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Riches Sprout Thorns

I have never considered myself a person with the ability to foresee things, but I have to admit that I could see this coming from miles away. The old woman was already frail, but not even the raging hail outside could match the stubbornness of my grand-aunt's spirit. Until her last breath, she would not stop trying to force some final words out even though she was suffocating. Now, here I stand, giving her eulogy just like my dad claims she would have wanted me to. I know this could not be farther from the truth, considering that even though I gave my whole life away to study in hopes of being appointed as the next official representative of France in the World Peace Committee, my grand-aunt still gave what she once acknowledged as mine to my cousin, Isabelle Dimartise.

My life lost meaning when I lost that position. What if I became a world famous actress instead of wasting my years studying laws that I do not even completely agree with? But God forbid I ever said that in front of my parents. I continued praising my grand-aunt for her remarkable works in guaranteeing order and stability across the globe. I felt bitterness towards her decision, but I couldn't pretend as if I didn't idolize the woman ever since she took me to the Opéra Bastille to teach me what she called "the root art of politics."

"Stella, what do you think that I have in common with that actress over there?" She raised her binoculars and waited silently for my answer.

"You both like theater?"

Silence.

"You're both pretty?"

"Flatterer, but wrong."

I looked around for clues, but I saw nothing besides velvety red curtains. She took my prolonged silence as a cue to answer her own question.

"We're both great liars."

At the moment, I did not understand why she meant that, but now, I truly can see that my grand-aunt was indeed an incredible liar. She lied to me about her promise to make me the representative for twenty years. What more did she lie about?

I heard Angelo, Isabelle's twin brother, clear his throat, which snapped me out of my reverie. I had frozen mid eulogy. I pretended that I was submerged in silent prayer, and then I quietly descended from the podium. "Good save." Angelo said when I sat down on the empty chair behind him, and Isabella, who sat on the other chair, nodded approvingly. I genuinely smiled at her, because despite her being the holder of my dream, she was still like a sister to me and the only one who would defend my name in the face of my family.

The reception felt never ending, exactly how my great aunt would have wanted it. She loved to be celebrated.

I desperately needed a break from the charged environment, so I walked towards the balcony. As I leaned over the railing and admired the calming moon's shine, I couldn't shake this uneasy feeling of being watched. I caught some movement on my peripheral view, and I spun around only to be met by my aunt's face.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't want to steal your moment of peace." She smiled and walked beside me to lean over the railing. She lit up a cigarette and turned towards me, "besides, I didn't want my favorite niece to see me in this state." She lowered the cigarette, and as she did, I noticed her chipped red nails. Aunt was clearly anxiety ridden these days. She flashed me a pearly white smile and asked me for a hug. I was about to hug her, but then we heard a commotion inside. Something felt clearly wrong.

Leaving the night's cold behind us, we both began walking towards the reception, and as we did we heard the most chilling shriek and the sound of glass shattering. Aunt's eyes grew wide when she recognized her daughter's voice and the woman ran towards the noise. The revolting image in front of me is one engraved into my mind until the day I die. Isabelle's ears and mouth were bleeding, and her mouth was foaming. Some of the glass shards from her cup were scattered around the marble floors, while others were engraved deep into her arm. I approached a large glass shard and quickly tucked it in my handkerchief, because I knew that it could be tested on later on. Isabelle was definitely poisoned. But who would want to do such a thing? Political opponents? In her short time as grand-aunt's political successor and representative in the World Peace Committee, it's unlikely that any outsider knew about her ideals enough to actually want her dead this bad.

My aunt's eyes rolled to the back of her head. She fainted and I shouted, "Is anyone here a doctor?" Seconds later, I saw him once again after fifteen years. Kieran St. Clair, my childhood best friend, carried her to a sofa and checked my aunt's condition. "She's breathing and she didn't hurt her head significantly. Her blood pressure dropped, but she'll regain consciousness in a few minutes."

"Thank you." I said as I looked up to him.

"Only doing my job." He nodded. Then, he held my hand and helped me stand up.

"It's been a while." He commented.

"It has. Doctor? Didn't you study botany?"

"No, I became a doctor and now I am teaching med students at La Sorbonne."

"Why?"

"Despite being in your family's favor, and under your grand-aunt's care, I still needed money. Beautiful flowers weren't going to provide for me, as much as I love them."

"So you left your dream for money?"

"Like you did?"

"Fair enough."

We walked away from the crowd and into the gardens. A swarm of reports would appear sooner or later, and at least twenty people in the crowd must have called the police already. I didn't mean to look insensitive towards the recent events, but I simply wanted to distance myself from everyone's eyes. The thought of a killer being amidst the crowd was unnerving.

