

The Menagerie

By
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE INVESTIGATORS

Desgrez, Francois: Captain of musketeers

DuPont, Sergeant: Parisian police officer

DuPont, Sylvie: The sergeant's daughter employed by Mme de Vivonne

La Reynie, Gabriel-Nicolas de: Lieutenant-General of Police

THE NOBILITY

Antoinette, Duchesse de Vivonne: wife of Athénaïs' brother Duc de Vivonne

Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan

Bossuet, Bishop Jacques-Bénigne: Bishop to the court and tutor to the Dauphin

Bouillon, Duchesse de (Marie-Anne Mancini)

Brinvilliers, Marie Madeline, Marquise de

Buckingham, George Villars, 2nd Duke of: renowned English rake

Colbert, Jean-Baptiste: Controller-General of Finance

Fouquet, Nicolas: former Minister of Finance, imprisoned by Louis

Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de Mortemart (Papa): Athénaïs' father

Gabrielle de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Marquise de Thianges:
Athénaïs' sister

La Grande Mademoiselle (Anne-Marie, Duchesse de Montpensier):
Louis XIV's cousin

Lauzun, Antoine, Comte de: Mademoiselle's lover, imprisoned with Fouquet

La Vallière, Louise, Duchesse de: first mistress of Louis, later Sister Louise

Lionne, Hugues de: Foreign Minister

Louis XIV, King of France

Louis-Victor, duc de Vivonne: Athénaïs' brother, husband of Antoinette

Louvois, François-Michel, Marquis de: Minister of War

Maintenon, Françoise, Marquise de: formerly Mme Scarron, governess of the royal bastards

Mancini, Marie-Anne: Duchesse de Bouillon

Mancini, Olympe: Comtesse de Soissons, Superintendent of the Queen's Household

Marie-Thérèse: Louis' wife, Queen of France

Monsieur: Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIV

Montespan, Louis-Henri de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de:
Athénaïs' husband

Mortemart, Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de, (Papa) Athénaïs' father,
First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber

Primi Visconti, Giovanni-Battista, Comte de Saint-Mayol: Italian fortune-teller
Racine, Jean: poet/playwright
Termes, Roger de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de: cousin of Athénaïs' husband
Vivonne, Louis-Victor de Rochechouart, Duc de: Athénaïs' brother

THE SUSPECTS

Bosse, Marie: poisoner
Cato, Mlle: Athénaïs' second personal maid
Chanfrain, Jeanne: Guibourg's mistress
Chapelain, Magdelaine: poisoner
Cotton, Abbé Jacques: priest/sorcerer
Filastre, Françoise: poisoner/abortionist
Galet, Philippe: alchemist
Guibourg, Abbé Étienne: priest/sorcerer
Lesage (Adam Coeuret): magician/charlatan
Mariette, Abbé: defrocked priest, co-conspirator with Lesage
Montvoisin, Marie-Marguerite: step-daughter of la Voisin
Oeillets, Claude de Vins des: first personal maid of Athénaïs
Sainte-Croix, Gaudin de: poisoner
Vanens, Louis de: sorcerer/counterfeiter
Vautier: husband and wife, manufacturers of poison and perfume
Vigoureux, Marie: fortuneteller
Voisin (La Voisin): aka Catherine Montvoisin, accused of witchcraft, poisonings, and abortions

THE ROYAL BASTARDS

Unnamed girl (Louise?): born 1669, died age two
Maine, Louis-August de Bourbon, Duc du: Athénaïs' first son by Louis, born 1670
Vexin, Louis-Cesar, Comte de: second son of Athénaïs and Louis, born 1672
Tours, Louise-Marianne, Mlle de: "Tou-Tou," Athénaïs' daughter by the King, born 1674
Blois, Françoise-Marie, Mlle de: born 1677
Toulouse, Louis-Alexandre, Comte de: born 1678

Prologue

1709

Just wait, La Reynie, just you wait! The rattling coach jolted him awake and he gasped—the curse, the drip, drip from the water torture, cries of mercy, please mercy! *No, La Reynie gasped, not that dream again. Just let me get to Paris before I die.*

THUMP—the coach lurched and the black leather casket across from him slid toward the door. He grabbed it and clutched it tight. The words might fly out, the truth disappearing along with the suspects. Most of them are dead by now. *Her too? What happened to her? She started it, the marquise. Condemned to hell, perhaps? Or condemned to remember, like him?*

“Air, I need air.” He opened the window to see showers drifting toward the horizon, the parting clouds allowing one last shaft of sunlight to lead the way through glimmering puddles. There at last, the lights of Paris were shimmering a welcome through the mist.

