

THE RESURRECTION TRINITY



FRANKENSTEIN SOUL'S ECHO

Book 2 of 3

PETE PLANISEK

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FRANKENSTEIN SOUL'S ECHO

Book 2 of 3

The Resurrection Trinity

PETE PLANISEK

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Pete Planisek

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For my family

CHARACTERS

*Ernest Frankenstein

Abrielle (Orfilia)

*The Creature

Tara Tierney Frankenstein (Chavi)

*Victor Frankenstein – deceased

Geneva

Christiansen

Salzburg

Jack Clerval

Costanza Clerval

The Duke

General de Corps d' A'rmee Ouellet

The Wild Rose clan prisoners

Baseria Nalie

Etolie

Vochallet

Isyll

Sebbi

The Wild Rose clan

Jal Nalie

Espen Nalie

Nasi Nalie (Nagyanya) - deceased

Mayte Nalie – deceased

Patia Nalie – deceased

Judika – deceased

Kelv

Hytr

The Moon Shadow clan

Nicabar

Tasaria

Pias (Boier Amăgitor)

The Moon Shadow Fortress

The Old Ones

Pell

Ghul

Captain Ayt

Tyben

China

Xie Xue Maa

Ai Qui Maa

Wei Maa

France

Noel and Anne D'Aoust

Spies

Bellange

Chloe (Onella)

Berryer

Grenier

Bayonne

Paul (Cheval)

Sister Annette

Sister Michelle

Sister Josephine

Bordouex

Amelie Sarah

*All characters from Mary Shelly's Frankenstein.

*“I have seen tempests, when the scolding winds
Have riv’d the knotty oaks; and I have seen
Th’ ambitious ocean swell and rage and foam;
To be exalted with the threat’ning clouds:
But never till to-night, never till now,
Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,
Incenses them to send destruction.”*

*-William Shakespeare
Julius Caesar (1.3.5-13)*

CHAPTER 1

THE ENDLESS DAWN

Ernest shielded his eyes, and for a moment, the world was nothing but the pulsing blend created by shadow and light. He blinked fervently. He felt her knock into him and giggle as she raced by, down towards the meadow, which was awash in wildflowers and dazzling emerald grasses. The clean, cool air of the mountains refreshed him as he dodged among grass and stone in pursuit.

“Give it back.”

Without turning around, she only shook her head, laughed, and tauntingly held up the object fueling his pursuit. Her dress and several glances backward slowed her escape, but escape was not the purpose of this game. Twice his hands snatched at her waist, but both times she deftly managed to elude his touch. Her eyes danced with mischief as she swatted blonde strands of hair away from them. God, he loved her smile. A shriek of mock panic escaped her as he tried to grab her a third time, the result of which sent them tumbling towards a mixed patch of strawberries and wildflowers. A swarm of tiny insects fled upwards, away from the disturbance of their world caused by the intrusion of the panting humans.

“Now ... would you please ... give me back my hat?”

Ailis rolled her body to prevent his hand from prizing the hat out from underneath her. The stalemate amused her.

“Perhaps ... if you ask me nicely, Monsieur Frankenstein,” she said haughtily. She seemed convinced he’d met his match, that is until he began to tickle her. Soon Ailis was berating him as she laughed and swatted at him with the hat.

“That wasn’t fair,” she admonished as she regained her composure and stuck his hat back upon his head at a ridiculous angle.

Ernest pushed it back on his forehead and grinned smugly, “I never said I play fair.” His hand unconsciously caressed her hair, and she smiled softly as he leaned in to kiss her. But their lips did not meet. Instead there was only light. An empty, blinding light, which drove the dream from his mind and returned him to the lonely darkness of his life.

*

Upon awakening all he felt was pain and the sickening weight of unbearable grief. She was not here. His love, his friend, his soul was back in Ireland, resting beside her father, in a quiet cemetery. And he was here, adrift on the restless seas of the world.

As the ship rode the waves, a brilliant flash of sun briefly shot through the cabin window then vanished. Had they finally outrun the storm that had plagued them since leaving the Orkneys? How long had it truly been since he’d seen the sun? It hardly mattered.

The briefest of knocks was issued before the gypsy entered, pistol in hand.

“The Master orders you on deck,” he spat contemptuously in French.

‘The Master ...,’ Ernest had barely spoken to Victor’s hideous, self-proclaimed prodigy since they’d come onboard. Time had quickly lost all relevance, night and day blended obscurely as they roved through the tempest. The few respites the storm had allowed shrouded the vessel in fog and mist. Ernest had ceased winding his watch some time ago as it had stopped twice while he slept and

was no longer a reliable gauge of reality. He'd been alone but for the thoughts recorded for him in his wife's journal. The journal! He'd been reading it when he'd fallen asleep. Ernest searched the bunk frantically but could not find it.

"Outside, now!" A second gypsy ordered as he joined the first in the doorway. He too was armed and bore an expression which left no quarter for arguing reason. Ernest relaxed. The journal probably was just buried in the blanket or had fallen and slid across the deck after he'd fallen asleep. Precious as it was he would just have to find it when he returned. Ernest could feel the cold air swirling through the door and took a moment to don his coat, then relented to the men's command.

The covered lanterns on either side of his cabin's doorway flickered angrily in the frigid winds. The sun had already been reclaimed by the sea, and the clouds and lightning again arched through the heavens. The heaving seas made walking extremely difficult, but Ernest's years spent on ships allowed his body to adjust his gait effectively. The two-masted schooner was handling these harsh conditions well, so far, but the longer they stayed in the storm, the more likely it became that ill fortune would find them.

More disquieting than the weather was the crew. The Moon Shadow gypsies, who seemed to comprise the bulk of men aboard, also seemed to highly resent his presence. As if they viewed him as some evil omen. But it was the others who truly worried him. He had seen only a handful of these cloaked figures since boarding, and though all appeared to be the size of ordinary men, even the gypsies gave them a wide berth. More strangely, these cloaked figures rarely showed any sign of movement. Even when waves washed upon the deck, threatening to drag a man back into the sea with them, the cloaked figures remained still. Their inexplicable behavior, coupled with their outward resemblance to the ship's 'Master,' disturbed him greatly. Did the same corruption of man exist beneath their robes or could they be something worse?

As he climbed the final steps to the deck, it was difficult for Ernest to imagine a sight more grotesque than the face he'd witnessed on the shores of North Ronaldsay Island. The face that the dark, brooding, shape now before him possessed. The devil's features faced astern into the most brutal of the winds. Ernest fervently hoped that the gale would not release the hood that now concealed the odious visage beneath. Perhaps sensing this, the cloaked man handed Ernest a spyglass, and without comment, pointed to a spot on the horizon. With the shifting seas, heaving waves, and swirling mist, it took Ernest sometime to ascertain what he was supposed to locate. Once it was clear that he had, the creature motioned him away from the stern and leaned in close.

"I'd hoped to lose them in the storm, Uncle. They have pursued us for sometime."

"Who are they?" Ernest yelled, as each word threatened to be taken by the winds.

"Avengers, from the nation we approach."

Ernest pondered this only a moment.

"This is their ship,"

"It is one."

Did that mean he had captured others?

"And what of her crew?"

The figure beside him was silent. Ernest turned away from him, but the nightmare followed and continued to speak.

"Unless the winds change, they will catch us within a day. Then there will be a battle."

"You can't outrun them?"

The figure nodded.

"They carry more sail and a more experienced crew."

Ernest thought quickly.

“Then surrender.”

He caught a brief glimpse of those cruel black lips.

“There is too much at stake, for both of us.”

Ernest felt a massive hand rest upon his shoulder and fought the urge to free himself.

“And what of their lives?” Ernest asked as he gestured towards the distant ship.

“I know of your battle experience at Trafalgar. Before you return to my presence, you must decide if you will help us defend this ship. The retrieval of your daughter, as well as your reunion with Jal’s child, depends upon our success.”

Ernest felt a gnawing cold in the pit of his stomach. How could this man know about his connection to Trafalgar? The unseen hand released him, and the immense creature returned to the stern. Ernest’s head was swimming as he was escorted back to his cabin and locked within.

For a moment he stood and merely felt the deck shifting beneath him before finally collapsing onto a poorly constructed chair by the room’s small desk. It groaned under the stress of its load, the back bowed as if ready to snap from the tension, but Ernest paid it no mind. His attention was now riveted to Ailis’ journal, which was now set squarely in the middle of the desk. Wordlessly, he sought to reconcile himself with the object.

Was he losing his mind? Could it have been here the whole time? No, he’d been reading it before he fell asleep; he was certain of that. Then how had the journal come to be here, at a place almost entirely opposite of his bunk? He opened it and discovered that the pale green ribbon Ailis had always used as a bookmark now lay between pages different from those he last recalled reading. Could one of the gypsies have found it upon the floor and simply placed it here?

A new and most unwelcome thought suddenly burned within him. Could the devil above have come below and read his wife’s journal while he slept? The thought of such a perverse intrusion enraged him. Anger and fear coursed through him. Though he longed to avenge this injustice, Ernest did not release his emotions. He could not afford to crumble under their weight. To display his true feelings would only further empower his captors and possibly aid their dark designs. No, he must devote his energies to reason. He must discover if the journal’s condition was the result of an innocent accident or deliberate manipulation. If the latter, it meant no thought once written, no space provided onboard was safe. What could the true purpose of his presence here be? Would it make itself known to him only when it was too late?