We updated each other about our lives. We also reminisced about our childhood memories. Kieran was an orphan and he was taken care of by my grand-aunt. We had a lot of fun growing up together alongside Isabelle and Angelo-

A shiver ran down my spine as I realized that I hadn't seen Angelo in a while.

"Where's Angelo?" My shaky voice interrupted his anecdotes. "I haven't seen him in a while."

He understood what I was hinting at, and we both ran back inside. The police were there, and the renowned Detective Chaykovsky was talking with my now conscious aunt.

I ran towards them and prayed that she knew where Angelo was. Does he even know about what happened to his sister? Is he even alive?

When I was mere steps away from my aunt and the detective, I felt strong arms hold mine behind my back. I turned around to see two police officers apprehending me for an unknown, but most likely ridiculous reason. "What do you two think you're doing?" I protested.

"Stella Dimartise, you're being detained under suspicion for the murder of Isabelle Dimartise. You have-"

"What? This is ridiculous." Kieran interrupted the officer.

"Where's Angelo?" I repeatedly asked. I would not be at peace until I found him safe. "Please, he could be in danger." The officers didn't budge. I looked at Kieran and nodded my head towards the bedrooms' hallway. He got my cue and ran to look for Angelo.

"Detective Chaykovsky!" My ugly shriek caught the detective's attention. He began walking towards me with his hands behind his back and a condescending look on his face. "Ms. Dimartise, I would never have expected this from you."

"Unhand me already! You know, I once believed you were competent in your field."

He scoffed and crossed his arms. "What makes you think any differently now?"

"Let me ask you this, great detective. Have you seen Isabelle's twin all night?"

I could see the detective's whole demeanor shift in silent defeat. "Pass her to me." He ordered the officers. He held onto my cuffed arm as I guided him and my aunt towards the bedrooms' hallway. She was shaking with each step she took. She couldn't lose both of her children in one night.

"He's in this room!" Kieran shouted. When we reached him, we saw no other than Angelo passed away on the floor. My aunt paled, and I shook her arm in hopes that she would not faint once again. The detective crouched beside Angelo and pressed two fingers against his pulse. "He's alive and breathing."

"Did he faint?"

"We will know in hopefully some minutes-"

We all jumped by a loud thud coming from the wardrobe. The detective held his gun and walked towards the noise. Each step was excruciatingly slow. Step. Step. Step. I almost ran to the wardrobe and opened it myself. He finally reached the handle, and then he pulled it hesitantly. It felt as if he were pulling it inch by inch, and then *crash!*

A red headed woman wearing nothing but a nightgown fell down straight to the floor. Besides her laid an empty flask.

"You again?" Aunt was about to launch herself at her, but Kieran held her back. She murmured something about how humiliating this was to her son's reputation.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I didn't want to do this." Her eyes welled up with tears. "I was forced to."

My aunt sobbed loudly.

"By who?" Detective Chaykovsky helped her up.

"I can't say. She has enough power to ruin me!"

Detective Chaykovsky stared at me with the most disgusted look ever. I shook my head as he led me outside himself, but before I was out of the room, I caught a glimpse of the girl's arm. It had long nail marks right besides her elbow, and specks of chipped red nail polish around the marks. "Wait!" I shouted, but it was too late. I was already out of the room and being led to the police car.

Everyone followed us outside to see my departure. "Kieran! It was my-" The door was closed on me. I knocked on the window separating the front and back seat, but Detective Chaykovsky ignored me and turned his radio up. As I was being taken to the station, all I could think was: *How could she?*

For the next few weeks, I was under house arrest, I was staying at a solitary wing of my grand-aunt's mansion. I couldn't complain about any treatment I was receiving, and I had to thank my family name for that. I still felt indignant over how Isabelle's murder was pinned on me. However, I understand that me being the previous official representative of the WPC before my cousin was named made me look extremely suspicious.

"The next World Peace Committee peace vote will be casted next Sunday. It would put an end to the fifteen years war-" I didn't want a reminder, so I turned the TV off to gather my thoughts.

Now that grand-aunt, Isabelle, and Angelo were out of the picture, I was the next in line. This made me even more suspicious, but a jailed person can't be part of the committee. Whoever did this does not want any of us casting down the next vote. Now an anonymous collective vote would be taken into account. Why wouldn't my aunt want her own family to cast the vote? Nothing made sense.

I needed to visit Kieran and tell him my version of these recent events. Out of all the people, he would believe me. I wore dark sunglasses and a scarf around my head. Then, I escaped through the window. I took a cab to La Sorbonne and hoped that Kieran was working on that day. I Dr. Kieran St. Clair at the front desk, but the receptionist looked at me confused. "There is no one in our records from the past two decades with that name."

