

Hotel Nebelrand

Luxembourg City – 22 April 1939, twilight

The letter was wrong.

That was Lucien's first, last, and only coherent thought before the fog began to creep in, not from the Pétrusse valley outside, but from the edges of his own mind. The paper was a heavy, creamy stock, bearing the personal wax sigil of Her Royal Highness, the Grand Duchess Charlotte. "For the Director of Hotel Nebelrand," Monsieur Krier, the senior attaché, had said, his voice clipped with the particular urgency that infected everything in the spring of 1939. "Her Royal Highness insists it arrive before tonight's gala. You understand?"

Lucien understood. In these days, one understood many things without asking: why German tourists took so many photographs of bridges, why Radio Luxembourg interrupted its jazz programs with increasingly grim bulletins, why his father woke gasping from dreams of bloody trenches and fallen comrades.

But the letter was wrong. It felt too heavy in his pocket, a dead weight that had nothing to do with paper and wax. An object from the Grand Ducal Palace could not be wrong. It was an artifact of national stability, as solid and meaningful as the red lion on the coat of arms. An honor for him to deliver it. But the envelope felt less like an honor and more like a tumor. As Lucien walked the final block towards the Hotel Nebelrand, the cold, damp, cellar-like chill of the paper in his breast pocket seemed to seep through the fabric and right into his bones.



The new Hotel Nebelrand, Fog's Edge, rose at the mouth of Avenue de la Liberté, overlooking the Pont Adolf, like a polished black obelisk pretending to be a hotel. Where Jean Staar once planted his proud Hôtel de la Gare, the State had demanded a still grander beacon for the Centenaire, and so the Nebelrand had been conjured, all Art Deco angles and chrome that caught the dying light wrong. Seven stories of limestone and black marble, windows that reflected not quite what stood before them. Beneath the marquee, electric letters stuttered between HOTEL NEBLRAND and 1839–1939, as though the sign itself could not decide in which year it was living.

Lucien looked doubtfully at the sign, the letter in his pocket a literal weight on his heart. Around him, Luxembourg City rang with Centenary celebrations—brass bands playing "Ons Heemecht," children waving tiny red-white-and-blue flags... It was a fever dream of patriotism, beautiful and desperate, like dancing while the house burned down. Everyone knew what was happening in Prague. In Vienna. The Reich was hungry, and it was only a matter of time before the German boot was to fall on neutral little Luxembourg.

Steeling his nerves, Lucien pushed through the great glass doors. The doorman, a young, eager creature, with the soft look of someone who'd never seen a trench, bowed deep enough to show the pink of his scalp.

Inside, the lobby was a cathedral of symmetry: terrazzo floors in black-and-ivory chevrons, brass inlays catching the chandelier light like fish scales. Yet the pattern refused to meet itself in the middle; no matter where one stood, the chevrons pointed somewhere else. At the far wall a triptych of mirrors rose to the ceiling.



Flawless sheets of Belgian glass, the clerk bragged, but when Lucien crossed before them, he was almost sure that he saw not one reflection but two, the second image a blink behind the first. At the desk, the concierge, a thin man with a smile that never quite reached his eyes, approached to meet him. His nameplate read Faber.

"Monsieur?"

Lucien straightened his posture, clearing his throat. "Rosport, junior attaché à la Cour grand-ducal. I have a letter from Her Royal Highness for the Director."

"Ah. Yes. I'm afraid the Director is... indisposed," he said, the same words Monsieur Krier had used about Lucien's predecessor, who'd taken his own life with a service revolver three months ago.

"Perhaps you could leave the correspondence with—"

"No substitutions. It must be delivered personally." He kept his voice steady, professional.

The concierge's practiced smile flickered. "Ah. Certainly. Please wait a moment."

Lucien watched the man lift the sleek Bakelite receiver, whisper into it, then pause. A moment later, he replaced it, his face carefully blank.

"Monsieur Rosport, Monsieur le Directeur will receive you. This way."

Faber led him to the elevator, its brass cage reflecting their faces in queasy multiples. As they ascended, the operator—a gray man who seemed to exist only in profile—pulled the lever past 7 to a floor marked with a symbol Lucien didn't recognize.

"The Director's floor. This is as far as I can go with you. The Director awaits in Room 707." Faber murmured.



Bewildered, Lucien stepped into a corridor lined with mailboxes, hundreds of them, each bearing a date instead of a name. Some dates Lucien could understand: 10 May 1940. 6 June 1944. Others were wrong: 15 October 1961. 22 December 2001. 30 April 2025. The hallway stretched impossibly far, lit by buzzing electric bulbs that cast everything in a sickly yellow pallor. Each door he passed was numbered 707, none felt like the right one. He turned a corner into another identical corridor. Then another. The mailboxes continued, their dates growing stranger: 32 December 1975. The Ides of Tomorrow. Year Zero.

Room 707, the right one this time, finally appeared. Inside was a vast space filled with desks, each with its own empty chair, extending as far as Lucien could see. Lucien saw his reflection in a hundred dusty mirrors, each showing him at a different desk, in different clothes, aging and young, sometimes not quite human. In one, his eyes were brass. In another, he had no face at all. The letter in his pocket unfolded itself. The words swam: Please complete the census for Room 707.

He was sitting. When had he sat down? The desk before him was covered in letters yet to be written, their dates yet to happen. Through the window, he saw not the city but an endless grid of rooms, each containing another version of himself, sorting mail that would never be sent. He picked up the pen. The first entry was already complete: Lucien Rosport, Room 707, Quantity: Pending. The ink was still wet, though the date read 1839.

In the lobby below, the gala began. The Grand Duchess raised her glass to a century of independence.