

## In Disgrace

The sound of the Queen's high-heeled shoes tapping their angry way down the hallway struck terror into my nine-year-old heart. The echoes along the marble floors became louder as they approached my room. I whimpered involuntarily, and Abigail, my maidservant, threw me a triumphant look.

"Now you're in for it!" she said.

As if I didn't already know. But terrified as I was, it crossed my mind rather spitefully that Abigail herself would also have to pay the price. After all, she's the one who was supposed to be looking after me.

The footsteps grew louder, and I realized, with abject horror, that they were the *only* footsteps to be heard. I had never known the Queen, my mother, to travel without her entourage of ladies. She loved an audience, especially when she had the opportunity to reduce someone to a quivering wreck - something which tended to happen on a regular basis. The thought of having to face my mother alone drained the blood from my face.

*Maybe Abigail will get in more trouble than me*, I thought, desperately looking around the room for somewhere to hide. The footsteps paused outside my door, and I backed away until I was pinned in place by my bed. The door flew open so furiously, it banged against the wall, almost cracking the plaster.

Abigail didn't even get the chance to curtsy.

"Leave us!" hissed my mother.

As Abigail scurried out of the door like a frightened mouse, my mother slammed the door shut and turned to stare down at me malevolently, like a giant, bejeweled bird of prey. Sparkling from head to toe with pearls, diamonds and gold, the width of her skirt extended far beyond the span of her arms. She was indeed a sight to behold. But it was the towering magnificence of her hair that demanded the most attention. Thickly powdered, as was the custom, her mighty 'pouf' was intertwined with ropes of pearls, ribbons, lace, ostrich and peacock feathers, and topped with a bird's nest complete with ornamental birds and eggs.

Gazing up in awe at the birds, I remembered overhearing Abigail tell someone that the Queen had to sleep in an upright position every night, so as not to disturb her pouf. She also needed be extremely cautious not to stand under the candles of a lit chandelier,

especially after what happened to poor Madame Bellamy. I was just starting to picture the bird's nest going up in flames when her voice cut into my thoughts.

"Close your mouth, Princess Louise-Marie! You look like an imbecile."

I *felt* like an imbecile, standing there frozen with fear. Abigail had told me that children can be legally imprisoned for up to a month at the request of their father. Since my father is the King, he could probably have me thrown into the dungeon for the rest of my miserable life if he so desired. My mother had great influence over my father's decisions, and right now she was angrier than I had ever seen her, so my chances of survival were slim at best.

"You're a DISGRACE," my mother continued. "Just look at you! You look like you've been rolling in MUD!"

I had actually been rolling in mud, but wasn't about to mention that.

"You have SINGLE-HANDEDLY brought shame and disgrace to the royal family. And to think you're the eldest. Not to mention SECOND in line to the throne!"

The reminder that I could conceivably inherit the throne made me feel nauseous. My only comforting thought was that my father, the King, was in good health, and so was my younger brother, Henri, who, as the only boy in the family, was first in line.

My mother was just getting warmed up.

"We're a laughingstock! My eldest daughter found CAVORTING around town on a donkey! A common donkey! I think I'm getting one of my headaches."

My mother's headaches were infamous, often having the effect of throwing the entire castle into a frenzy.

"So, were you kidnapped, or did you run away? DON'T answer me; I don't even want to know!"

I was mesmerized by the birds atop the nest. They were quivering with my mother's every word. My guess was they were trying to fly away.

"LOOK AT ME WHEN I'M TALKING TO YOU!"

I tore my eyes away from the nest and did my best to maintain eye contact while holding back tears. The tirade went on endlessly. I didn't hear any mention of the words 'prison' or 'dungeon,' but knew there would be consequences nevertheless. As she began to wind down, her eyes narrowed, and she looked me up and down with contempt.

I must have looked rather bedraggled, to say the least. My once-white dress was stiff with mud, my arms and legs were bloodied with cuts and scrapes, and one of my feet was painfully blistered.

“You have been a disappointment to me since the day you were born. You have neither looks nor brains. Why can’t you be more like your sister?”

And then the worst blow of all.

“You will have to answer to your father, of course. The hearing will be held after chapel in the morning. That dreadful vagabond will have to answer for his crimes. And as for you ... you will be punished. Oh, the DISGRACE of it all!”

