

Most Dangerous Thing

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Viktor arrives at the Chateau in the dead of night. His underwear and socks are stuck to his skin with cold and wet because he forgot that the driveway was unreasonably scenic and thought that he could beat the storm while walking. The storm soon came through to tell him he should have taken a fucking cab.

The East Wing staff, though, seemed to have been expecting him despite the late hour as they come sweeping through to collect his luggage and provide towels to dry himself with as soon as he steps inside. Someone must have alerted Madam Alouette to his arrival because, soon enough, he sees her familiar figure appear at the end of the hall accompanied by the distinct clicking of her heels against stone. If possible, the sound seems to invoke *more* efficacy in the staff around him.

"Madam," he says as soon as she's within hearing range. He's mildly surprised to see her here as neither of her charges are staying in the Chateau, but then, if the Duke and his family are going to move while they wait for repairs to be made on the main estate, it doesn't make sense to leave one of their Heads of Staff. Even if that staff has no one to serve currently.

"You're late," she says instead of a greeting, "I had your room prepared two days ago."

"Sorry. It was hard to get things in a state where I could leave."

"I'm sure," she says primly, "However, some notice would have gone quite far. You've got my staff in such a state, arriving so late. I can't imagine how we'll manage to deal with the influx of tasks. There's no way I'll be able to spare someone to alert the Duke until well after breakfast." Several of the staff start coughing suspiciously as she says this. Madam Alouette doesn't smile, but her face gives off the impression of one all the same.

"Are your employees sick, Madam?"

She waves a hand dismissively. "Oh, I'm sure some of them are coming down with something. It is flu season, after all. I'll have to send them home so they don't infect the rest of the estate."

Viktor grins. He has always liked Madam Alouette. She is a clever, efficient woman with an impenetrable sense of humor. Likely,

she is looking for excuses to send the staff home with pay considering the lack of work with no one to clean up after. But of course, she would never be so gauche as to say that aloud.

"Though I'm sure you could have managed," she continues with a skeptical look, "I've come to escort you to your apartments so you might be able to rest and make yourself presentable for your meeting with the Duke." She turns to walk away without looking back to check if she's being followed. He does, but not without difficulty. While she is not a short woman, she is smaller than Viktor by quite a bit. Even so, she consistently walks at a pace he finds hard to keep up with.

The rapid clicking of her heels picks back up as she guides him through the halls, announcing their approach well before anyone would have a chance to see them. He takes the time to look around as they go, hoping that he'll be able to find his own way next time.

It's a futile thought. The Chateau is more unfamiliar to him than he expected, though he feels foolish for not realizing it would be. It's a castle as the name implies and built with fortification in mind. It is shockingly different than the main estate which boasts an artist's touch in every detail and rich wood accents. Here, it is stone chilled to the touch and solid walls with no windows covered with tapestries in an attempt to hide their utilitarian nature. It is also somehow smaller despite the fact that it takes up almost twice as much land. The halls are narrower, the ceilings lower. It never once lets you forget its purpose.

"How has the situation been?" Viktor asks.

"Quiet," she replies. She says it tightly as if somehow the word has offended her. "With both the Lords gone, Lady Megiline is the only one residing in this wing."

Viktor inhales roughly through his nose. "And Lady Morgan?"

"She no longer found her staff fit for work. She's moved to the West Wing while she looks for replacements."

"And the Duke just let her?"

"One of his grandchildren is dead. Another has run away. The Lady Morgan is his daughter. At this point, I do not think the Duke cares about the implication."

She's right, of course. The way it's looking, Morgan de L'ourette may very well be the only option for Duchess when the time comes. Her daughter, Meg, is only eighteen and almost three years out

from being eligible for heir-ship. With the Duke nearing seventy, the Gentry might not be willing to wait that long. But still, allowing Lady Morgan to stay in the West Wing all but declares the Duke and Duchess dowager and Lady Morgan as the one to succeed him.

"I see," he says eventually. Thankfully, he's saved from the suffocating silence not soon after. Madam Alouette finally slows down her brutal pace as she leads him through a door.

"This is your sitting room," she says, "I apologize for the sparseness. We weren't allowed to bring anything with us and many of the things in storage here aren't suitable." She seems genuinely troubled by this, but Viktor's standards are much lower than hers, he knows.