* * *

Athénaïs lay dying while the rain crept softly, closer, under cover of darkness. Indeed, a mist seemed to envelope her ladies hovering like vultures waiting for some tidbit. “Oh, God, forgive me,” she whimpered. They drew closer.

But over there, a shadow? Catching her eye. “Look. In the corner. Do you see?” She pointed with a frail hand. “It’s moving... No, no!” Her faded blue eyes searched their faces, pleading. “Don’t you see? I tried to be good.”

She settled back, drifting. “No, it really wasn’t my fault, it was them, remember? You were there, yes, and you too, recall the day it all began. Versailles in the summer was beastly, and Louis’ little château crowded. But with him there it was the center of the universe, for Louis’ sun was rising. And I was falling, falling...”

PART I

Chapter 1

The Star Summer, 1665

Athénaïs looked down from the terrace of the little château of Versailles, taking in the view. What was it about this place that captured the King's imagination? Before her lay not much more than a swamp surrounded by woods. The humble château was cramped and hot, but look—at His Majesty's command, the gravel allées were being lined with flowers and shrubs, spreading out from the château into the distance. The air was filled with the intoxicating smell of tuberose and jasmine, budding, blooming, the gardens coming alive, lush with promise. Louis was excited the day before, the architect's plans spread before him, pointing here and there, barking out commands. A huge palace would envelope his father's little château and eventually wings would stretch out to house hundreds. Over there, a grand canal with gondolas will replace the swamp, and look, there! A ménagerie filled with exotic creatures. Acres of gardens, statuary, all to be the scene of fantastic fêtes celebrating His Majesty's triumphs, for King Louis XIV would soon be off to conquer the Netherlands and even cross the Rhine. All Europe would then lie before him like so many unwilling damsels.

Ah, yes, the damsels. Athénaïs fanned herself furiously. She was twenty-six years old, married with two children, and this was not the life she had planned. She was born a Rochechouart de Mortemart, a pedigree more distinguished even than the Bourbons; but she had married for passion, not position. She became Marquise de Montespan, wife of Henri, a swarthy Gascon whose château was far off in the Pyrénées. Henri kept nagging her to live there with him, but she was now a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, and status at court meant the chance at favors from the Crown. She must dress the part, but her diamond earrings—the ones Maman had left her—were gone to a game of cards. She had screamed at Henri. He hit her. Well, at least the bruises didn't show. She glanced down at her dress with a frown. Such a pretty

dress embroidered with flowers, perfect for a day in the garden, but no match for the other ladies in Valenciennes lace fluttering about like butterflies.

The King had smiled at Athénaïs yesterday, a special smile. But he smiles at every pretty face. Did he really mean it? She fiddled with her fan, unsure. *Stop it*, she thought. *I shouldn't be thinking like this, Maman would kill me.* Athénaïs' brother laughed at her for being such a Libra: beautiful, witty, talented, but like the scales, tipping back and forth so she felt like two people. She tried to be a good Christian woman, devout; but her wit was sharp as a rapier, as her victims could attest. Henri called her a bitch. She snapped back, "I am no worse than anyone else at court. Hypocrites! Does anyone advance there by being kind? Polite, of course, but kind?" Then she realized what she had said and fled, weeping.

She looked down from the terrace at the King, who was becoming the center of her universe. *It wouldn't hurt, really.* She descended the stairs; down, down, pulled inexorably into his orbit.

Athénaïs wandered over to join the crowd of courtiers preening themselves before His Majesty. They waved their fans, practicing their most elegant conversation under the most uncomfortable of circumstances, studiously avoiding staring at the King and Louise but not missing a word.

While the rest were miserable with the heat, sweat dripping down waistcoats and tight bodices, His Majesty had tossed his jacket and waistcoat aside and was lying supremely at ease under a tree, his head on Louise's lap while she fanned him with his plumed hat. His Majesty and His Mistress, Louis and Louise. They should match, somehow, but they didn't; the mighty King and the shy little violet, her ash-blond curls damp with sweat.

He sighed and stretched. "This is really too boring," he yawned.

The King must be amused. But poor Louise had no wit whatever, so she summoned the wittiest person at court, her good friend. "Athénaïs!" she called.

Athénaïs took a deep breath and sauntered over to give the King her prettiest curtsy.

"His Majesty is bored," Louise announced with gravity.

“Really? May I be of assistance?” Athénaïs sat down next to them, carefully arranging her flowered dress. She kept that dress for years, just to remember that moment.