Ernest decided he could no longer afford the tranquil peace offered by sleep. At least the beast above had been honest about one thing: there was too much at stake. He felt within his jacket and was relieved to find the decorative box, which Nasi had entrusted to him, was still present and sealed. Ernest’s fingers caressed the box. Several times since his departure from Ireland he’d been tempted to open it. Nasi had specified this should only be done in a dark hour, as yet unknown to him. Ernest smiled bitterly at the thought. Had he spent an hour bereft of darkness since she’d issued the directive? His heart softened. Yes, Tara’s birth, his final hours with Ailis had been blessings. Comforted, he released the box and withdrew his hand from his jacket.

Ernest gathered Ailis’ journal and returned to the narrow bunk. The cabin was now all but dark as the storm reclaimed the ship into its lustful, vicious grasp. He closed his eyes for a moment and allowed his senses to open fully to the battle taking place all around him: urgent cries and orders from the men on deck, the strain of the wind and wave against the ship’s timbers, the sudden shifts in gravity as the vessel challenged the storm. Could this cursed vessel actually make a safe port? And if so, what awaited him there? Perhaps they would sink. Then at least it would be over. Or maybe their

pursuer would founder and no battle would occur. Slowly he opened his eyes. No, a battle was coming. He could feel it.

He tried not to think of death as lightning relentlessly stabbed the skies outside his window. Did he aid this crew in the destruction of another? If he failed to do so, would Tara and Baseria be forever lost to him as Ailis was now? Again his emotions surged in tune to the violent seas all around him. If he hadn't been so selfish she might still be alive. Tara would be home with them, and Baseria safe with her people. A sudden stinging pain jolted him from his reverie. He'd unconsciously begun to run his fingers through his hair, but failed to notice which hand he was using. The dim light permitted only a cursory examination of the angry, crimson tinged cut, deeply scored into his palm.

Despite the discomfort the wound afforded him, Ernest smiled. Abrielle bore an identical mark. The thought of his mysterious sister-in-law comforted him. The scar served as a constant reminder of their bond to each other, their oath to Ailis, and the promise of hope. The skin around the cut itched and throbbed. Where was she by now? Had she already found Jal and rescued Tara? Would they ever set eyes upon each other in this world again?

Ernest began to tear a small strip of linen from his sheets to rebind the wound. He needed to believe he would see her again. Before parting they'd each held numerous doubts about the other's ability to survive their respective ordeals, but they'd also recognized their only hope was their faith in each other. Actually if anyone possessed the skills to save Tara, a spy in service to Napoleon's Empire would seem to be a logical choice. Though more important than that was Abrielle's indisputable love for her niece and for Ailis. It was this love that would ultimately lead to either their shared salvation or destruction.

As he finished tying the bandage, Ernest found that his reflections about Abrielle provided him with a new inspiration. His sister-in-law would not passively sit and wait for others to decide her fate, of that Ernest was certain. The revelation that the schooner was a commandeered vessel, likely military, danced in his thoughts. If true then this cabin had probably belonged to an officer. Perhaps his enemies had finally made a mistake. Mariners, by nature, as well as necessity, tended to horde an assortment of items for various reasons. They might be curiosities that could be traded or sold, personal objects, or those useful in defense if a ship were unexpectedly boarded. Could there be a hidden cache left behind by the cabin's former occupant?

During his days aboard, Ernest had conducted a brief examination of his temporary home, but then he'd been concerned only with the superficial. At that time the most useful object he'd been able to locate was a corked bottle. He'd momentarily considered using it to convey a message requesting help until the futility of such an action had dawned on him. What could he say? He did not know his heading, destination, the name of the ship he sailed on, or what type of assistance would be most beneficial when the time to escape came. Besides, the endless storm only further elevated his doubts about tossing a letter into the sea. In such conditions, it might travel hundreds of miles before washing ashore or become trapped in the churning currents within the storm.

But now his eyes probed the cabin with a new energy and purpose. The darkness would hinder his progress, but lengthening the time the task would take might at least keep him awake. After taking a moment to decide where he should begin, Ernest set about his chore. He fervently hoped to locate a pistol, his own having been thrown overboard before they'd left the Orkney Islands. True, there were a few other objects in the room that could be used as makeshift weapons, but he doubted any of them would last long in close-quarter combat. If their pursuers caught them and came aboard, they would have no reason to treat him as anything other than a pirate. A pistol would at least give him a chance to defend himself. More importantly, it could also provide him with a means to wrest his fate back

from his captors.

As he searched, Ernest tried to keep dark thoughts at bay. It was difficult. There were too many demons swirling within: past, present, and future. He was accustomed to uncertainty in life, but now that ambiguity was colored by a near crippling grief. The life he and Ailis had fought so hard to create was rent asunder. His loving partner in this world was gone, as was their cherished child. His soul felt shattered. It was poisoned by guilt and grief. Increasingly he felt lost. There would be no future, which left him alone with only the past and present. As in his life before, he was now to be forced, unwillingly, into participating in another pointless battle at sea. And as had happened so many times these past weeks memories, long buried, unbidden, tipped the senses, and there could be no refuge from their influence for Ailis was gone—the horrors of the past and present were free to assault his soul.

CHAPTER 2

TRAFALGAR

21 October 1805

HMS Mars

“... perform your duty, as a loyal subject and patriot to the Crown, then your fealty shall be rewarded, in this life and the next, if you stand with your brothers against tyranny and revolution and serve this moment with your fellows. Freedom through action, lads ...”

Ernest and those now around him heard few of the words the stoic British officer spoke. This was partially due to the beat of drum and the call of fife, which beckoned men to station, however, they were not the only reasons.

Unlike this trained minion, he and the others were not committed to achieving glory and honor in the service of a distant and uncaring master and, therefore, had little interest in speeches regarding such matters. They were not officers of the line, nor enlisted volunteers. They were prisoners taken over two months earlier by these agents of the Crown to serve their own political purposes. Their lives meant nothing to those they ‘served.’ The only thing that truly mattered was that they did serve their self-appointed masters. Ernest was proud to be counted among those who resisted such undeserved allegiance. The price they paid was worked off by suffering through whippings, harsh words of beratement, and incarceration. But they had not broken under the manipulations of their captors and so this junior officer, desperate for their obedience, now stood before them and recited propaganda, most of which he undoubtedly believed.

Despite the circumstances, Ernest did pity the man. If he lost his life in the next hour or so would he truly understand why he so eagerly embraced death at such a young age? Did he simply exist in this world to serve as others saw fit? Had he ever questioned such things?

“That’s sufficient for this lot, Lieutenant Easter. Secure those who will join willingly. Put the others at the bow and stern cannonade crew positions or back in the brig.”

Easter proffered a crisp salute to Captain Duff who quickly vanished from view on the quarterdeck above.

“What should we do? Fight?”

Ernest did not turn to look at Ives Cross. The boy—he could be no older than fifteen—had, against Ernest’s wishes, clung to him ever since he’d come aboard three weeks earlier. This was the second British vessel he’d been sent to since he and most of the men from the merchant ship he’d been serving on were captured in the Atlantic. Often men who had been seized by a press gang were separated at the earliest possible moment. The British feared their continued close proximity might lead to open insurrection. And so Ernest had arrived here and unwillingly inherited this would-be charge.

After nearly six years across the world, Ernest had been heading home, a shadow of the man he’d been when he’d left, life’s barbarity having broken him. The trip was to have been a last effort to salvage the dim part of him that he could still recognize from his life before, in Europe. Rare had been the day that he thought of himself as the son of Alphonse and Caroline Frankenstein. For years, in fact, he’d lost that identity completely. Many now knew him simply as “the Swiss.”

In late July, yet another engagement had taken place between vast naval fleets loyal to Britain and

Napoleon. Men were lost and ships damaged, forcing the British Navy to employ forced conscription of any able-bodied men. They feared their homeland was prone to invasion if they failed to annihilate Napoleon's fleet, and this dread awakened a type of zealous fervor among the British sailors. They must succeed, regardless of the cost to themselves or others.

"Those of you who will stand with the Crown, step forward as men, now," Easter commanded. Though several shifted nervously, none of them moved.

"Your word first, sir," Ernest politely requested.

"What?"

"Your pardon, sir, but we'll not stir an inch without an officer of the line giving us his word that freedom shall be granted to those among us who serve you in this battle."

The inexperienced Lieutenant Easter looked somewhat ill. Clearly he had not foreseen this problem arising from these shackled creatures before him.

"Easter, sort out that rabble." The first officer leaned over the deck railing, looking irritated that the captain's order had yet to be fulfilled. Easter saluted smartly then returned his attention to the ten men assembled before him.

"I'd rather shoot you all myself," Easter finally declared.

"There's no time, Lieutenant," intoned one prisoner smugly.

Easter's nostrils flared, but he knew the grand moment was upon them. After months of sailing across the Atlantic in pursuit of the enemy, they all knew that the next hours would determine the course of European affairs for years to come. If he faltered in this simple duty now, all hope for honor or advancement might be lost. He lowered his voice.

"Very well, as an officer of the line, I give you my word," Easter muttered, a look of pure loathing upon his face.

Nine of the men saluted him then began to head either astern or towards the bow as soon as their shackles were released. Ives Cross followed Ernest, the lone dissenter, towards the bow. The young man was beaming with joy.

"I didn't think it would work, but ol' John Claggey was right. Did you see Easter's face ... what's wrong?"

