The castle was waiting for them. And with it, the answers they sought... or perhaps the questions they had never dared to ask.

The corridor on the right was different from the others. Narrower, darker, and above all, colder. With each step they took, the temperature seemed to drop further, to the point that their breath now formed thick clouds of vapour.

The walls here were covered with tapestries in tatters. One could still make out embroidered scenes: gardens, castles, couples embracing. But damp and time had transformed these romantic images into nightmarish visions. The faces were effaced, the bodies distorted, as though the degradation itself were telling the tragedy that had unfolded here.

Mia walked ahead, guided by a force she did not entirely understand. Her rods vibrated lightly in her hands, like tuning forks resonating with an invisible frequency. She felt the energy intensifying as they progressed.

— It's growing stronger, she murmured. The energy... it's almost suffocating.

Théo, filming everything, felt something too. It was not as clear as what Mia felt, but there was an oppression in the air, an almost palpable presence. His EMF detector, which he held in his other hand, was beginning to show abnormal fluctuations.

— The electromagnetic fields are going haywire, he said in a tense voice. I've never seen readings like this.

Sofia, for her part, was struggling to maintain her rationality. She noted mentally all the details: the temperature, the acoustics of the corridor, the signs of structural degradation. She searched desperately for down-to-earth explanations for what they were experiencing.

But even she had to admit that something unusual was happening. The atmosphere was charged with an almost electric tension. It was like being in the eye of an invisible storm.

The corridor finally opened onto a door. Not an ordinary door, but a veritable work of art. Of solid oak, carved with floral and geometric motifs, it was astonishingly well preserved. At its centre, a coat of arms was engraved: two female silhouettes holding a rose between them.

— This is it, breathed Mia. The bridal chamber. Their room.

Théo placed his hand on the handle, hesitating. He felt that crossing this threshold would lead them down a path of no return. But they had come for this. To discover the truth.

— Are you sure? he asked, looking at his two friends.

Mia and Sofia exchanged a glance, then nodded. Together, they had decided to come. Together, they would see it through.

Théo pushed the door. It opened without resistance, as though it had been waiting for them.

Chapter XVIII

The Bridal Chamber

The room that revealed itself before them was at once magnificent and terrifying.

It was a circular chamber, situated at the base of the East Tower. The vaulted ceiling rose to approximately five metres, with stone ribs converging towards a central medallion depicting two doves. The walls were pierced by three narrow windows, arrow slits that let in thin shafts of light.

But what immediately captured their attention was the bed. At the centre of the room, miraculously preserved, stood a massive canopied bed. The curtains, once of red velvet, hung in tatters, but the carved wooden frame still held. The mattress had long since vanished, leaving only a network of stretched ropes.

Beside the bed, an overturned dressing table. A broken mirror whose fragments still littered the floor. An open travelling trunk, empty. And in a corner, something that made the trio shiver: a pair of woman's shoes, small, delicate, placed side by side as though someone had just removed them.

— My God, murmured Sofia. It's as though time had stopped here.

Théo, regaining his professional composure, immediately began to unload his equipment.

— We'll set up the gear here, he said in a voice he strove to keep steady. If paranormal phenomena occur in this castle, it's here they'll be most intense.

He set to work with methodical efficiency, as though concentrating on technique to avoid thinking about the oppressive atmosphere of the room.

Théo had brought an impressive arsenal of ghost-hunting equipment. Not that he necessarily believed in ghosts in the traditional sense, but he was fascinated by unexplained phenomena and wanted to document them with the best technology possible.

He began by setting up his laptop on a flat stone near the door. The screen lit up in the gloom, projecting a ghostly bluish glow on the walls.

— Right, he explained whilst working, connecting cables and checking parameters. I have three cameras. A thermal camera that I'm going to

place there, he pointed to a corner of the room, which will detect any variation in temperature. If something manifests and displaces the air, we'll see it.

He carefully installed the camera on a tripod, orienting it to cover the maximum possible space. On his computer screen, the thermal image appeared, showing the room in shades of blue and violet, marking the cold zones.

— Next, I have my full-spectrum camera, he continued, taking out a second unit. It captures light waves beyond the visible spectrum: infrared and ultraviolet. Some theories suggest that paranormal manifestations might be visible at these frequencies.

He positioned this second camera facing the bed, where the tragedy had begun.

— And my third camera, the one I've been filming with until now, I'll keep mobile to document what the fixed cameras might miss.

Sofia watched the process with interest. Despite her scepticism, she had to admit that Théo took his work seriously.