Louis stretched, his dark curls cascading over his sheer linen shirt. She blushed and looked away. He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners with mischief. Then, those smiling eyes closely followed a bright bead of sweat rolling down her bosom into her décolletage.

Now he was the one to look away. “It’s too hot to hunt, and Louise is out of conversation,” he declared. “You, madame, seem never at a loss for words.” He grinned. “Amuse me.”

She giggled. “Let me see. Perhaps a fable by La Fontaine?”

“Yes!” the King and his mistress exclaimed.

“Well. Once upon a time...” She whispered her own version of La Fontaine’s more pointed tales, and the King and Louise were soon laughing uncontrollably as they furtively glanced at her targets—the short, sly Comte de Lauzun now a fox, the King’s bejeweled brother Monsieur Philippe a preening peacock. The poor courtiers paused their parade to gabble like frightened geese—they knew they were being watched, but what to do?

His Majesty the cynic gazed right back at them, moustache curled with just a hint of a sneer. His eyes turned to Athénaïs. It seemed like time stopped.

Then the chapel bell tolled the Angelus. “The angel declared unto Mary,” it sang, calling the faithful to prayer. Athénaïs suddenly felt a chill. There she was, a married woman, sinking into an abyss. She made a polite excuse and fled to her apartments to pray.

* * *

An encounter the following December brought Athénaïs a part to play, entering stage left, so to speak—back stage after the play at the theatre Hôtel de Bourgogne—footlights blazing, chandeliers aglow, the happy crowd in full riot with drinks, gambling, even a roulette wheel. Papa had invited Athénaïs and Henri to Jean Racine’s celebration of his debut of *Alexandre le Grand*—and that was where Athénaïs met *her*.

A real stage! Bright lights, the sharp smell of raw wood and paint, a trap door for magical appearances and disappearances,

fanciful scenery depicting a palace in India. A croupier called, "Place your bets, mesdames et messieurs," and Henri was off. Athénaïs frowned; more money lost to the wheel. But the lights called her, the oil lamps blazing at the edge of the stage, the huge chandelier above sparkling with candles.

Athénaïs walked to center stage, bathed in shimmering light, entranced. What would it be like to be a famous actress, like Alix Faviot des Oeillets or Thérèse du Parc? Terribly immoral—Maman insisted that actors went to hell—but oh, how wonderful to wear exotic costumes, play tragic heroines, to be applauded by an enthralled audience...

"Ma chère fille!" Here comes Papa, tipsy as usual. Dear Papa—Gabriel de Rochechouart, Duc de Mortemart, Prince de Tonnay-Charente, Marquis de Lussac and Vivonne, heir to the most distinguished family in France—next to the Bourbons, of course—First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber. Maman called him a drunken whoremonger and finally left him.

"Papa!" She gave him a kiss.

"Ma bonne," he said to Athénaïs, "would you like to meet the author of the play, Monsieur Racine?" He looked around and finally spotted the playwright.

Racine smiled broadly when Athénaïs was presented. "Enchantée, madame," said Racine with a low bow. "Ah, Athénaïs. You are named for the goddess, no?"

Athénaïs smiled, pleased to be the center of attention. "Yes, monsieur. I was baptized Françoise, but that name is so terribly common. It seems everyone these days is called either Françoise or Louise, or Louis or François. So I added Athénaïs, as I adore the Greeks."

Soon Papa wandered off, and Athénaïs and Racine fell into deep conversation about Greek plays, facilitated by a round of brandy.

They were interrupted by a shout. "Look who's arrived, it's Thérèse du Parc!"

The crowd erupted with joy at the arrival of the leading lady of Molière's troupe, and Racine rushed over to embrace her. While Athénaïs was watching that personal greeting, Papa came over with a pretty brunette about Athénaïs' age.

"Ma chère, may I present Mlle Claude de Vin des Oeillets, the

daughter of our leading lady.”

“Bon soir, madame,” said the mademoiselle. She curtsied politely, her dark eyes flickering, assessing Athénaïs.

“Ma bonne,” said Papa, “You mentioned that you need a proper ladies’ maid, now that you have joined the Queen’s household. The mademoiselle is very talented.”

“Really. Your experience, mademoiselle?” Athénaïs asked. “Can you embroider?” Soon they were engrossed in happy conversation as if they had known each other for years.

A clatter of dice—“Les jeux sont fait!” called the croupier. Silence, for the die had been cast, then loud cheers.