That wasn't possible.

I caught a cab back home and shook throughout the whole ride.

I wish the driver would've turned the radio off before I heard the following news. "Two days until the World Peace Committee Fifteen Years' War vote-"

"This is an alert. Stella Dimartise escaped from house arrest. She was last seen at La Sorbonne looking for a professor. If you spot her, please call the authorities." The message was repeated twice.

Now *he* knows. I had to get to the police station before him. I paid the driver extra so he would hurry up to the police station. When I got there, relief washed over me even though I was about to be jailed.

After I entered the station, Detective Chaykovsky cuffed and led me to the questioning room without uttering a single word to me. *Alright*. The faster I could explain myself the better. Suddenly, I winced when I felt a killing grip on my forearm.

It was Kieran holding a bouquet of white speckled flowers.

"Let me talk with her before she's sent away. Please." I felt appalled when he pleaded to the detective.

He claimed it would be a *friendly* chat. Kieran St. Clair was indeed once a friend of mine, before he chose to rip out the roots of my trust and plant bushes filled only with thorns.

That's when it clicked. I stared at the bouquet of white speckled flowers he was holding *for me*. Exactly the same flowers that I almost fell on at the gardens right after Isabelle's death. Death by poisoning, followed by Angelo's coma, which was induced by an unknown substance in the wardrobe girl's empty flask. He narrowed his eyes as he grew aware that I had pieced the puzzle.

"I'll ruin you! You damned pathetic failed botanist!" I tried getting a kick or two before being hauled away by two

more police officers.

“You seem to be the one who’s ruined, love.” He smirked and I was dragged away.

Mere weeks had passed and I was already growing tired of the mashed potatoes at prison. I blamed Detective Chaykosky for my constant stomach aches. He didn’t fully believe my statements against Kieran.

Yesterday, I received word that Angelo woke up from his coma. Today would be the official day in which I would cast my vote against the Fifteen Years’ War useless massacre. I trusted that Angelo would make the right decision. Despite me being here in this unsanitary cell, I felt at peace, but that moment of peace was short-lived.

“You have two visitors.”

I was led out of the cell into the visiting room. If stares could burn, I would have pierced a hole right through that protective glass. My hand shook as it reached for the phone, but I refused to reveal fear across my face. He knew I was deadly scared nonetheless. I pressed the cold phone to my ear.

“They got me. It was never personal. If your family wasn’t the cause of my demise, I maybe would have even liked you.”

“You disgust me.” Those words didn’t do my hatred justice.

“Listen, I had to do everything I did. If the war ends, I lose my arms business. I lose everything.”

“Arms business? First, you’re a doctor, then a poisoning botanist, and now an arms dealer?”

“I have always been a poisoning botanist at heart.”

“You don’t have a heart.”

“That’s unfair. I brought you a flower bouquet the day you were imprisoned. Who else did that for you?”

“You’re sick.”

“I am surprised that you managed to put the pieces together. All except for one. ”

“Enlighten me.” I leaned forward on the chair. I hoped that my eyes conveyed the hatred I couldn’t possibly express with mere words.

“At this point, I don't care to confess.” His posture indeed seemed defeated. Even though I do consider him sick and twisted, I saw regret glinting in his eyes for a spare second. “I tried to fulfill my purpose at this game, and I failed. At least I wanted to admit that granny’s passing was premature.”

I felt a pang in my chest and I hit the glass. “You’re vile! She treated you like her family! Greed has destroyed you!”

“I did what I had to do to survive.”

“You didn’t have to kill them!” My tears stung as I repeatedly hit the glass until the guard held me back.

“You don’t get to sit on your throne of family inherited riches and point fingers at my despair. You know nothing but what has been given to you, and you know nothing about me.”

“I don’t need to know anything about you besides the fact that you’ll now rot in jail for the rest of your life.”

The guard uncuffed me while Kieran was handcuffed. I’ll never forget the look on his defeated face. The guard handed me a letter signed by Detective Chaykovsky.

I skimmed through the letter in which he recognized his mistake and he even admitted that my reasoning was outstanding. However, the last part was worth reading with the utmost attention. "If you do not wish to go back to New York with your parents, I have an empty spot here at the station as a detective trainee. If this interests you, please call this number..."

I have never called a number so quickly in my life. I was so filled with joy to the point of hugging the guard. He pushed me away and led me out of the building. Free at last. Not in a million years would I have ever foreseen the fact that I would finally find another purpose in this life besides being under my family's shadow. I rejected the invitation to participate in the World Peace Committee. Training to become a detective is still the best decision I have ever made in my life.