— And the EMF detectors? she asked.

— I have three different ones, replied Théo, taking out the devices. My K2 detector here, he brandished a black box with coloured LEDs, which measures electromagnetic fields on a scale of one to five. If activity increases, the LEDs light up progressively from green to red.

He placed the K2 near the entrance door.

— I also have a Mel Meter, more precise, which measures both EMF and ambient temperature. He installed this device near the bed. And finally, my REM Pod, which creates its own electromagnetic field and sounds an alarm if something disturbs it.

The REM Pod, a small antenna-shaped device, was placed at the centre of the room, its green LEDs blinking gently.

— Do you have anything else in your magic bag? joked Mia, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Théo smiled nervously.

— Oh yes. I also have audio recorders to capture EVPS, electronic voice phenomena. He placed two small recorders at different points in the room. Sometimes voices or sounds are recorded that we didn't hear at the time.

Once all the equipment was installed and tested, Théo straightened, contemplating his work. The LEDs of various devices blinked softly in the gloom, creating an almost science-fiction atmosphere.

— There. If something happens, we'll know.

But even as he said it, he could not suppress a shiver. Despite all his technology, despite his quasi-scientific approach, he felt that this room was... special. Different. As though something were waiting here.

And he was right to be afraid.

While Théo finished adjusting his devices, Mia had sat cross-legged at the centre of the room, her dowsing rods laid before her. She had taken other objects from her bag: crystals which she arranged in a circle around her, a sage stick which she lit briefly before extinguishing it, letting fragrant smoke rise into the air.

— It's for protection, she explained, seeing Sofia's questioning look. And to purify the space before attempting contact.

Sofia sat beside her, her notebook open on her lap. She had decided to document everything that happened from a psychological and observational standpoint.

Théo, camera in hand, stood slightly back, filming the scene.

For several minutes, nothing happened. The silence of the room was almost oppressive, interrupted only by the occasional beeps of Théo's devices and the nervous breathing of the three explorers.

Then, suddenly, the K2 detector near the door lit up. Not just the first green LED, but directly up to the yellow LED, level three out of five.

— What the...? breathed Théo, rushing towards the device.

But before he could reach it, the K2 went dark, then lit up again, then went dark once more. As though something were playing with it.

Simultaneously, the temperature in the room dropped sharply. On the computer screen, the thermal camera showed a zone of intense cold forming near the bed. An almost black blue patch, abnormal, moving slowly.

— Do you see that? said Théo, his voice rising in pitch. There's something over there!

Sofia rose abruptly, her scepticism wavering in the face of technical evidence. She could see with her own eyes the data on the screen. This was not imagination. It was measurable, quantifiable.

— There must be an explanation, she murmured, but her voice lacked conviction. A draught, a flaw in the structure...

But Mia knew it was not a draught. She felt it. The presence she had sensed since their entry into the castle was now here, in this room, with them.

She closed her eyes, concentrating, opening her senses to the maximum. And suddenly, she saw her.

Not physically, not as one would see a real person. But in her mind, clear as day: a woman in a medieval wedding gown, standing by the window. Her face was turned outwards, towards the courtyard below. Her shoulders were trembling. She was weeping.

— Berthe, murmured Mia. You're here. I can sense you.

The REM Pod at the centre of the room suddenly began to wail, its LEDs flashing from green to red in a fraction of a second. The strident alarm made everyone jump.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the alarm stopped. Silence fell once more, even more oppressive than before.

Théo, his face pale, checked the recordings from his cameras.

— Everything was recorded, he said in a trembling voice. The EMF fluctuations, the temperature drop, the REM Pod triggering... It's... it's incredible.

Sofia said nothing. She was sitting, her notebook fallen to the floor, staring fixedly at the point where the thermal camera had detected the cold zone. Her rational mind searched desperately for an explanation, but found none that could account for all the phenomena.

Mia, for her part, opened her eyes again. They shone with a new intensity.

— They want to communicate, she said. I'm going to try automatic writing.

And that was when things were truly going to tip into the unknown.

Chapter XIX

Automatic Writing

Mia took from her bag an old notebook with a worn leather cover. It was her mother's, filled with notes, rituals, attempts at communication with the beyond. The last pages were blank, waiting to be filled.

She hesitated a moment, holding the notebook against her chest. Automatic writing was the most powerful technique her mother had taught her, but also the most dangerous. It involved opening one's mind completely, becoming a channel for forces one did not control.