But finally, the clatter of the wheel fell silent, the guests drifted toward the exit, and Racine came over to say good-bye to Athénaïs, still chatting with her new maid. “Monsieur, it has been a delight to meet you,” she said. “And I am glad I came. Papa recommended Mlle Claude to be my maid.”

“Indeed.” Racine lifted an eyebrow. Mlle Claude’s eyes darted from him to Athénaïs. “How fortuitous,” he said finally, and bowed. “I hope we will meet again, madame.”

Henri joined them, his sour expression revealing his luck at the wheel. “The hour is late,” he said to Athénaïs. “Come along.”

As they headed for the exit, shadows slowly advanced across the stage as one by one, the lanterns were extinguished. The die had been cast.

* * *

The following fall found Athénaïs and the court at Versailles, and Henri, thankfully, was off with his troops. It was early morning, and she was dozing.

“Madame!” Mlle Claude banged open the door. “You will never guess who is outside.”

“Come ride with us, madame,” called a familiar voice.

Athénaïs sat up. “It can’t be.” She donned a wrap, ran to the window, and found His Majesty and Louise on horseback below in the morning mist. Louise’s little spaniel Malice ran about yapping, ready for adventure.

“Is that a royal command?” Athénaïs teased them with a smile.

“Of course,” laughed Louise, her blonde curls dancing. “Mal-

ice commands it, and we mustn't keep her waiting. What, aren't you up yet?"

The King ceremoniously swept his plumed hat before him. "Madame," he intoned with the utmost formality, "it would give us great pleasure if you would deign to accompany us." He grinned, his dark eyes sparkling.

Athénaïs gave a mock sigh. "Oh, very well, if it is a royal command. Give me but a few minutes to dress." She shut the window. "Oh, mon Dieu!"

"I will fetch your riding costume." Her maid was already running off.

"And my hat with the big plume!"

Soon they were galloping off with little Malice in pursuit of whatever struck their fancy. They rode down the allées through a swirl of chilling fog, past newly transplanted poplar trees standing like sentinels, past manicured hedges shaping the formal gardens; on past the swamp with hundreds of workers digging it into a huge basin with fountains. The mist lifted, and His Majesty paused to point out yet another piece of wilderness destined for transformation—but Malice spotted a rabbit and dashed off, and whooping with delight they galloped off in pursuit. Finally, they charged up a hill with a view of Versailles and dismounted to sit together on the grass, Malice panting in Louise's lap.

The King's creation lay before them—the old château surrounded by scaffolding, allées and gardens radiating out like the rays of the sun. Farther to the south were the beginnings of a village teeming with workers and servants. They sat in silence; the King's arm around Louise's waist, while Athénaïs scanned the horizon, entranced.

"This is my dream," said the King quietly. "Versailles is destined to be the most magnificent château in the world, a sign to all that France is preeminent in all things." He paused. "Although it may not look like much now."

"Oh, but Your Majesty!" Athénaïs turned to him wide-eyed with excitement. "Do you see the promise here, the classical beauty? Why, with but a few more well-placed trees, this will look like a painting, a landscape that seems to go on forever." She turned again to the view, drinking it in like a glass of fine wine.

"Why, yes, madame." Louis raised an eyebrow with interest.

“And yet, Your Majesty, please do not forget the contrast between formality and nature. Look there, how charming those woods are next to that large fountain? I hear Monsieur le Nôtre designed all this. You are very fortunate to have found him. He has a wonderful eye.”

“As do you, madame,” he said softly.

Louise looked at the King, then at Athénaïs. “I believe it is time we returned,” she said. She got up and mounted her horse. The other two followed, avoiding each other’s gaze.

* * *

When Henri returned from the war, Athénaïs invited their friends—plus important guests—to welcome him home. It was supposed to be the perfect little dinner party. Then the regrets came in. Athénaïs sighed at the diminished guest list. She prayed that at least the flowers, the food, and above all the conversation would impress her guests. But tonight Henri was drunk and a boor. All she could do was watch, and fume, clutching her glass of brandy.

Henri’s godmother La Grande Mademoiselle was declaiming in her most précieuse manner the importance of grace and sophistication in polite discourse. “Not quite,” replied Mme de Sévigné with a smile, “an original style is most important.” Mme de Sévigné’s witty letters were the best sort of news. Then Henri’s impish little friend, the Comte de Lauzun interjected, “But what about honesty?” He laughed, “Ah, perhaps not at court. What would people think?”

“Vraiment,” declared Henri, pouring another drink. “Honesty and morality are certainly more important than manners. Molière was right to lampoon the précieuse and their ridiculously affected speech. Whatever happened to courage in battle?” He took a swallow. “And why must we attend the King at all times? He expects the nobility to strut about like creatures in a cage to keep an eye on them.”