By now Ernest was used to Ives' naiveté when it came to such matters, but as the moment of battle drew near, he feared the boy would learn the harsh realities of the world too late. Should he tell him that Easter, as a junior officer, could not make such a bargain? That if the others believed they had outmaneuvered him they were fools? They'd gained only a moment of discomfort from the man and traded themselves for the illusion of power and the promise of freedom. In return, Easter now had them where the British wanted them—manning the most dangerous and vulnerable stations aboard. If it came to close range fighting, they would all be mowed down by shot, ball, and a generous amount of shrapnel. Of course, the same could have happened to them in their cell, which was probably why Easter decided to release Ernest despite his dissent. And dead men told no tales.

"Just stick close to me."

As they made their way forward, they passed a host of harsh, resentful faces. In fact several menacing midshipmen blocked their path or spat at their boots. Those they were to fight beside seemed just as willing to shoot them as any enemy sailor they would face today. It wasn't surprising. Most aboard viewed these prisoners as scum. Command inherently feared insubordination, so the crew had collectively been forced to work longer and harder due to the disobedience of these criminals. Ernest and Ives did their best to ignore the British sailor's open animosity.

"Swiss," a voice behind them barked. It belonged to the boatswain, who was followed closely by

a Royal Marine. Ernest studied them a moment paying careful attention to the extra musket the Marine held.

“What’s this?”

“Orders,” the boatswain said somewhat apologetically.

During his weeks aboard, the boatswain had consistently struck Ernest as an honorable man. Under different circumstances they might even have been friends.

“Easter?”

The boatswain nodded as the Marine handed Ernest the musket and the heavy ammunition bag.

“Wants you up with the sharpshooters in the rigging, trimming the sails. Cross, keep goin’ forward.”

“But I can go up with ...”

“No!” both Ernest and the boatswain roared simultaneously. Ives shrunk slightly before he began to walk away.

“Ives,” Ernest called calmly to his retreating companion. The young man stopped and turned, a sour expression on his face. He didn’t understand. How could he? Ernest was certain that Ives’ story about stowing away on one of his uncle’s merchant ships was only a half truth, at best. In fact, from the scant details Ives chose to reveal, Ernest often wondered if the boy had any family at all. He knew that Ives would tell him the truth one day, but for now how he’d truly come to be here remained a mystery. His lack of basic seamanship skills and overall awkwardness made it clear that this was most likely his first sea voyage, to say nothing of his initiation into combat at sea.

Working in the rigging, a dangerous prospect under normal circumstances was often a suicidal duty during battle. In close combat, the goal was to strip an enemy vessel of her masts and sails, and then render her easy prey for either a boarding or fire ships. Up among the masts, he would be targeted with canister and grapeshot from enemy sharpshooters along with mortar and cannon shot. Allowing Ives to accompany him on such a treacherous duty was unthinkable. Though highly dangerous, at least the deck would afford him some cover. But Ernest knew none of this really mattered to the boy.

At times Ives Cross’ stubbornness and reverence for him reminded Ernest of his own departed younger brother, William. Perhaps that’s why, in spite of himself, he had taken to watching out for the boy, who now was staring back at him with seething distaste.

Ernest considered his next words carefully.

“In battle, even brave men duck.”

Ives appeared to consider this idea as he studied both Ernest and boatswain, who nodded slightly in support of the statement. Had the advice come from any other man aboard, Ives probably would have ignored it. He’d been fooled too many times, but he trusted Ernest.

“You remember that too,” Ives finally counseled. He smiled, tightly, then continued onwards towards the bow cannonades.

The boatswain shook his head as Ernest affixed the ammo bag and musket over his shoulders, “Shame when young men fall in with the wrong crowd.”

“He didn’t ask to be in this war,” Ernest observed.

“No, the Almighty chose him to be. Just like the rest of us.”

The two men exchanged a brief, even look then shook hands.

“Watch out for him.”

“Good luck, Swiss,” the boatswain bade to Ernest as he began to ascend the port rigging.

His clothing whipped his body rhythmically in the wind, which was adequate for the sails but not

strong. He hoped it wouldn't fail them. As he rose higher in the rigging, the battle began to reveal itself to him. The *Mars* appeared to be in the lead position of a long column of British ships, trailing aft. To the north he could see more sails stretching out in another battle column. Both were heading towards the sails of the Combined Fleet—an armada consisting of ships from both France and their Spanish allies. Their sails, which all but covered the swiftly approaching horizon, seemed to be rather loosely organized at present but the steadily growing clouds of smoke, emitted by gunfire, and ships already engaged in battle, made gathering a clear view of the enemy difficult. The British columns appeared to be driving into the heart of the Combined Fleet. If the winds held, the *Mars* would be under fire in less than ten minutes.

Far below him, the ship's decks buzzed with action and energy as men loaded weapons, shifted sails, and bellowed orders. The sound of cannon echoed over the waves, and flashes from the ignition of gunpowder peppered the obscuring smoke ahead. Despite all of this, Ernest took one last moment to savor the world around him.

The sea was the most fantastic reality he'd ever known. The complex blend of untamed energy, terrifying and awe-inspiring beauty, the raw natural wonder, and unpredictable forces for good or ill made it so. Even now, as they plowed the waves towards battle, on to death and terror, he could see dolphins playfully escorting the ship. The air was still fresh and alive with the unique scent of the ocean. Regardless of the near tranquility of the moment, an absurd question posed itself to him. It was a well-trodden thought but one that still plagued him—for in all his journeys, through the lonely, painful years he could never discover a real answer to it. What was he living for?

Those he loved or cared for had all preceded him in death. Was his presence here, now, as the boatswain maintained, by the design of a higher power? Did he believe in one? Were the events about to unfold meant to reunite him with those who had already discovered the mysteries that lay beyond the mortal veil? Was there a purpose to his life? Ernest closed his eyes and shut out the world. He saw so little good left within him. He couldn't fathom how Ives or any one else ever could.

A strange warmth from his hand and forearm rejoined him to the moment. The ship shook slightly, either from their own guns firing or from taking enemy fire. To Ernest's surprise, they were nearly on top of the masts of a French frigate. His thoughts stolen by time, he'd been oblivious to the enemy fire driving into the sails. He looked below and saw some men were already wounded or dying on the deck. Several bodies were already being thrown overboard. Ernest cursed his carelessness as he climbed further upward. He must have been grazed by shrapnel. He hoped Ives was doing a better job of adhering to his own advice about ducking.

Just then a section of mizzen mast, sail, and rigging exploded behind him, embedding razor sharp splinters into his exposed skin. Ernest's nerves danced with pain. This was to be only the beginning. The *Mars*' guns answered with a deafening salvo of their own moments later. The thin winds abated and smoke now hung thickly all about them, enshrouding countless enemy ships within the obscuring clouds. As fire continued to be exchanged through the suffocating haze, an ever increasing chorus of agony bellowed below him as the casualties mounted.

It seemed to come all at once. Just as Ernest gained his position manning the main topgallant, a new cry was heard. The shout was quickly drowned out by the dual sounds of cracking timber and a hail of long shot and cannon fire. The foremast, along with the sail, rigging, and crew crumbled. Small arms fire now raked the main mast, tearing sections of the canvas sails to ribbons. The ship heaved as she heeled, either to line up a shot or avoid some. The motion brought down more sail and rigging. The *Mars* was rapidly being reduced to an uncontrollable hulk and would soon be adrift upon the swells.

Again the keel shuddered under enemy fire, and this time, the main mast shifted. All about Ernest those still alive in the rigging began to gingerly, but rapidly, descend from their unstable perch. Some didn't make it. The shifting waves, crumbling mast, and continued fire of the enemy caused some to fall directly into the greedy sea. One Marine near Ernest was disemboweled by shot, his entrails falling onto the deck before his body followed.

Ernest himself fell the last few feet to the main deck, viciously wrenching his knee. Seconds after reaching the deck, the boards quaked beneath him as the starboard side gun crews, topside and below, broadsided a passing French ship. The resulting smoke obscured the deck and made his progress towards the bow difficult. He kept slipping on blood, being run into by others who were moving through the haze and stumbling over the dead who littered the deck. He came upon one poor gun crew whose powder had ignited. Their skin was all but melted beneath their silent, still forms. The grotesque sight only strengthened his resolve to reach the bow and Ives.

When he reached the forecastle, he discovered that the shattered mast, with its sails and rigging made further progress towards the bow all but impossible. Still he must reach it. Freeing himself of his jacket, he began to navigate the maze. Narrow pathways took him towards the starboard side, where he found a mound of debris that was impossible to surmount. If he wished to reach his goal, there was only one option available: he'd have to climb out on a section of mast, which hung over the water and expose himself directly to enemy fire.

"Ives!" He shouted over and over, but the din of battle made it unlikely any one on the opposite side of the wreckage could hear him. The sudden report from the bow cannonade and a puff of smoke made it clear that someone was still alive on the other side. Ernest peeked over the side and spotted the approaching enemy vessel. He'd have only a moment before they were in small arm's range. Without thinking further, he flung himself onto the projecting beam and worked to reposition himself to jump down on the other side of the debris pile. He began to swing his body, and just as he released the beam, several shots whizzed by his head. He'd made it by seconds.

"Where'd you come from?" an astonished sailor asked as Ernest thudded onto the deck. His injured knee screamed with pain, the echo of which now pulsed through his ankle.

"Where's Ives?"

"Who?"