— Mia, said Sofia in a worried voice. Are you sure? You're trembling...

Mia nodded, though indeed her hands were trembling.

— My mother did it dozens of times. She taught me how. You just have to... let go. Let the spirit use your body to communicate.

— But she never did it in a place this charged, objected Théo. Mia, perhaps we should...

— No, Mia interrupted with fierce determination. This is why I came. This is why I spent two years studying, searching. If I retreat now, all of it will have been for nothing.

She sat cross-legged, placed the open notebook before her, and took a pen. Then she closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply, slowly, entering a meditative state.

Théo filmed, capturing every instant. Sofia, despite her scientific training, felt her heart pounding. Something in the air had changed. The atmosphere had become almost electric.

— Berthe, Alix, murmured Mia in a voice soft, almost hypnotic. I know you are here. I can sense you. I have not come to judge you. I have not come to harm you. I just want... to understand. To understand your story. To understand your love.

The silence that followed was almost unbearable. Then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, Mia's hand began to move.

At first, they were only scribbles, hesitant strokes on the paper. But gradually, the movements became more assured, more fluid. The pen glided across the page with an ease that was not natural.

Sofia leaned over to see what was being written. And what she saw chilled her to the bone.

Words were forming on the page. Not in Mia's handwriting, which was round and feminine, but in an ancient calligraphy, angular, difficult to decipher. And the writing was changing. Sometimes fluid and elegant, sometimes more brutal and jagged. As though two different people were using Mia's hand.

The first words were:

— Alaric... My Alaric...

Then the writing changed, becoming more desperate:

— I did not know... I did not know it was her... Why did you tell me nothing?

Sofia felt her throat tighten. It was Berthe. Berthe addressing Alix through Mia.

The writing changed again, becoming stronger, almost violent:

— Forgive me... Forgive me... I already loved you... From the first glance at the tournament... But I was cursed... The pact... The devil...

Théo filmed, fascinated and terrified. On his screen, he could see that all his detectors were going haywire. The K2 was flashing frantically between green and red. The thermal camera now showed two distinct cold zones, as though two presences were standing on either side of Mia.

The words continued to pour onto the page, faster and faster:

— When you revealed the truth... I saw in your eyes that you truly loved me... Not Alaric... ME... Berthe... And I understood... We were made for each other...

Then the other writing, more desperate:

— But I was afraid... Afraid of what it meant... Afraid of sin... Afraid of judgement... So I jumped... To escape the confusion... The shame...

And the first again:

— And I followed you... Because without you, my life had no more meaning... The devil could take my soul... As long as I stayed with you...

Sofia felt tears running down her cheeks. Despite all her scepticism, despite all her scientific training, she could not deny what she was seeing. It was not just Mia writing. It was something else. Or someone else.

But suddenly, something changed. Mia's writing became frantic, almost violent. The pen was nearly tearing through the paper. And the words appearing no longer made coherent sense:

— Trapped... Trapped... Cannot leave... The pact... The price... Eternally... HELP US...

Mia groaned, a sound of pure pain that made Théo and Sofia start. Her body stiffened, her still-closed eyes began to move frantically beneath the lids, as though she were living a nightmare.

— Mia! cried Sofia, rushing towards her. Mia, come back!

But Mia did not react. Her hand continued to write, faster and faster, filling page after page. And now, it was no longer just words. It was symbols, runes, complex geometric figures that neither Sofia nor Théo recognised.

Then, in a voice that was not her own, a deeper, almost guttural voice, Mia spoke:

— Alaric... My love... Why did you abandon me? Why did you choose her gold rather than my heart?

It was Alix. Alix speaking through Mia.

Théo, panicking, dropped his camera, which fell to the floor but continued filming. He rushed towards Mia.

— Mia! Wake up! It's not you speaking!

He shook her gently by the shoulders. For an instant, nothing happened. Then Mia's eyes opened abruptly.

But they were not her eyes. Or rather, it was not her gaze. The pupils were dilated, almost black, and there was in that gaze a depth, an ancientness that froze Théo and Sofia's blood.

— She does not understand, said the voice that was not Mia's. You do not understand. We are trapped. The pact... it binds us here. We can neither leave nor find peace.

Then the voice changed, becoming higher, younger:

— I wanted to love her. I did love her. But I was so afraid. Afraid of what others would say. Afraid of God. Afraid of myself.

Sofia, fighting against her own terror, tried to keep her composure.

— Berthe? Is that you? How can we help you?