Athénaïs tensed, praying he would shut up.

“Madame,” said Lauzun to Mme de Sévigné, “Speaking of cages, I heard that your cousin has finally been released from the Bastille.” He grinned. “I am dying to hear the details. Will he be returning to court?” Athénaïs took a breath. The Comte

de Bussy had been imprisoned for writing a scandalous exposé laying bare the amours of the royal family, Madame Henriette in particular.

Mme de Sévigné's blue eyes, usually sparkling, now glared. "No, he has been exiled to his estates. I do think he has been punished enough."

Athénaïs opened her mouth to change the subject, but—

"What a travesty!" exclaimed Henri with a wave of his glass. "Bussy told the truth about that den of vipers." His eyebrow arched in triumph, he turned to Athénaïs. "The court seethes with adulterous liaisons," he pronounced. "Imagine, the First Gentleman of the King's Bedchamber living openly in adultery, causing his poor wife to flee in despair."

He was describing her parents. Ready to spit, Athénaïs turned to Mademoiselle for help—the fearless La Grande Mademoiselle, the King's spinster cousin, who long ago had led the nobles in a revolt against the monarchy. Mademoiselle opened her mouth to counterattack, but Henri could not stop.

"And the royal family," he declared. "Bussy was right to expose Madame and her escapades. And Monsieur? No wonder he cannot control her. We know what *he* is." He tossed back the last of his drink.

La Grande Mademoiselle rose to leave. Lauzun blinked. Mme de Sévigné's eyes narrowed. Athénaïs seethed. The party was over.

Henri staggered off to their boudoir, Athénaïs on his heels. "You beast!" she railed. "How can you say such things about my family? And Monsieur is the King's brother, for God's sake, and Madame is the sister of the King of England!"

Henri curled his lip in a sneer. "Why, ma chère, I thought you hated hypocrisy. Did I say anything that is untrue?" He pulled off his waistcoat and started to unfasten his britches.

"They are not hypocrites, certainly not Papa. Monsieur and Madame don't pretend to be moral. Did you see the look on Mademoiselle's face? You Gascon boor, how dare you!"

"You little bitch, how dare *you*!" He backhanded her, and she crumpled to the floor.

The salty taste of blood filled her mouth. "Please, don't hit me again," she whispered. "I have to appear at court, I don't want

the Queen—”

He loomed over her, huge, like Maman in her nightmares. “You will do what I tell you to, bitch.” He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her to her feet. “Take off your clothes.”

Chapter 2

The High Priestess March, 1667

Athénaïs shivered as she and Papa walked down the frigid halls of Saint-Germain to Louise's apartments. Outside the snow whirled through the woods, flinging icy fingers against the windows, fingers she imagined pointing at her, at her hatred of Henri, at her guilty thoughts.

It was an incredible invitation to dine with the King and Henri was gone again with his troops, so tempting. She looked up at Papa, her heart pounding, ready to turn back, but the door swung open and Monsieur, the King's brother, kissed her on both cheeks, his rouge nearly smearing hers. "You look absolutely *marvelous*," he exclaimed.

"Merci, mon cher," said Athénaïs, with a smile. She could always rely on Monsieur for fashion advice. But her smile thinned. Here was her dear brother Louis-Victor, Duc de Vivonne, and of course he brought his wife Antoinette. They were a mis-matched pair: Louis-Victor, blond like Athénaïs and hugely fat; and Antoinette, dark hair, thin, with ice-blue eyes that cut right through. "Kiss, kiss!" Athénaïs and Antoinette perfunctorily embraced.

She gave a curtsy to His Majesty, kisses for Madame Henriette and Louise, and then they were seated. It promised to be a delightful dinner party with a minimum of formality, but Athénaïs was wary. Everything at court had a protocol, drilled into her as a child. Every Frenchman had *monsieur* before his name and every married woman was called *madame*, but the King's brother Philippe was called *Monsieur*, so his wife Henriette was *Madame*.

The King's cousin La Grande Mademoiselle, Henri's godmother, had a title that was easy to remember for she was both tall and formidable. Only those with the title of *duc* or *duchesse* could sit in the presence of the King. Athénaïs was but a *marquise*, so she had to stand—a lot. But tonight, formality was set aside.

During the fish course she noted the King gazing at her from across the table. “Madame,” he said, “what do you think of Molière? He seems to be both popular and despised after having attacked both the pious and the ridiculous.”