"The kid they sent up here."

"You're daft. There's no kid up here," the man said waving to his companions as he completed firing another shot. The collapsed mast was actually providing them with more cover than they'd have under normal circumstances, and they were taking full advantage of that fact.

"What's the Swiss want?" an older man asked.

"Some kid," the younger sailor replied throwing up his hands.

"Ives Cross."

"Didn't the boatswain grab some kid just before we started firing?" another sailor asked as he worked to reload the cannon.

"Yeah, took him aft," the man's companion nodded as he worked the ramrod.

Ernest waved thanks and began to head back towards the protruding mast. He was less optimistic about making the jump safely this time.

"Hey, Swiss," the older man pointed to a small gap in the debris pile, "tell 'em if they want to win this thing, I need more powder up here." Ernest thumped the man on the shoulder then began to crawl through the maze. His knee protested each time he moved, but this was still safer than the alternative. A cannonball smashed into the wreckage immediately behind him and collapsed the

passageway through which he'd traveled. He heard screams followed by a hail of shrapnel that pierced some of the canvas then silence.

As he began to drag himself aft again, a new pain made its presence known to him. Something was apparently now buried beneath his left shoulder blade. It took many painful minutes to complete the passage back to the forecastle steps.

Though the *Mars* and her crew had been horrifically maimed, they were not out of the fight yet. By fate or chance, some men remained uninjured, and a host of them were working to try to steady the damaged main mast. If they could work the rigging to reset it, they might be able to get underway again. As these men worked, they were constantly harassed or killed by fire issued from passing enemy ships. Ernest staggered aft, dizzy with pain and blood loss. His progress was arrested by a hand grasping his arm. He was surprised to find it was Lieutenant Easter, who was wiping Ernest's blood off his hand.

"Get below to the surgeon, Swiss."

"Ives?"

"Get below, that's an order."

The conversation ended abruptly as the man who was working immediately next to them had his chest hollowed out by shot. Distracted, Easter didn't see Ernest continue aft.

The quarterdeck was pure chaos. The remnants of the mizzen mast were scattered about the deck along with the dead. Several officers were congregated around a headless corpse. One wept openly.

"Who's in command now?"

"Give us a minute," the weeping man begged the officer.

"We don't have time. The Captain did his duty. We must do ours."

"I think you are, sir," a junior officer decided. "Every other senior is injured or dead."

"Good God. Did anyone see where his head went?" the newly appointed captain asked in disdain as he beheld the headless corpse of his predecessor.

"I think it's overboard," a pale looking officer affirmed, "Captain Duff was leaning over the railing when it hit him."

"Conduct the body below."

"Sir, there's no room."

"There is for him. Swiss, lend us a hand, poor fellow. You need to go below anyway by the look of you."

Ernest knew the Commander was right; he was too weak to climb over the debris aft. He and another injured junior officer bore Captain Duff's remains below.

Though he tried to prepare himself for the grim sights and sounds below, Ernest found both overwhelming. They left the Captain's body with those who had been fortunate enough to succumb to their wounds, piled near the hatchway, waiting to be disposed of. Crammed inside the next room were the wounded where Death stalked the deck. The condition of many within seemed hopeless: hands or feet shot cleanly off, disfigured burn victims who howled in pain, men who were bleeding profusely from an assortment of holes gouged into their flesh and organs. Beyond this mass lie those awaiting amputation. A pile of rotting limbs now bereft of their owners lie on the floor. The agonized screams of those being operated on shook the timbers of the ship as well as any shots now striking her sides. It was among those awaiting the saw that Ernest located the boatswain and Ives.

Ives appeared, mercifully, to be unconscious. His face was burned, his ears were gone. A pool of blood stained the deck beneath him, but he was still alive.

"I tried, Swiss. I tried," the boatswain coughed.

Ernest moved over him. The man's right leg was crushed and would obviously have to come off. He took a gulp of spirits then continued.

"Thought he'd be safer, aft with me. The mizzen, when it fell, crushed my leg. Kid was tryin' to pull me free when the stern took a direct hit...ignited the cannonade's powder. Then they opened up with the muskets and pistols. It was so thick, like iron rain passin' over my head. He's deaf now, bleedin' to death inside, I heard the surgeon say. They're gonna toss him over."

No sooner were these words uttered by the boatswain than men appeared with the surgeon who pointed to Ives. Ernest fought to stand.

"You can't do this. He's still alive."

Ernest knew firsthand what agony the boy would suffer drowning.

"He's done for and we need the room. Carry out my order," the surgeon commanded to the men. They bent down and as they lifted him Ives shrieked in pain. The startled men paused.

"Get him out of here!" the surgeon roared. "Bring that one in."

Other men hurried to scoop the boatswain up from the deck. He cried out in pain as they jarred the leg about to be amputated.

"Swiss!" The word was barely intelligible, but the motion he made was not. Unnoticed by those carrying him away, the boatswain pointed to the deck where his pistol lay. The directive was plain.

Tears of anguish and pain traced paths through the grime on Ernest's face as he moved to retrieve the pistol. It held one shot. The tortured screams the boatswain howled were the last sounds that Ernest registered. He was going into shock both from his wounds and from the knowledge of the task he must complete. Through the throngs of the dead and dying, he traveled back to the hatchway. Suddenly the ship rocked violently. The main mast had finally collapsed. Ernest was thrown into a wall; the force of the impact drove the shrapnel further into his back. He almost dropped the pistol as he fought to remain conscious.

Only the sufferings of those from his nightmares drove him on as he managed, finally, to crawl up and out of the hatchway. He could not allow Ives to suffer the terror of drowning. As he fought to stand, he saw them swinging Ives as they prepared to throw him overboard. Ives was still shrieking in pain. Ernest lined up the shot. William's dead face hovered before his eyes. He fired.

The shot tore through Ives' cheek and blew out the back of his head. As he watched the motion of Ives' head in death, Ernest relived the moment, eleven years earlier, when he'd witnessed Justine's head snap upward as her neck was shattered upon the gallows. The surprised men dropped Ives' body instantly, and it disappeared over the side. Ernest's quaking form slumped to the deck in shock.

CHAPTER 3

THE FINAL HOMECOMING

Geneva, Winter, 1810

Jack Clerval deeply inhaled one last puff off his cigar as he considered the entrance before him. He held the smoke in for a long time before releasing it. He was annoyed, and despite the cold, he was in no real hurry to go inside. Christiansen's letter gave no detail for the purpose of this errand, which had brought him hundreds of miles in the dead of winter from Salzburg. The roads had been intolerable, the hour was late, and he was down to two cigars. To top it all off, his decision to make this trip, once again reignited the feud between himself and his talented but volatile wife, Costanza.

**

"You say you love me, but how then can you do this?"

"Ah, Stanza, you know I love you but ..."

"Then stay, my love." She climbed onto his lap. "This night means everything, Jack. Tonight I will sing for you, only for you," she leaned in close and nipped at his ear.

Jack sighed as he thumbed the letter from Christiansen, which could not have arrived at a worse time. It was Costanza's big night. A wealthy and highly influential member of Salzburg's elite had commissioned her to be the featured artist at an exclusive winter's ball ceremony to be held at his luxurious estate. The performance was her best chance to date of securing the attention and patronage of even more wealthy benefactors—whose support would make her the toast of not only the stages of Salzburg, but perhaps one day, all of Europe. Didn't he owe it to her to be there? They'd fought, divorced, remarried, loved, loathed, lied, and to a degree supported each other's vices. Both were selfish, vain, unapologetic, and overly passionate. They were everything to one another, including perfectly wrong.

There were only two people in the world who could entreat him to leave at a time like this. Sadly, one of them had, and Jack feared it could only be due to events involving the other. He pushed her back gently and prepared himself as best he could for the inevitable. Even before he spoke the words, the softness of her expression hardened to a look of incredulity.

"It's got to have somethin' to do with Ern. I can't just"

She pushed herself away harshly and began to pace the room, her long flowing purple robe tracing her exasperated motions across the decorative floor.

"Oh please ... *I need you in Geneva now*. Who would send such a ridiculous letter and be serious? And it says nothing of Frankenstein, who just abandoned you in Ingolstadt."

"He didn't leave me, somethin' musta happened," Jack snapped as he pulled a fresh cigar from his vest. He was too agitated now to even light it. Her arms flailed wildly at his statement as if she were swatting away nuisance insects.

"He did, Jack. He did leave you. You owe him nothing. He is not your master; do not run across the Alps like a dog back to Geneva merely because you are bidden do so."

Jack folded his arms and scowled.

"Oh, damn it all, I crushed my cigar."

“Write your Christiansen back. Tell him you’ll leave in a few days, not this morning.”

“I can’t,” Jack quietly said.

“Why?” Costanza demanded.

“Because you saw ...,” Jack caught himself, but the damage was done.

“I saw nothing that night. Nothing.”

He couldn’t blame her denial. The memory of the mummified hand grasping Ernest disturbed him as well. They hadn’t spoken openly about it in months. In fact, the subject of Ernest Frankenstein had become almost a taboo between them. There were too many dark and disturbing mysteries surrounding the man. Seeing him again had awakened too many grim memories of Henry’s death, and his wife knew that. In her mind nothing positive could come from more contact with Ernest. He was best relegated to the past so that she and Jack might embrace their future. But secretly, Jack knew it was a future that could never exist until he solved the truth behind his brother’s murder. And Ernest’s quest to discover Victor’s past was the key. They’d been close, he knew it.