"The door at the back is your bedroom, the one on your left is your office, and the one to your right is a combined toiletry and wardrobe." She gestures for him to follow her through the door on the right. "They should just be getting your things unpack—"

She cuts off as she walks in and sees three people in uniform looking very distraught over his luggage. "What is this?" she asks, and then seems to answer her own question. She turns to him. "You only brought one suitcase?"

Viktor nods. Madam Alouette frowns, then recovers. "Get out of here," she says to the other three, "I'll handle this." From the way they scurry out, they almost seem relieved.

As they shut the door behind them, Madam Alouette struts forward to where they left his suitcase open on the floor. She picks up a few things and lays them aside, then continues to root around in it for a minute before standing. She looks at him.

"There's practically nothing in here. Though, I suppose I'm not surprised," she says, "You know he can't fire you."

"He can, if my employer is presumed dead."

"A good thing your employer *isn't* presumed dead," she snaps, "You think he would leave you here without protection? It's in your contract, same as mine."

"You've read my contract?"

"Of course I have. I helped write it." She finally turns away from him, waving a dismissive hand as she does. "Go wash up and leave me to it. I'll be damned if you're living out of a single suitcase on

my watch. Someone will be up with your linens by the time you're done."

And Viktor, because he knows an order when hears one, does. He takes a shower, and when he exits back into his wardrobe, Madam Alouette is gone. In her place, there are several more sets of shirts, pants, and jackets than he remembers packing hanging on the racks and folded on the shelves. It's not full, but the only people he knows that can fill a room-sized closet are the nobility themselves. It's more than he expects to ever need on this trip.

Just like the Madam said, there are fresh linens on the bed. He lies down expecting to lie awake until dawn, but a full day of working followed by a full night of traveling catches up to him. He's asleep within minutes.

He wakes up well into the morning. He's just barely dressed himself when he hears a knock from outside. When he goes to check, Madam Alouette has already let herself in, rolling in a tray of food behind her.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're kind of scary?" he says, too used to her uncanny timing to truly be unsettled.

"I've brought brunch," she says, ignoring him. "I just alerted the Duke of your arrival. I will come back in an hour to get you so you can meet him." She looks at him seriously. "Prepare yourself. I do not think he will be alone."

Viktor nods, suddenly unable to speak, and Madam Alouette leaves without another word just as swiftly as she arrived. He eats, then waits. There isn't any work here for him to do, and Viktor is too antsy to try and entertain himself with something else. He would take some pictures of his rooms to send to his sister, but that's technically a breach of his contract, and he really doesn't need to give them any more reason to fire him.

Instead, he spends the hour by imagining how exactly this is going to go. The summons wasn't terribly specific; it just requested his presence to discuss the bombing incident. Considering his position, it's hard to believe anything good could come of that.

He's relieved when Madam Alouette shows up again, if only because she's saved him from his own racing thoughts. She, of course, didn't have to fetch him personally, but she must be anxious too. For him, or simply for some work to do, Viktor isn't sure.

"He'll be waiting for you in his office," she says, and then she's off again at that breakneck pace. Viktor had been expecting it this time, and so doesn't get quite so left behind. Still, she moves so quickly that he's barely able to register the transition from East Wing to West Wing.

For the most part, the change is subtle. There's an increase in staff walking around; the color scheme changes from rose gold to true gold to bronze; then there's the staring.

The staff is discreet about it, at least, but the all the eyes on him still make his skin crawl. Madam Alouette must feel it too because her pace falters just the slightest bit.

There's no rule against them being here. There's nothing even that strange about it. They aren't being looked at because they're odd or curious because they aren't. They're being watched. Viktor doesn't doubt that their every move will be reported back to someone.

The clearest distinction between the East Wing and the West Wing isn't the color scheme; it's the loyalties.

Viktor knows when they've reached their destination because Madam Alouette begins to slow down, and eventually, she comes to a stop outside an ornate wooden door. She knocks and announces their presence.

After a moment, a voice calls to tell them to come in. Madam Alouette does, and then holds the door open for him to enter behind her. Once he's stepped inside, she bows toward the Duke and leaves, closing the door on her way out.

Thanks to her warning, Viktor isn't surprised to see not just the Duke sitting in his office, but the Duke's entire family, sans Olivier and Lucas.

The chair behind the Duke's desk is empty. Instead, he sits on one of the pair of ornately upholstered sofas that sit in front of it. Next to him sits his wife, the Duchess. On the opposite sofa sits Megiline and her mother, Lady Morgan.