Athénaïs glanced at Papa—her champion—and was reassured by the twinkle in his eye. She put down her fork, gathered her courage, and jumped in. “As for the pious, Sire, Molière did us all a favor when he exposed the hypocrites. His *Tartuffe* is a veritable rapier skewering all those who hide their venality beneath a veil of religion.”

Antoinette turned to stare at Athénaïs.

“Then you may be interested to know,” said the King with a grin, “that Molière has modified *Tartuffe* somewhat to take into account the criticisms of the Church and would like to perform it for the court.”

“I hope, Sire, that his modifications do not detract from his central message. Your court has much to learn about hypocrisy.”

“Why, madame, do you suggest that some of my courtiers might be hypocritical?” said His Majesty with a laugh. “Any examples?”

Athénaïs pondered. Whom could she skewer? The rest of the table fell quiet. Antoinette’s stare became a glare. “As a matter of fact... Your Majesty, your courtiers might be compared to the creatures in La Fontaine’s Fables.”

“An analogy you have used before to good effect.”

“Merci. Consider the snipe.” She flashed an innocent smile at Louise who grinned back. Athénaïs was attacking the long-nosed Olympe Mancini, Comtesse de Soissons. “The snipe is a common bird distinguished by its very long bill—” She paused dramatically, her audience rapt with attention. “A nose it buries in the mud in pursuit of its prey.”

His Majesty threw back his head and laughed. Both Madame Henriette and Louise blushed, giggling. The scheming comtesse had revealed to the Queen the King and Madame’s little plot: in order to avoid discovery of their affair, they had enlisted Louise as a cover—then everyone’s house of cards collapsed when the King *really* fell for Louise.

Monsieur shot a glare at his wife. Her infidelity led to his flaming affair with the Chevalier de Lorraine, then she had an

affair with *his* former lover, the Comte de Guiche. Athénaïs could hear their screaming fights from across the château.

At that, the dinner party evolved into a contest of wits, everyone competing to see whom they could insult with the most eloquence. While Athénaïs gleefully participated, she realized she was the only person present who was not fornicating. Papa was living openly with his mistress Marie, Monsieur and his wife were fighting over who sleeps with his pretty boys, the King not only has Louise, he'd been flirting with the Princesse de Monaco whose brother is the Comte de Guiche. And there were rumors about Antoinette, staring at Athénaïs from across the table. A den of writhing snakes indeed. The only one here with any morals is Louise, a little violet in a court full of thorny roses, hardly the type one would expect to be mistress of a king, his *maîtresse en titre*. Does she still amuse him? Could Athénaïs?

Helas! The conversation dwindled; they had run out of targets for mockery.

"You are not eating, Madame," said the King to Henriette.

"I apologize, it is not the food. I have been unwell." Henriette handed her plate to a valet. "I have been having a pain in my stomach."

Athénaïs turned to her friend. Henriette looked thinner, and pale. "Have you seen a physician?" she asked.

"A physician?" Henriette replied with a wave of her hand. "As if they were of much use. They are telling me to drink ass's milk. Ugh."

Everyone fell silent, a bad sign for a dinner party. Louise's pretty blue eyes were wide with panic. The King was not amused.

Athénaïs came to the rescue. "Sire, we have been looking forward to learning your plans to invade Flanders. Nothing could be more exciting than securing the glory of France."

"Indeed, madame!" The King flashed a smile rivaling the sun itself. "My genius Minister of War Louvois and I have a plan that cannot fail." Shoving the dinner plates aside, he traced battle lines on the tablecloth with his knife. "More glasses!" he called. "They will be my troops. And salt cellars, they will be the enemy." His guests cheered as the King, his dark curls dancing, moved utensils about. "Reinforcements!" he called, and they all joined in, marshalling their troops of glasses and salt cellars and silver

knives and forks, the frantic servants scurrying about protecting the crystal and porcelain from certain destruction.

“En garde, Your Majesty!” Athénaïs positioned a tiny gold salt spoon like a catapult and prepared to hurl salt at him.

“What, madame, you dare?” The King lobbed a dinner roll in her direction. At once the entire dinner party was throwing food and laughing helplessly.

Louis tossed a casual remark in her direction and she sailed a witticism back, keeping up an airy pretense. Perhaps that silly war game made her heart pound. She felt herself sinking, trapped like a carriage wheel encased in mud.

The King’s dark eyes, glinting with a soldier’s ferocity, met hers. He smiled, a brief lift of his moustache, for her eyes alone. They had a secret. Her breath caught—she glanced away, pretending to strike up a conversation with Louise. *God save my immortal soul*, she thought. *I am his next conquest.*

* * *

Later that night, Athénaïs dreamed.