“I’ll write you when I get there.”

Costanza hurtled a vase into the wall beside Jack’s head.

“Don’t bother!” She left before he saw the tears in her eyes.

*

Jack rubbed his eyes. Christiansen better have something good here to drink or he was libel to curl up on the office floor and go to sleep as most decent folks had done hours ago. Of course if he were decent then guardians of the city, whom he’d bribed generously, would never have revealed to him the secret means to enter Geneva after the gates had been sealed for the night. He consulted his watch by the moonlight but decided it must be wrong. When had he wound it last? Jack hurled his still burning cigar carelessly over his shoulder and exhaled a last cloud of smoke before entering the building.

He hadn’t actually expected anyone to be here at this late hour, but despite this, he could hear the low din of muted voices from inside Christiansen’s office. Now that he was actually here, this visit seemed even more ill-advised than it had in Salzburg. At least there he’d had Costanza to argue about it with; now he only had himself to reason with. What would he find on the other side of that door? Logically it should be Ernest. Who else could keep Christiansen here at this atypical hour? But what if Stanza was right and Ernest had abandoned him deliberately in Ingolstadt? Did he hug him or punch him? What if he found Victor—the man he still blamed for Henry’s murder—and not Ernest on the other side of the door? What if all of this had to do with some inane business transaction for his father’s merchant fleet? In that case he’d have some very strong words for Christensen indeed.

The door to the office proper was locked. Jack banged against it heedless of how it might startle the occupants of the room. Actually, as he knocked, the thought of their startled faces amused him even more.

“Who’s there?” the slightly shaking voice of Christiansen asked.

Why not have some fun?

“Only a poor traveler in search of spirits, sir.” Jack did his best impression of a drunk. Considering the practice he’d had over his lifetime, it was masterfully done.

“Then go and find a pub. This is a solicitor’s office, not a tavern.”

“Ah, please sir. I haven’t got a coin on me, just lookin’ for some help on a cold night, and then I’ll leave you in peace.”

Jack was having a hard time not spoiling the moment by laughing. He could hear Christiansen consulting his companion. After a moment of silence, the door slowly opened a crack. Jack grinned and stooped over slightly as he began through the door. He might as well carry the act out until the last second.

“Oh bless you kindly ... ah CHRIST!!!”

As he crossed the threshold, his arm was seized, pulled sharply upward, and his elbow was driven into the back of his head. His momentum into the room was corrupted as his attacker used it to pivot him painfully into the wall beside the door, which was slammed shut simultaneously. The wind knocked out of his lungs, he wheezed dryly as he fought to force air back in.

“It’s all right. Release him,” he heard Christiansen say.

Instantly the pressure on his arm was gone, though his shoulder and neck muscles still burned terribly.

“Damn it, Ern, when’d you get so jumpy?” Jack asked to the figure behind him as he tried to stretch his wrenched shoulder muscles, which were threatening to become one great knot. There was no reply. He turned.

He’d never before set eyes upon the young woman who stood before him, but he would never forget the smoldering passion alive within the gaze from her delicate but intense brown eyes. They seemed to see everything. She was tall; her brown hair was partially braided and pulled back, the rest hung behind her slender shoulders. Her dress was conservative yet elegant at the same time. She backed away from Jack without comment and walked silently to a nearby window, turning her back on him.

“Jack, meet Abrielle, Ernest’s sister-in-law,” Christiansen said.

For a moment Jack looked blankly at her as his mind fumbled with this new information.

“Oh, that just figures,” he muttered to himself finally as he continued to massage his strained sinews.

“Pleased to meet you I’m sure,” Jack stated sarcastically as Christiansen handed him a drink. He nodded a silent thanks and waited for Abrielle to acknowledge him. She didn’t.

“She always this friendly?” he finally asked Christiansen who shrugged slightly.

Still Abrielle did not move. Her attention was riveted to something on the street below. Jack and Christiansen exchanged a look then began to move to silently join her at the window. Before they could reach her, however, she turned abruptly, crossed the office, and began to resume her gloves, hat, and outer garments. She winced slightly as she worked to pull on her right glove.

“This was a mistake,” she said simply by way of explanation to the men’s puzzled faces before she began to head for the door.

“Please, what’s wrong?” asked Christiansen. “I beg you, mademoiselle, you have traveled too far under such tragic circumstances ...”

She held up a hand to silence him. Her attention was fixed on Jack who was now staring down into the street.

“Jack, what’s ...?”

“Ssshhh!” Abrielle hissed at the older man, “Do you see, do you see what you have done?”

The accusatory question was directed at Jack. The cold windowpane fogged a little as he breathed, but he himself remained still.

“That’s impossible,” Jack’s brow furrowed, “they couldn’t ... not through the secret entrance.” She hesitated only a moment.

“Monsieur, I thank you for your time,” she inclined her head faintly towards Christiansen then

purposely resumed her hurried steps towards the door.

“Jack, what is it?” Christiansen demanded, obviously torn between heading for the window and arresting Abrielle’s flight through the nearby doorway.

“Three of those damn gypsies are down there,” Jack replied quietly.

“His carelessness brought them. How can I trust him with so vital a mission if he’s too inattentive to notice when he’s being tailed?” Abrielle challenged, “No, it is safer if I handle this alone.”

Christiansen put his hand on the doorknob a second before she reached it. With her back to Jack, her intense gaze fell solely upon Christiansen, but he did not waver.

“If you truly believed that mademoiselle, you would not have come here.”

Her lips parted a measure, and her gaze grew momentarily distant. At least until Jack broke the silence.

“All right, if we’re throwing out accusations, how do I know they didn’t all follow you here?”

“Jack, you’re not helping.”

“Not trying to be helpful, Christiansen. You acted as if you knew someone would be down there. What time did she get here anyway?”

Christiansen hesitated and looked to Abrielle.

“I have been here four days. I sent him a letter announcing my arrival three days before that,” Abrielle stated evenly.

Jack’s jaw all but dropped.

“What in blazes is this?”

An unspoken message passed between Christiansen and Abrielle, who gave the older man a brief wry smile before she began to remove her outerwear.

“Come, monsieur. It is late, and you have traveled far to join us,” she smiled at Jack.

“So what now we’re all friends or somethin’?”

“Jack, come on. Sit down by the fire, please. Despite appearances, we are very happy that you are here,” Christiansen affirmed.

“What about them?” Jack jerked his head towards the street.

“They will be dealt with but not now,” Abrielle declared as she used the hook end of the fireplace poker to maneuver the log she’d just added into place. The room brightened a bit.

Christiansen held out his arms to take Jack’s heavy travel cloak and hat, which he surrendered after taking a moment to retrieve his second to last cigar. He ignited it then thumped down unceremoniously into one of the ornate but comfortable chairs near the fire.

“Have you eaten tonight?” Christiansen inquired.

“Not really hungry just now,” Jack rejoined as he watched Abrielle cross the room to retrieve something from her own winter travel wear. As she handed him a sealed envelope, he noticed an extremely painful looking cut encompassing nearly the entirety of her right palm. Abrielle sat down quietly in a nearby chair, waved away Christiansen’s offer of tea, and closed her eyes.

Jack studied the undated letter, penned hurriedly in Ernest’s hand:

Jack,

My dear friend, I can only hope after the host of sorrows I have suffered that this letter finds you well. My haste and the fear of eyes not meant to see these words preclude me from laying bare any great detail but I must call upon your stout heart again. I am sending you my sister-in-law as my agent. She is most capable and will inform you what must be done in order to save my daughter. I pray that one day I will look upon you both again.

*Yours,
Ernest*

Jack looked to Christiansen who was silently smoking a cigarette as he leaned on the mantelpiece, but he did not stir. Abrielle must have sensed that Jack was finished reading. She did not open her eyes before she began to speak.

“Ernest believed that I mailed his letters before we left Ireland. I was unwilling to trust our enemies, so I brought them here myself.”

Jack eyed Christiansen who still seemed unwilling to meet his gaze.

“Where is he?” Jack demanded.

“He was heading towards the Orkney Islands, North Ronaldsay to be precise,” Christiansen answered as he tossed the remnants of his cigarette into the fire. A tense, silent minute passed. Something made Jack fearful to ask the next question.

“What of his wife?”

“My sister is dead.” Abrielle’s eyes finally opened as she spoke these words in a hollow tone. She studied her wounded hand a moment then she stared, unseeing, into the fire, “and my niece has been abducted.”

Jack sank into his chair as if a great weight had been thrust upon him. Christiansen rubbed a troubled hand over his balding head. Abrielle met their eyes.

“We’re going to get her back,” Abrielle vowed, her voice tinged with sadness, bitter resolve, and anger. She was fighting hard not to allow the grief she hid to overwhelm her.

Jack now burned with his own righteous sense of indignation.

“It’s those bastards in the street, right?” Jack started up but Christiansen forced him back down into his seat. He shook his head.

“We have many enemies, Jack,” Abrielle continued as if nothing had happened. “We must be ready before we confront them.”

Christiansen hovered over Jack until the younger man waved him away, dropping ash all over his leg. They were right. He needed more information before he acted.

“Can you stay here, in Geneva for a while?” Christiansen asked.

“Whatever you need,” Jack angrily declared. He pushed all thoughts of Costanza from his mind.

“Good. I need you to go to Hungary,” the beautiful woman stated.

Jack faltered slightly.