For a moment, Viktor isn't sure what to do. This setting is much more informal than he was expecting, but also much more pressure than if it were just him and the Duke alone.

"Greetings to the Duke and his Duchess," he says belatedly, "And to the Ladies of the House as well. You've summoned me?" They each incline their head as he greets them, though Lady Morgan twists her face in displeasure as she does.

They look tired, Viktor realizes. The Duke especially, but all of them seem weary, even dressed as they are in their best casual finery. Meg's eyes are red-rimmed.

"Yes," the Duke says, "Though, I'm sorry to pull you from your work. It is my understanding that you are now handling the case."

"Yes, the local law enforcement handed the case over to me and my team the day after the incident." He hesitates, then decides to elaborate. "They've been trying to regain jurisdiction of the case very insistently ever since despite the law being very clear on who has rights to conduct an investigation on a ducal household."

"That's unfortunate," the Duke says and he even seems to be genuine, "I will speak to the Department. You are Olivier's Head of Security; they should not be disrupting your work."

Viktor is baffled. He'd been expecting accusations, not sympathy and assistance. Did they not suspect his involvement? If not, why did they call him here? Then, suddenly, he's stuck with a bolt of clarity: they haven't read his contract. It seems ridiculous; he signed on when the twins were *sixteen*. Surely, someone reviewed his contract before it was given to him. Then realizes that someone did: Madam Alouette. Hadn't she said she'd help write it? And she writes contracts all the time for her own employees. No one would look twice if she gave the green light.

Before he can recover from this realization, the Duchess speaks up. "Have there been any developments? Do you know anything more about the attack?"

He shakes his head. "Most of what we've found has already been reported. The bomb was small, homemade, and hidden in Lord Olivier's bed frame. It was clearly meant to explode and set the room on fire. The list of people with that kind of access to the Lord's bedroom is short and almost all of them had an iron-clad alibi."

"Everyone but Lucas," Meg says, and it's like the words drop the temperature in the room by several degrees. She's not looking at anyone as she say it, instead staring at her lap with a kind of cold intensity Viktor has never seen in her before.

"Yes," he says quietly, "All suspects but Lord Lucas have been cleared of suspicion."

The room goes quiet for several awkward moments. The Duke, in particular, seems to grow older and wearier right before his eyes. It's him that eventually breaks the silence.

"That is why I called you here," he says sadly, "It seems you have found out all you could from the crime scene." He shifts so he is looking at Viktor straight on. "I would like you to find my grandson and detain him. That should be the focus of your investigation. It may not bring Olivier back, but it will certainly give us *answers*."

He says this all so earnestly that all Viktor can do is helplessly agree. The meeting ends quickly after that with him answering a few more questions and informing them of his next steps for the investigation, but in all honesty, he barely remembers what was said.

He has to walk back to his room himself. This suits him fine as he has a lot to think about and he feels less like a caged animal getting lost in a castle than pacing the same twenty feet in his room. It's as he's wandering like this that his phone rings.

Viktor answers without really looking, both glad to have the distraction and entirely too used to getting calls he can't refuse in the past two weeks.

"Hello?"

"I'll be gone within two days."

Viktor breathes out a sigh of relief. "Good. Don't tell me where."

"They have you looking for me?"

"Yeah."

"It was only a matter of time." There's some shuffling on the other end. *"This will be my last call for a while. I have to ditch this phone before I leave. I'll be able to contact you once I get there."*

"Okay. Remember what I taught you."

"I will." And then the call disconnects. Viktor sighs heavily, wondering how exactly he's going to make this work.

"That was him, wasn't it?" A voice startles him and he whips his head up to see Meg standing behind him. "That was Lucas on the phone," she continues, her eyes burning where they're stuck to the phone in his hand, "You already know where he is, don't you?"

Viktor shakes his head. "I don't," he tries, but Meg isn't moved.

"Oh, but you could," she says, her gaze snapping up to his. She takes a step closer. "Where is he?"

"I told you, Lady Megi—"

"Don't fucking call me that! Where is he?" she demands, taking another step closer, "Call him back right now. He doesn't g-, get to do this! He— We said we'd be different." Her frustration is palpable then. She glares at Viktor.

"Fuck you," she says, biting and venomous, "And fuck him too. Keep your secrets; it doesn't make a difference to me. You might not get it, but family is most dangerous thing for people like us. I'm better at this than he is. I'll find him. I'll drag him back myself, claws and all."