Little Françoise-Athénaïs was running, running to Papa, when Maman grabbed her by the arm and jerked her from safety.

“You insolent little demon! Your wicked tongue will send you straight to Hell.”

“No, please, she is just a child!” Papa pleaded, his arms outstretched.

“She is twelve, almost a woman, and she knows better.”

“Maman, please forgive me!” The weeping girl cowered at her mother’s feet.

“It’s not my mercy, it’s Our Lord’s mercy you must beg for.” Maman, her own eyes full of tears, knelt before her and held up her rosary. “My child, see the suffering Christ. See the wounds you yourself inflicted upon him with your sins, your mocking words a scourge.”

“No!” Rocking back and forth, she could not look. “Oh no, mon Dieu, forgive me.”

“God will forgive you, my child, but only if you are truly sorry.” Maman pulled her to her feet. “Come, I will help you atone.”

“No,” Papa cried, “she is too young for that, please.” Now Papa was in tears.

“Do not dare to intercede. You know nothing about atonement, you and your drink and your whores.” Maman turned to Françoise-Athénaïs. “Come to my room, child.”

The door shut. “You know what this is for, no?” Maman handed her the scourge.

“Yes, Maman,” she whispered. She took the whip with its many barbed tails, favored by saints to mortify their flesh and perfect their souls. Biting her lip, she stood tall, and looked up at her mother with fear and pride. She knew what this was for and she could do it all by herself.

And when she was done and blood traced down her stinging back, little Françoise-Athénaïs and her mother lay on Maman’s bed, weeping in each other’s arms.

* * *

“Maman—Maman!” The nightmare jerked Athénaïs awake. She reached for her snuff on the table and took a pinch with a shaky hand. Why should she feel guilty? Two nights ago she had seen His Majesty leaving Louise, pregnant yet again, and proceed to the Princesse de Monaco’s apartments. The following morning that arrogant woman looked extremely pleased with herself, as did her complaisant husband. No doubt he had been suitably rewarded. The King had made no moves in Athénaïs’ direction and she was hoping to forget him. She deeply inhaled the snuff then sneezed with relief.

“Good morning, madame.” Mlle Claude came bustling in laden with café au lait and brioche. “Are you well, madame? You look upset.”

“I was dreaming about my mother.” Athénaïs clasped the warm cup for comfort and took a long sip. “She died a few years ago.”

Her maid put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I am so sorry, madame.”

“When she died... His Majesty was so kind to me. We wept together, for she had been a great friend of his mother. And then when the Queen Mother died, it was I who comforted him. Such tender moments.” She put down the cup, forbidden thoughts flooding her brain.

“Tell me—” Athénaïs hesitated. How far could she trust

her maid? “What have you heard about the King and his, ah, his amours?”

Mlle Claude smiled with delicious wickedness. “He may be tiring of Louise de la Vallière, and there are many ladies in pursuit of him.”

“There have always been ladies in pursuit. The only ones who haven’t tried are too ugly or too old or too tired.”

“Or chaste, madame?”

“In this court? Adultery is an art form, like painting or sculpture; everyone in competition to see who is the best dressed, the most attractive, who can get into His Majesty’s bed first. And His Majesty seems unable to resist.”

“Yes, madame.” Her maid arched an eyebrow. “He seems to have quite an appetite.”

Athénaïs frowned. “The problem is that he still loves Louise, in spite of the fact that she is unsuitable for him—and for her position of *maîtresse en titre*. She has no conversation whatsoever, terribly dull.”

“Yes, and may I say, madame, she is not so well endowed as you.” Her maid smirked.

“Precisely, and no intelligence either. Both her bosom and her brain are sorely lacking.” They both giggled.

She settled back into her pillow. “What I could do with her position—yes, a patron of the arts, like Madame and Monsieur, sponsoring playwrights and poets and painters. And to be a part of creating Versailles—Oh, there is so much to plan, to develop, to supervise. For her to be *maîtresse en titre*, and for me to be compelled to rise when she enters the room. I can’t bear it.”

She took another sip. “No.” She shook her head. “No, I must at all times appear chaste, even though I am sorely tempted. I must not easily capitulate, or I will be like the rest of them, good for an occasional romp but lacking his sincere regard.” She shut her eyes tight to get Louis out of her head, her body. “I will not sell myself cheap. I refuse to be a casual encounter resulting in my husband’s advancement and the loss of my family’s honor. I must have his respect,” she whispered, “or I will die.”

