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I often heard my sister before I saw her, and tonight was no exception. Zosa's supple voice spilled through the open window of Bézier Residence, sounding so like our mother's—at least until she began a raunchier ditty comparing a man's more delicate anatomy to a certain fruit.

I crept inside, unnoticed in the crowd of boarders. Two of the younger girls pretended to dance with invisible partners, but every other eye was fixed on my sister, the most talented girl in the room.

A special kind of girl rented rooms at Bézier Residence. Almost all worked jobs fitting of their foul mouths: second shifts as house grunts, factory workers, grease cooks, or any number of ill-paying positions in the vieux quais—the old docks of Durc. I worked at Tannerie Fréllac, where women huddled over crusted alum pots and wells of dye. But Zosa was different.

"Happy birthday," I shouted when her song ended.

"Jani!" She bounded over. Her huge brown eyes shone against a pale, olive-skinned face that was far too thin.

"Did you eat supper?" I'd left her something, but with all the

other girls around, food had a tendency to disappear.

She groaned. “Yes. You don’t have to ask me every night.”

“Of course I do. I’m your big sister. It’s my life’s greatest duty.” Zosa scrunched her nose and I flicked it. Fishing in my sack, I pulled out the newspaper that had cost me half a day’s wage and pressed it into her palms. “Your present, *madame*.” Here, birthdays weren’t dusted with confectioners’ sugar; they were hard-won and more dear than gold.

“A newspaper?”

“A jobs section.” I flipped open the paper with a sly grin.

Inside were advertisements for jobs in fancy dress shops, patisseries, and perfumeries, positions that would never belong to a thirteen-year-old who didn’t look a day over ten. Luckily, they weren’t what I had in mind.

Skipping past them, I pointed to a listing that had appeared in papers across town an hour ago.

The ink was vibrant purple, like Aligney blood poppies or crushed amethyst velvet. It stood out, a strange beacon in a sea of black and white.

The girls crowded around us, and everyone leaned in as the purple ink winked with an iridescence that rivaled polished moonstones.

No address was given. The legendary hotel needed none. It appeared every decade or so in the same old alley downtown. The whole city was probably there now, already waiting like fools for a chance at a stay.

Years ago, when the hotel last made an appearance, the majority of the invitations were delivered beforehand to only the wealthiest citizens. Then, the day the hotel arrived, a few more precious invitations were gifted to random folk in the crowd. Our matron, Minette Bézier, was one of those lucky few.

That midnight, the guests stepped into the hotel and disappeared, along with the building. Two weeks later, they famously stepped *back*, appearing in the same alley from nothing but thin air.

My fingers twitched and I pictured cracking the seal on my own invitation. But even if we were fortunate enough to win one, we'd still have to pay for a room—and they weren't exactly cheap.

Zosa's brows drew together. "You want me to interview?"

"Not quite. I'm going to interview. I'm taking *you* to audition as a singer."

It had been four years since I'd taken her to a singing audition—the first one hadn't worked out in our favor, and I couldn't stomach going through it again, so we didn't try for more. But today was her birthday and this was *the* Hotel Magnifique. Everything about it felt different. Perfect, somehow. "Hotels hire singers all the time. What do you say?"

She answered with a smile that I felt in the tips of my toes.

One of the older girls shoved a lock of greasy blonde hair behind her pink ear. “That advertisement is a tease. It would be a miracle if any of us got a job.”

I straightened. “That’s not true.”

She shrugged as she turned away. “Do what you want. I wouldn’t waste my time.”

“Think she’s right?” Zosa asked, her delicate mouth turning down.

“Absolutely not,” I said, perhaps too quickly. When Zosa’s frown deepened, I cursed silently and dragged my thumb along our mother’s old necklace.

The worthless chain was Verdanniere gold, rigid as steel. Maman always joked my spine was made of the stuff. I often fumbled for it when I needed her guidance with Zosa. Not that she ever gave it; dead mothers weren’t any good for guidance.

“The hotel wouldn’t run an advertisement if no one had a chance. Tomorrow, we’ll show them what we’ve got. When they discover how brilliant we both are, we can kiss this place goodbye for good.”

The thought felt like a bright coal smoldering in my chest.

My fingers trembled as I straightened one of Zosa’s dark curls like Maman would do. “Let’s show the advertisement to Bézier. She’ll know more about the hotel than anyone here.”