With that, she swept out of the room. Sideways, of course, on account of the width of her skirt. I heard the key turning in the lock and thanked my lucky stars I hadn’t been imprisoned in a dungeon cell. *For now*, anyway. Tomorrow there was to be a hearing. I didn’t know what that was but gleaned from its name that it would be an occasion where the King would hear me out. I hoped he would listen carefully, because there were a lot of things I needed him to hear. Especially about Sebastian.

Running away hadn’t been a sudden decision on my part. Far from it. I’d been dreaming of my escape for years and had made careful plans. I had intended to walk to my Aunt’s manor house, counting on her kindness to take me in.

My mother’s sister, Aunt Josephine, was so unlike my mother it was hard to believe they were even related. With not a single lady-in-waiting in sight, her house was one of warmth and laughter. No eavesdropping, no spies, and no gossip. You didn’t have to obsess over how you used your napkin at dinner, or which knife you sliced the ham with. You didn’t feel like you were being constantly watched by people who wanted you out of the way. You didn’t have to behave in a certain manner. Or even speak if you didn’t want to. You could just breathe. And my aunt treated me as if I were a real person. As if I actually mattered.

At the palace, it became clear to me from a young age that I *didn’t* matter. Yes, I was the eldest princess and could potentially succeed to the throne if my brother were to die. Not that I ever wanted to think about such an event. It was quite obvious to everyone that I wasn’t well-equipped to be a princess or a monarch. My only value lay in an arranged marriage, one that would benefit the Kingdom by creating a good alliance or filling the coffers with wealth.

Limolou is a small Kingdom, wedged in between Saxony, Bavaria and the Holy Roman Empire. Small as Limolou is, our land is coveted by all of our neighbors so it’s important for us to maintain good relations with the more powerful nations around us. A royal marriage provides the perfect means to create an ally. As the eldest, I would be the first

one to be auctioned off, although my father had joked that my dowry would have to be ruinously high for anyone to take me.

I was expected to be elegant, sophisticated and informed, able to hold down an intelligent conversation whilst looking attractive at the same time. But as everyone could see just by looking at me, I hardly qualified on any level.

Afraid of everything and everyone, I could barely speak for fear of being ridiculed. The ladies would stare at me in amusement, whispering about me behind their fans. They mistook my silence for stupidity, and bemoaned my pale plump face, ordinary brown hair and lack of curls.

“She’s an ugly duckling, that’s for sure,” I overheard Abigail tell one of the footmen, years ago. “Doesn’t even have a pretty temperament to make up for it!”

“What’s an ugly duckling?” I dared to ask Abigail later that day, as she was brushing my hair.

“An ungrateful little wretch who doesn’t even know how lucky she is. Now hold still!”

Abigail could be very mean when she was brushing my hair.

I was unhappy. I felt like I didn’t belong, and knew that if I disappeared from the palace, nothing much would change. My younger brother Henri, as the only male heir, would inherit the crown when our father died. And if it were princesses that were needed, there were three more of those other than myself, all of whom were living up to expectations.

My sister Marie-Angelique, just a year younger, was everything a princess should be. With her confidence, cuteness and curls, she would be sure to attract a hoard of suitors when the time came. She might be a bit of a handful, always demanding the most expensive of items, but that was expected, even encouraged in a princess. And the two younger princesses, Sophie and Lizzie, were continually cooed over in a way that I never was. I wouldn’t be missed. In fact, there would probably be a collective sigh of relief if I disappeared.

“Thank goodness she’s gone,” my mother would say. “She just wasn’t right for the job. We’re much better off without her!”

It wouldn’t take long to get to Aunt Josephine’s by carriage, depending on the state of the roads. I thought I could remember the way, and would be able to walk there in a couple of hours at the most. But the right day and the right timing was crucial to my success.

In the mornings after breakfast, we children had to attend chapel, which was followed by our lessons. If I disappeared at this time I would be missed, and there would be an

immediate search put into place. I wasn't a very fast walker, so the palace guard would no doubt catch up with me. But if I left in the afternoon when we were allowed to play in the gardens, I could probably get a head start and be halfway to Aunt Josephine's before I was even missed.

A Tuesday would be best. On Tuesday afternoons, Abigail was supposed to watch us, and she wasn't good at watching. She would be dozing off in her chair, or gossiping with the gardeners, kitchen maids - anyone else who happened to pass by. She didn't care if any of us disappeared from her line of sight for a couple of hours; in fact, I think she preferred it that way.

So it was on a Tuesday afternoon in April of the year 1780, that I prepared to run away.