“Might I suggest something?” With a sly smile, Mlle Claude leaned closer. “Did you ever hear of Madame Montvoisin? She is known to have answers for situations like this.”

“La Voisin? The fortuneteller? Oh no, I couldn’t possibly. It would be a sin.”

“A sin? Oh really, madame. Surely you must know that tout Paris is visiting her. And you *should* know that half the ladies at court are her clients, also attempting to replace the mademoiselle in the King’s affections.”

“No!” But Athénaïs contemplated, her eyes narrowed. “Who are these ladies?”

“Madame la Comtesse de Soissons, and—”

“What? That bitch, I could have guessed. How like her.”

“And her sister, the Duchesse de Bouillon—”

“I should not be surprised, Italians and their poison rings and what not—”

“Yes, madame, please remember the Mancini family’s reputation. It is very dark, especially the sisters. And your family, too. Your sister-in-law is also a client of La Voisin.”

“Antoinette, my brother’s wife? Does she also want to seduce the King?”

“Madame, women visit La Voisin for many reasons. I know these ladies have been there, but as for why?” Mlle Claude smiled at Athénaïs’ confusion. “Listen,” she whispered, “I will take you to La Voisin. We will go incognito. No one will ever know.”

* * *

The following evening, their carriage pulled up at the tail of a long line of coaches in front of a comfortable villa outside Paris. “We can’t go in now,” Athénaïs whispered. “There are too many people.”

“Don’t be afraid,” Mlle Claude smiled. “We can wear our masks.” She put on her black velvet traveling mask. Masks were a boon to ladies, protecting both their complexions and reputations. “And look—many of the coaches are leaving.” Their driver advanced to the door as Athénaïs too donned her mask.

They were about to alight when Athénaïs shrank back into the shadowed corner of the coach. “Look—could that be?” A man built with the broad shoulders and determination of a bull walked briskly past them towards the first coach in line.

Her maid gasped, but quickly squeezed Athénaïs’ hand. “I told you, madame, tout Paris consults the famous La Voisin.

Come along, now.” In a rustle of brown silk, the laughing made-moiselle got out of the coach, followed by the wary Athénaïs.

They were greeted at the door by a girl of about fifteen, her frowzy hair peeking out of her lace-edged cap. “Bon soir, mesdames,” she curtsied. “Please come into the parlor.” Light from a chandelier and a few candles pierced the shadows, reflected in a crystal ball on the tea table near the settee. Next to the crystal ball was a deck of tarot cards lying on a square of purple silk. “Please be seated,” the girl announced. “I will fetch my mother.”

“Isn’t this exciting,” whispered Mlle Claude as she looked around the room.

Athénaïs stared at the murky crystal ball. “How can anyone see anything in there?”

“Only someone with *my* gifts can see the future,” boomed a woman’s voice behind them.

Startled, both ladies turned to see La Voisin in the doorway. Although short and plump, she radiated authority in her magnificent sea-green velvet dress and crimson velvet cloak embroidered with hundreds of double-headed, wingspread eagles. Even her slippers were stitched with gold thread in the same motif. What stunned Athénaïs were the woman’s eyes: black as night, so piercing as to invade one’s soul.

“You may leave, Marie-Marguerite.” La Voisin gestured dramatically and her daughter fled. “My dear Mlle Claude,” she said warmly as she swept into the room. “And who is this?” Her black eyes locked onto Athénaïs, still wearing her mask.

“She prefers anonymity,” the maid announced. “Her position is rather—delicate.”

“Very well.” La Voisin seated herself opposite the ladies, Athénaïs still impaled by her gaze. “Please remove your gloves, madame, so I may take your hand.”

As if in a trance, Athénaïs did as bidden. La Voisin took her right hand and examined the palm. “There is a gentleman, perhaps, that you find elusive?” Athénaïs shrank back. For a long moment, La Voisin stared into her eyes. “Remove your mask, madame,” she hissed. “I do no reading of velvet physiognomies.”

Athénaïs reluctantly removed her mask.

“Ah, Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan,” said La Voisin with a satisfied smile. “That’s better. A beautiful woman such as you

should have no problem attracting a handsome gentleman.” She peered closely into her face. “But I see difficulties, another woman.”

“Yes,” Athénaïs whispered. “I want him. But I must have his respect.”

“I see,” continued the fortuneteller, “The gentleman’s love must turn to you alone.” With feather lightness she held Athénaïs’ hand, caressing it while she held her eyes. “But you desire more. So much more. Are you willing to pay?”