“Hungary?”

“That’s where Ernest was taken after his abduction in Ingolstadt. Apparently the same people are responsible for taking his daughter,” Christiansen explained.

“Tara, her name is Tara,” Abrielle spoke the name with soft reverence.

Christiansen briefly laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder, but he did not allow it to linger. It seemed as though he was apprehensive about doing so. From Jack’s brief time around her, he could well understand the benefit of staying on Abrielle’s good side, but Christiansen seemed genuinely intimidated by her.

“All right, what do you need me to do in Hungary?”

“Locate a group of gypsies known as the Wild Rose Clan. Their leader, Jal Nalie, took Tara.”

The whole situation made Jack irate.

“Damn gypsies ...”

“Your only task is to find them, Jack,” Abrielle declared commandingly as she rose from her chair, “then you will return here and wait for me.”

Jack was crestfallen and angry. What was the point of sending him hundreds of miles to find Ernest’s daughter only to abandon her again? True, he didn’t have much experience with children, but he could handle himself. Or did she doubt he could?

“Is this because of those ...?”

“Humm,” Christiansen cleared his throat before Jack could unleash a string of profanity.

“... gypsies down there who you say followed me?”

“Partially,” her face was inscrutable.

Jack eyed his companions suspiciously.

“I’m afraid we all share some responsibility for their mutual presence,” Christiansen began, “one has been watching me since Ernest left Geneva with you, Jack.”

“I *allowed* another to follow me,” Abrielle stated, “but the other did follow you through your secret entrance through Geneva’s walls.”

“How? It cost me half a cellar of vintage red wines every ten months as a bribe just to use that entrance. Dad will kill me if he finds out.”

“When he finds out, Jack. And that entrance isn’t the best kept secret these days,” Christiansen eyed him suggestively.

Jack blinked.

“Wha ... you know about it?”

“Must be all that fine vintage red wine the men are drinking during those long nights on duty, tends to loosen their tongues about certain secrets,” Christiansen wryly observed.

“Ah.” Jack hurled his cigar into the fire.

Abrielle suddenly hovered over him, the coldness in her demeanor highlighted by the dancing shadows.

“The point is that you cannot assume what our enemies will do. Relying on old habits could lead us all to ruin, and from now on, you must obey my orders.”

“Orders, huh? My wife tries those. Normally don’t work too well,” Jack stated smugly. Seemingly out of nowhere, Abrielle produced a knife and held it under Jack’s throat.

“I’m not your wife. And if you do anything that endangers Tara, I will use this. And you won’t be pleased with the results, I promise. You will obey me.”

He felt the slightest increase in pressure from the knife before it disappeared again. Jack was too stunned to protest. She loomed over him a moment longer then slowly walked away from his view. He leaned back in his seat and fumbled for his last cigar. So she was deadly and beautiful. Jack couldn’t decide if he was absolutely terrified of this woman or if he was beginning to like her. Still she had rattled him. When was the last time he’d deliberately smoked the final cigar he had with him before replenishing his supply?

Christiansen was absentmindedly rubbing his own neck.

“Well, good, that’s settled then,” Christiansen diplomatically asserted.

“I will need to leave in three days, earlier if the weather changes. Do you think we’ll have him ready?” Abrielle asked the older man.

“Ah, that depends. Jack, how are you at learning languages?” Christiansen inquired.

“Long as its useful to me and not some Ancient Greek nonsense or such, I’m pretty good, why?”

“I’m going to teach you Gaelic,” Abrielle said flatly as she again studied the figures in the dark street below.

“What for?”

“Encoding messages; I’ve already taught the fundamentals to Christiansen in case I have to leave early.”

“Where are you going?”

“France,” Abrielle replied quietly.

“It’s complicated,” Christiansen sighed at Jack’s incredulous expression.

“No kidding. That sounds familiar,” Jack shook his head.

“We fight not one enemy, but three, each separate but connected,” Abrielle stated as she returned her attentions to her companions.

“Great, more riddles and what sounds like the start of a long story. Well, Christiansen I’ve changed my mind about eating.”

“Abrielle, I left some food on the second shelf on the cart in the back room. Would you mind ...?”

She was out the door before Christiansen finished. For a moment neither man spoke for fear she’d return and overhear them.

“Jack, I really must apologize for your greeting tonight, but she insisted on seeing your reaction to the gypsies.

“Guess I passed, huh. Christiansen, seriously, what’s her story?” Jack whispered.

Christiansen hesitated a moment before nervously shaking his head.

“Sorry, both Ernest and she were quite adamant that I not reveal her full story to you.”

“Why?” Jack asked.

“To protect you, and us, in case you’re captured or ... worse.”

“Huh. Yeah, hadn’t really considered that possibility. Ernie sent you a letter too right?”

“Not now, I think she’s coming back,” Christiansen stiffened.

“She said there are three enemies?”

“Yes. This Jal’s group, another rival gypsy clan in France, and the master they serve.”

Abrielle appeared in the doorway with a large covered tray.

“Yeah, who’s that?” Jack asked lazily.

Christiansen paused.

“Victor’s son.”

*

If only there was some other way. Abrielle tried to reflect upon all that brought her to this château on such a bitterly cold night. The iron hard sheets of snow shone in the bright moonlight. She’d known where he was for years, but it had never occurred to her that she would one day have to stand before him again, to plead for a favor. The last of which still haunted her to this day.

By now he must know she was here. It was incredible that a man like Bellange would willingly allow her to linger, unchallenged, this close to his home. Perhaps retirement had changed him, as some rumors purported. She would know soon.

Maybe it was the modesty of the place that surprised her. Abrielle was about to see the third most powerful man in the whole of Napoleon’s Empire, but his home, though impressive, was plain. No honor guard attended, no gates impeded free passage; a few of the windows bore candlelight, but the house was far from aglow. All was tranquil. The only sound breaking the deep silence of the night was the hoot of a lone owl. No doubt it was all part of the illusion created by the spymaster for his visitors, the spider awaiting his unsuspecting prey. Hadn’t one of his earliest teachings imparted to

her been the idea that one should only be visible when it was advantageous to be? That notion now stood solidified in the stone edifice before her. It was a disguise, to be used then discarded as the demands of life dictated.

As she approached the door, it unexpectedly opened. Abrielle felt her reflexes begin to initiate their well-rehearsed movements, but she stifled them. Only a swirl in her tracks in the snow and dissipating vapor trails from a slight increase in her respiratory rate betrayed her momentary reaction.

A figure appeared in the doorway. The man was unarmed or so it appeared. His hair all matched the snow, he bore that subtle look of bemusement, so agitating yet so familiar to her. Abrielle's eyes darted around her, but nothing more happened. The owl repeated its ageless call to the night, then silence.

“Welcome to my home, Abrielle,” Bellange's smile deepened. “I've been expecting you.”

CHAPTER 4

WHISPERS OF DECEIT

The words of greeting dissipated into the thin air of the frost-charged night. None were returned as Abrielle's mind and senses furiously sought any insight into what this tactic might gain him. He'd expected her? Was it possible they'd known her true whereabouts all these months?

She searched his face for clues, but knew it would be a futile exercise. He wore so many false faces, a fact she'd often marveled at, for he assumed them with such ease. Even the name he bestowed upon himself was false. Had he ever possessed a true identity of his own? She banished these musings from her mind as again he spoke.

"Have you finished?"

"What?"

"Assessing your situation, wondering what the old man is plotting. I noticed you surveying potential escape routes as you approached."

Abrielle allowed herself to relax a degree.

"As you always taught me to do," she replied.

He chuckled softly.

"Well, if you're done and care to join me by the fire, I'd be most grateful. This cold air dulls the senses and will bid me to bed early if I remain out in it too long."

Abrielle hesitated a moment longer then sedately continued towards him. Her resolve was fixed; she must speak with him before she was apprehended. He was the only one she could think of who might possess both the knowledge and the will to help her. Bellange, the man who had shaped so much of her life yet remained such a mystery.

"Merci, monsieur, I am most grateful for your civility," she humbly stated as she allowed him to remove her coat once they were inside.

"Think nothing of it, mademoiselle. I am pleased to once again share in your company," he said, indirectly acknowledging the rift between them.

"I will be brief."

This time it was Bellange's turn to hesitate.

"Your time is yours," he nodded, "please leave your weapons here with your cloak. I promise no one will take them."

Without protest she produced several deadly possessions. It would be pointless to attempt to hide them from her former master. He allowed her to retain one small knife before they began down a long, dark hallway.

"You keep no servants, sir?"

"No, that's the problem with being a retired spy. You never seem to trust anyone again, though I do retain a rotating group of temporary help procured from the countryside."

He held out his hand to indicate the direction they were to head. Abrielle tried to hide her smile at the thought of Bellange as some type of country squire. Did any of the locals know who it was they were truly dealing with?

"I must apologize for calling upon you so late," Abrielle began as they sat down before an inviting fire in a room, which could only serve as the library, "but my need is great and my time

short.”

“Of course,” he agreed.

Bellange studied her a moment then rang a small bell set upon the table beside him. How could the old servant who arrived with an equally ancient dog have heard such a soft, delicate chime? The dog immediately gravitated to the new stranger as his owner stated his needs.

“My guest is thirsty. Something warm, perhaps?”

Abrielle petted the dog who was already slumping against her chair in blissful abandonment.

“Yes, tea ... or something stronger,” she suggested.