Zosa nodded, eyes gleaming. I plucked the jobs section from her fingers and took off. Girls raced behind me up two flights of stairs to my favorite room, the third-floor sitting room that used to house sailors before Bézier bought the building. It was stuffed with shelves of antiquated ocean charts and atlases for far-off places I’d often page through.

Bézier sat before her fire, stockinged feet propped on a window ledge. Outside, rain battered the port of Durc, turning the city I hated into a wet blur.

Her mouth pinched when we all streamed in. "What is it now?"

I handed her the page of newsprint. Purple ink caught the firelight and Bézier's pale face slackened.

"Is something wrong?" asked a girl behind me.

Bézier glanced above the hearth to the decade-old sheet of parchment sheathed behind glass: her invitation. In the low light, the purple ink shone with the same iridescence as the advertisement. "Hotel Magnifique is returning, I see."

Another door opened and a few stragglers squeezed in, jostling for a look.

"I've heard the guests sip on liquid gold from champagne flutes for breakfast," said a girl in back. More girls chimed in with their own rumors.

"They say the pillows don't have feathers, they're all stuffed with spun clouds—"

"Heard each night, you cross the world thrice over—"

"And all their fancy doormen are princes from some far-off land—"

"Bet they give fancy kisses, too." A girl with beige skin and ruddy cheeks made a vulgar gesture with her tongue. Thankfully Zosa didn't notice. Instead, a grin split her face.

Shame there was no way to know if the rumors were true; guests signed away all memory of their stay upon checkout. Besides luggage, the only thing guests returned with was a feeling of devastat-

ing happiness. Bézier once admitted to icing her jaw from all the smiling.

Curious, I glanced at Bézier. Her eyes had grown misty, as if the hotel returning somehow sparked a memory. I opened my mouth to ask about it until Zosa slipped in front of me. "Did you ever see the maître?"

The maître d'hôtel was the proprietor and as famous as the hotel itself.

Bézier nodded, smug. "The hotel came once when I was a young, pretty thing. The maître had the brightest smile I'd ever seen. Positively gleamed greeting the crowds. He plucked a flower from the air and tossed it to me." She pretended to catch a tiny bloom. "The thing smelled like blueberry pie then dissolved to nothing in my fingers. Over a decade went by before the hotel came again, and when it did, the maître looked exactly the same."

"Wearing the same clothes?" someone asked.

"No, you ninny. He *looked* the same. Same face. Same charm. Hadn't aged, not a day. Makes sense, I guess. He is the greatest suminaire in all the world."

Girls gasped at the mention of a suminaire: the old Verdanniere word for *magician*.

Outside of the hotel, a suminaire was the most dangerous thing in the world. Magic was said to build in their blood during adolescence until it flared out in an uncontrollable power, with the potential to hurt—or kill—anyone who happened to be near them at the time.

Some said it poured from a child's nose into a dark cloud.

Others said it looked like pitch-black fingers clawing up a child's throat. And there was no way to tell a normal child from a suminaire before their magic flared.

There were rumors of what to look out for, of course. Outlandish things like craving blood or tongues turning black. There were even children said to come back to life after a fatal wound only to discover they had magic in their blood. But no one could prove it.

Whatever the case, magic was so dangerous that for centuries in Verdanne, children suspected to be suminaires were either drowned or burned to death.

But inside the hotel, magic was safe. It was well known the maître somehow enchanted the building himself, allowing the suminaires he employed to perform astonishing feats without harming a soul. Nobody knew how he'd done it, but everybody wanted a chance to see it firsthand.

Before anyone could ask another question, Bézier clapped her hands. "It's late. Everyone to your rooms."

"Wait," I said. "Do you remember anything now that the hotel is back? Is it as magical as the rumors?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt silly for asking.

Bézier, however, didn't laugh or think it odd. Instead, she glanced at her old invitation wistfully.

"I'm certain it's more," she said with a bitter note. I'd be bitter too if I couldn't remember the most exciting time of my life. She tossed the advertisement in the fire, then stumbled back. "My god."

The paper caught, burning pink, then green, then crimson, turning the hearth into a dazzling display of rainbow flames. The flames

shot higher, raging into the chimney, creating a more arresting sight than the storefronts of boulevard Marigny.

"It's *magic*," Zosa whispered.

My neck prickled. There was a reason Hotel Magnifique caused gasps and goggling. Normally, magic was rare, dangerous, and to be avoided at all costs. But somehow, inside that hotel, it was the opposite, and tomorrow we might finally have a chance to experience it ourselves.