Mia's eyes fixed on Sofia with a terrifying intensity.

— Tell our story. Tell the world our love was real. That we were not monsters. Just... two souls who loved each other.

Then suddenly, Mia's body convulsed violently. She let out a cry of pain, and her eyes returned to normal. She collapsed into Théo's arms, trembling, sweating, barely conscious.

— Théo... Sofia... she murmured in a weak voice. What happened? I... I don't feel well. Everything is spinning...

All of Théo's devices went dark simultaneously. Silence fell once more, deafening after all that activity. But the atmosphere in the room had changed. As though something had departed. Or as though something had been said that needed to be said.

Chapter XX

The Flight

For a few moments, no one moved. Théo was holding Mia in his arms, Sofia was frozen, her face pale, staring at the notebook filled with writing that was not Mia's.

Then Sofia, regaining her senses, made a decision.

— We're leaving. Now. We have what we came for. Perhaps more. But Mia needs to get out of here.

Théo nodded vigorously. He helped Mia to her feet. She could barely stand, leaning heavily on him.

— The equipment... he began.

— Forget the equipment! Sofia cut him off. Your main camera filmed everything, that's what matters. The rest, we can retrieve later. Or not. I don't care.

Théo picked up his main camera, checked it was still filming, and slipped Mia's notebook into his bag. Sofia took Mia's other arm, and together they made their way towards the door.

Before crossing the threshold, Mia turned round one last time. Her strength was returning little by little, but she was still weak. She looked at the chamber, this place of so much pain and love, and murmured:

— Berthe. Alix. I beg your forgiveness for disturbing you. May the light guide your way. May you at last find the peace you deserve. Your love was pure. Your love was real. And I shall see to it that the world knows.

A gentle current of air suddenly crossed the room. Not cold this time, but almost... tender. Like a caress. Like a thank you.

Then they left, crossing quickly through the corridor, then the vestibule, their footsteps echoing in the castle's silence. They were not exactly running, but walking as fast as Mia's condition allowed.

When they finally crossed the great door and emerged into the daylight, all three stopped, breathing deeply the fresh outside air.

The sun was already low in the sky. They had spent more time inside than they had thought. The golden light of late afternoon bathed the castle ruins, giving them an almost peaceful aspect.

Mia sat on a stone, still trembling. Sofia took a bottle of water from her bag and handed it to her. Théo checked his recordings one last time, making sure everything had indeed been captured.

For a long moment, none of them spoke. What could they say? They had just experienced something that defied all rational explanation. Something that called into question everything they thought they knew about reality.

It was Sofia who finally broke the silence.

— I don't know what just happened in there, she said in a soft voice. And honestly, I'm not sure I want to understand. But... She looked at Mia. You were incredible. Brave. Perhaps a little mad, but incredible.

Mia smiled weakly.

— I think I have my answer, she murmured. My mother always asked me whether death was the end. Now... now I know it isn't. There is something after. Souls persist. Love persists.

Théo put away his camera and sat beside them.

— We have proof, he said. Undeniable proof. The recordings, the detector fluctuations, the automatic writing... It's... it's revolutionary.

But even as he said it, he realised that the 'proof' would probably convince no one who did not want to be convinced. Sceptics would always find alternative explanations. But for the three of them, who had lived through the experience, no doubt was possible.

They remained there another half hour, recovering from their emotions, letting Mia regain her strength. Then, as the sun began to touch the horizon, they set off back to the car.

Before plunging into the forest, Mia turned round one last time towards the castle. At the top of the East Tower, where Berthe and Alix had leapt centuries before, she thought she glimpsed two silhouettes. Two women, hand in hand, watching the sunset.

She blinked, and the silhouettes had vanished. Or perhaps they had never been there. But Mia smiled. Because she knew, in the depths of her heart, that they were still there. And that they would remain, bound by a love stronger than death itself.

On the way home, sitting in the back of Théo's car, Mia touched the lavender scarf around her neck. She thought of her mother, of everything she had taught her, of everything she had lost.

But now, she knew. Her mother was somewhere. Perhaps not here, in this world, but somewhere. And one day, they would be reunited.

For the first time in two years, Mia felt a true peace descend upon her. The grief would never entirely disappear. The pain would always be there, as an undercurrent. But she had found what she was looking for.

Hope.

And at the Castle of La Roche, as night fell, two souls continued their eternal dance, a little less alone than they had been for centuries. For at last, someone had heard their story. Someone knew the truth of their love.

~ *The End* ~