Bellange’s servant left and returned with the requested refreshments in short order, however, the dog remained and soon became a fixture curled up before the fire. Abrielle savored the warmth that coursed throughout her body as she drank. In another time and place she might actually be able to relax and enjoy herself. Her journey from Geneva had been long and lonely; still a part of her treasured it for it had also been peaceful. And peace was something she’d seen precious little of in her life.

“So you were expecting me?” she asked casually as she poured Bellange another cup of tea and handed it to him.

“It’s not without precedent that a rogue Imperial agent should come to me,” her former mentor stated.

“And why would you think I’d gone rogue? I thought you had retired.” Abrielle blew wisps of steam away from her drink. He smiled.

“How I conduct my retirement is my business.”

“Matters simply required my attention elsewhere,” Abrielle said by way of explanation.

“A half truth,” Bellange observed as his eyes drifted from her. His sharp features suddenly seemed to sink. He was no longer the master spy, but an old man.

“When they came to me, I knew they’d grown desperate. I truly hoped I’d never have to see your face again,” Bellange admitted.

This statement was so astonishing that she nearly dropped her cup and saucer.

He held her gaze.

“I’d hoped you were free,” he explained.

“Free? What would you know of the word?” she challenged harshly.

Bellange rose and calmly walked to a shelf of books.

“The great philosophies of the ages tower before us here,” he observed as he regarded the shelf. “Man’s essential nature scrutinized, destroyed, reshaped by great visionaries, the work of demi-gods of wisdom. But was Aristotle mad? Voltaire [\[1\]](#) a fool? Can freedom and power and wisdom exist as one divine force? Can one man hope to balance these into equality?”

The color in Abrielle’s cheeks rose.

“And what would an Imperial demi-god care of my freedom?”

He turned remorseful eyes upon her.

“Power has not granted me freedom, only the ability to take it from others.”

Abrielle fought against the emotions surging within her. This was Bellange. She tried to remain unmoved by the expression of self-loathing upon his face. In a sense this man was a demi-god, who molded his creations to fit his needs in the name of the Empire. If not for him she would have been executed. Her life had served his. But she now saw herself also trapped within his statement. Though she rarely admitted it to herself, for a long time now she’d needed power, but what had that need cost her and others? Her mind recoiled.

Unexpectedly Bellange resumed his seat and put his head into a hand.

“Has something happened?”

His eyes again rose to meet hers, but he did not raise his head.

“It is a bitter thing to enter one’s winter and realize that you have betrayed all you ever loved. I have willingly participated in corruption of the ideals of the Revolution and in so doing, I have killed my own sons. I had four once, now....”

Dimly, Abrielle heard a distant clock begin to toll the hour.

“... the youngest died two weeks ago on the Iberian Peninsula [2]. The war there is savagery beyond description,” Bellange stated, a haunted look in his eyes.

“I remember,” Abrielle replied somewhat coolly.

The Peninsula War as it had come to be known was a great embarrassment for Napoleon and a vicious, grinding bloodbath for his troops. Spain was to have been taken and forced to submit to his will, but instead, the Spanish and their English allies had not only stood their ground but begun to push back at great cost to both sides. Caught in the middle were thousands of Spanish civilians and guerrilla fighters, desperate for vengeance.

Abrielle hoped Bellange’s son, if he existed, had not met too gruesome an end. Surely with his connections the spy master should have easily been able to keep his son from being sent to the Peninsula battlefields.

“What was his name?” she asked earnestly.

“He loved the mountains, you know. Crossing the Pyrenees [3] would have been a grand adventure for him,” Bellange wistfully noted.

“What was his name?” Abrielle repeated more gravely.

Bellange looked at her as if trying to remember it. She knew the torments of grief all too well, but never would it take her so long to recall the name of one she’d loved.

“You had no sons, did you?” she charged, sensing his subtle manipulations.

“I am sick with grief,” he plaintively stated. “Why did you come here tonight, Abrielle? So we could whisper as we once did, as I taught you to do?”

“Yes, I need information.”

Bellange closed his eyes.

“I’m retired.”

“A half truth,” she vehemently contended.

“A choice then,” his eyes opened slowly and fixed coldly upon hers. “I will no longer be a slave to Napoleon’s Empire. That was never the goal of our great rebellion.”

Abrielle tried to interject but was cut off.

“I’m glad it’s you they sent. Now, at the end.”

His countenance grew pleading.

“Do not be deceived as I have allowed myself to be. The Emperor is a traitor, a lesser man who has corrupted the ideals of the Revolution, who will bring us all to ruin if he is not stopped.”

Abrielle pulled away. She didn’t want to hear anymore of Bellange’s own traitorous talk.

“I will forget these words. You’re mad with grief by your own admission.”

She jumped when he clasped her hand firmly.

“Let us whisper then again, as we once did, as I taught you to do.”

“Please, don’t say anymore.”

She turned from him, freeing herself from his grasp.

“You have come to hear my last words, I must speak,” Bellange asserted.

“I told you, I came for information,” Abrielle reiterated.

“In service to the Empire?” he demanded.

“No,” Abrielle managed after a moment of indecision.

“Tell me, my child, what do you know of conspiracy?”

The questions were coming too fast. She needed to regain control.

“I will not turn you in,” she promised.

He seized her hand violently.

“We both have loosed the bonds of servitude. Stop pretending that you’re still bound. Tell me about conspiracy.”

The emotion in his voice and countenance disturbed her. The Bellange she knew prided himself on shielding his emotions from others except when needed. Was this part of some grand manipulation?

“What would you have me say? I am no stranger to them. I’ve ended them before in the name of the Empire. So have you.”

An abrupt noise carried down the length of the hall and shook the very stones that comprised the floor. Angry voices barked orders and doors thudded as they were roughly thrown open. Abrielle felt the man’s grip loosen.

“You must stop them before it goes any further,” Bellange commanded.

“Who?”

He staggered back from her and grabbed a book off the shelf. Abrielle sprung from her seat, desperate to stop him from drinking from the vial he withdrew from the book’s pages. She needed him. He was of no use dead to her. Their struggle only ceased when the metallic sound of musket and pistol hammers being cocked intruded the library. A host of well-armed French regulars held weapons upon them. Bellange dropped the vial and held up his hands. Abrielle did likewise. A trooper bent and sniffed at the vial.

“Poison,” he reported to a superior.

“I should never have sent you on that final mission,” Bellange said as they affixed irons onto both him and Abrielle. “I am repaid for my cruelty. But for that, you might believe me now.”

The apology caught her off guard, as she lunged at him but was forcibly pinned to a shelf of books by the military agents. Others began to lead Bellange out the door. How could he even attempt to apologize for the last mission he’d personally sent her on? The scars of which tainted her very soul.

“You’ve always used me! You lying bastard!”

He struggled against his guards to slow in the entrance and turn a degree.

“My youngest’s name was Andre Gramont.”

Their eyes engaged only a brief moment before the troops shoved him roughly out the door but not before a few last words reached her ears.

“... need ... end the conspiracy.”

A deep stillness descended upon those left in the room. Bellange was gone, and she’d never even asked him the question so vital to her own mission: Where was the clan of gypsies, who called themselves Moon Shadows, hiding in France?

*

Abrielle shivered against the cold stones which comprised her small cell. She tried to divorce her mind from her body’s discomfort and to focus on that which she could control: her thoughts. She’d been left alone, except for the daily deposit of the meal tray, for at least eight days. During that time,

she'd tried her best to decipher the real implications behind her enigmatic meeting with Bellange. Locked away with nothing but time the task should have been a relatively simple matter, however, truth remained an elusive oasis.

What had been real? She simply could not accept their exchange at face value. Not with Bellange involved. This was a man who'd trained countless, silent legions in deceit and trickery, all in the name of serving Napoleon and the ideals of the French Revolution. These whispers of an inscrutable conspiracy and the sudden existence of his here untold phantom family espoused Bellange's trademark tactics of deception. Confuse the subject, play upon their sympathies, then strike when their fears and clarity of judgment had been largely abated. He was laying a trap for her, wasn't he?

“I should never have sent you on that final mission.”

The statement burned within her. It coursed through her like the poison she'd kept the spymaster from imbibing. Had that been real? Could the troopers' timely arrival have been previously arranged? Had they been looking for her or had they actually been seeking Bellange regarding this conspiracy? Was his apparent grudge against Napoleon something he'd already acted upon? An assassination attempt perhaps? Bellange certainly possessed the means, and ostensibly, the motive for such a course of action.

She needed to get up. Her body was shaking itself apart in the chill, cold air of the cell. There was little room for her to wander, though. Rats and insects now held dominion over the corner where she'd taken to piling the remnants of her rotten meals. Her waste bucket, which had only been emptied once since her incarceration, sickened her to be near and rendered another portion of the small cell all but uninhabitable. That left her a very narrow area in upon which she could pace and retrace steps.

As she walked, she tried to stretch the kinks in her neck, but to little avail. The constant strain of her incarceration, the uncomfortable bedding, the nauseating scents, and incessant shivering made them permanent fixtures of additional discomfort. Though wholly unpleasant, these physical trials could be managed. But the mental and spiritual fatigue was beginning to take a toll.

Several times she awoke and thought she heard Tara crying; she'd fallen back asleep, whispering her name in the dark. The murky cell largely deprived her senses of any real means to measure time. She thought it had been eight days since her arrival, but that was based solely on the number of trays she'd received, and there was no real pattern as to when the trays arrived. Even though she'd know incarceration was a likely outcome of her return to France, each day she remained immobile was a day she was prevented from aiding her niece.

What had Jal done to her? Had Jack found her by now? What had become of Ernest? Had she already failed all of them?

Confronting Bellange for information had been a dangerous and desperate gamble. Ernest could only give her vague information about the location where the Moon Shadows had captured and abandoned him. And none of it proved that the mountainous area was their true home. It could have taken her weeks or months to locate them on her own. Of course, she could always have gone to Hungary and attempted to rescue Tara but then what?

It was impossible to believe that if she rescued Tara they would leave them in peace. She was dealing with groups of fanatics. Could another Moon Shadow member, aside from the one she'd dealt with outside of Geneva, have followed her across the Alps and reported her location to French authorities? She'd been under their observation now, off and on, for weeks. What did they already know about her? Maybe they'd decided to use the machinations of France to annihilate her.

Abrielle paused. She needed to believe that her efforts to confront the Moon Shadows here would help Ernest. Without securing Jal's daughter, all their great efforts might be wasted. Perhaps this

Baseria was being held here in France. But it was still difficult for her to believe that France would ever knowingly tolerate gypsies within the very heart of the Empire; at least not without protection from higher authorities. Could they factor into Bellange's mysterious conspiracy? She leaned against the wall, tired of wading through endless possibilities. No, she never really had a choice about returning to France. The question now was would she ever leave it again?

The fact that no one, as of yet, had interrogated her did not bode well. The poor meals, harsh environment, the loss of time, the mutterings of her fears, and all her sufferings so far were a mere prologue for that yet to come. She'd avoided thinking about her eventual interrogation because she could really do nothing to prepare herself for it. The great mysteries swirling around her made it so. Would Bellange stride through the door to her cell and offer her freedom in exchange for a new pledge of service? Or had he been fairly arrested, entrapped at last in his own web of lies? But why was he so frantic about conspiracies?

Bellange seemed to think that she was running some sort of independent operation to quietly murder him. He'd been expecting an assassination attempt on his own life. Could any of his words or actions have been vaguely sincere? He also seemed to see her as a source of hope for a problem he couldn't handle. Could all of this merely have been to test her loyalty? Was she now to be hanged as a traitor? She renewed her steps, counted them as she swung feverishly about the narrow room.

“I should never have sent you on that final mission.”

Her eyes hunted for a means to escape this dungeon as she fought to subdue the image of Paul's face. She tried to banish the persistent phantom from her mind.

“I should never have sent you on that final mission.”

Ailis' accusing face briefly appeared in her mind's eye then vanished. Her sister had never known the monster Abrielle truly was. If she had she would never have asked her to raise Tara after her death. Her vision clouded as tears formed along the edge of her vision.

Abruptly she stopped and smacked the stone wall before her with her hand. No, she needed to find a means to escape, not continue to dwell on such dark matters. She must find some way to prepare for her interrogation.

Just as this thought entered her mind she heard the jingle of keys, followed by the sound of metal scraping inside of the lock. The door swung lazily inward and flickering lantern light caused her eyes to blink uncontrollably. The figure with the lantern stood aside and backlit the silhouette of someone else. Abrielle staggered backwards a step. It was not Bellange. Though she still couldn't see her clearly, the scent the figure wore left no doubt as to who stood in the doorway. Her heart sank.

“Bonsoir, Abrielle,” Chloe said.

[1] French writer and philosopher during the Enlightenment.

[2] geographic region of Western Europe containing Spain, Portugal, etc.

[3] mountain chain between France and Spain.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE EMBRACE OF REMEMBRANCE

Abrielle's breath caught in her throat as Chloe glided into the cell. The woman was clad in an expensive dress and wore jewelry that sparkled in the dancing flame of the lantern in the hall. Of all the people her captors could have chosen, Chloe was the only one she truly feared. Upon reaching Abrielle, the woman paused only a moment before pressing her lips gently to both of the younger woman's cheeks. She allowed her lips to hover over Abrielle's, whose heart was now racing. Then she smiled slightly and stepped back.

"Welcome home, Abrielle."

The words were gentle and sincere. Chloe's eyes seized upon Abrielle's wounded right hand. She delicately took it into her gloved one and studied the cut.

"My, we have been careless."

Abrielle fixed her eyes upon the guards in the hall, each with a drawn weapon in hand. She felt Chloe's fingers interlace into those upon her left hand.

"Come."

Much to her own surprise Abrielle began to follow where she was led. The light grew stronger as they approached the entryway. There was still time. Though she was unarmed, if she was quick she might be able to snap Chloe's neck before the guards shot. She felt a mild increase of pressure on her fingers. Chloe had probably surmised that Abrielle might be contemplating escape, but the motion was more of a reminder than a threat. Chloe was in control, and this simple reminder terrified Abrielle anew.

Chloe was capable of anything, but if Abrielle lashed out, she would fail Ailis, Tara, and Ernest. There was no escape. As Bellange had been led away to meet his fate, he'd remarked how he was repaid for his crimes. As she entered the bright hallway, Abrielle could not help but remember her own and wondered what the price would be.

Bayonne, France 1794

"I found you!"

"You cheated. You watched. There's no way you could have found me that fast," Paul challenged.

"No, it's your fault for wearing squeaky shoes. Besides, I always find you," Abrielle smiled.

Paul grabbed the apple she was reaching for and began to taunt her with it by holding it just beyond her grasp.

"Give it back!"

"Get taller."

Abrielle shoved him and Paul laughed.

"Give it back or I'll tell Sister Michelle," Abrielle threatened.

Paul studied her a moment, then wiped the apple on his sleeve and took a big bite. Abrielle's lips puffed out slightly as she pursed them. He'd called her bluff. Actually it was a foolish one to begin with. Both of them were ignoring their respective chores. She was supposed to be hanging clothes in the nearby laundry room and him scrubbing the hallway floors.

Chores were boring but she always found Paul, three years her elder, interesting. He was certainly more fun to be around than the sniping, whiney, tiresome girls in her wing of the orphanage. It was too bad that the only time she really got to see Paul was when they were both punished at the same time. Of course this meant that she took to getting into trouble on a regular basis just so she could be near him.

She lunged for her apple and slipped slightly on the wet stones he'd been scouring.

"Come on. You still owe me for my twelfth birthday."

"I stole that fabric you wanted," he reminded her, but this did nothing to abate her efforts. She would get her apple back. Suddenly Paul stood up straight and began to move his hands rapidly over the apple.

"No, Paul!"

"Too late," he grinned as he held up his empty palms.

"Where'd you hide it this time?"

She searched frantically for it but to no avail. Paul was a good thief, but he was even better at hiding the evidence of his crimes. He laughed hysterically at her fumbling attempts to locate her food.

"You're a dirty thief, Paul Cheval!" Abrielle fumed.

"No, your apple is dirty. But I cleaned it for you." He withdrew her half-eaten, hair encrusted apple from the filthy water of his scrub bucket.

Suddenly it wasn't funny anymore. She'd teach him this time. She grabbed a nearby lump of soap.

"Paul! Abrielle!"

Both children jumped at the sound and sight of Sister Josephine as she hovered like an angry storm cloud in the doorway. She was quick to punish, by paddle or labor, and certainly did not appreciate two children, already serving a punishment, who were fighting. The day ended with both having relatively sore behinds and mouths that were crusted with the residue of the soap they'd been forced to hold between their teeth for hours after lying to her. But it was not part of the day that would forever make it memorable to Abrielle.

Very late that night, she was roughly shaken awake. She swung at the air briefly, then tried to roll back over. Sometimes the older girls especially liked to tease the younger ones by shaking them awake. The torment could last half the night at best or months at its worst. The last time something like this had happened, Abrielle hit her attacker as she retreated back to her bed. The tactic had worked, and the black eye the next morning had revealed the guilty party. She'd had no further problems with this type of harassment until tonight. The hand came again, and this time, she shot up in bed. Her hair a tangled mess, she flopped it over her head and she sought her tormentor, but the room full of sleeping girls was relatively quiet.

Annoyed, but tired, she lay back down once more to try to go back to sleep. It was then that the object on the floor by her bed attracted her attention. She pulled back the sheet and uncovered a small basket full of twelve apples. Her heart leapt as she searched for Paul but found no trace of him. A small note was tucked inside the basket:

Happy Birthday. Hide these before they get stolen!

Abrielle reached down, retrieved one of the dozen apples, and beheld it as a sacred object. Her fingers massaged its cool, taut surface; she breathed in the fresh scent. She bit into it and almost immediately spat it out. The remnants of the soap bar did not make an appealing mix with the apple. She used the sheet covering the apples to try and wipe more of the foul taste from her mouth. The second bite was pure bliss.

The sweet juices played over her tongue and trickled down her chin. She giggled with happiness

as she savored not only her presents but the fact that Paul cared enough to give them to her. She'd never made friends easily; the orphanage environment and her own personality made it difficult. She often wavered erratically between being shy or arrogant, and the rare moments of encouragement she received from the adults around her only re-enforced that to most she was nothing but an ordinary, easily forgettable girl.

Many of the other girls proved to be false allies, abusive, liars, or so desperate for any sort of affection that their clinging ways alienated her. Still she'd managed to make a few friends, but life and the nature of the orphanage often separated them far too soon. Several of her friends had died of diseases or been adopted—Belle even by her birth parents who'd been so beset by guilt they'd returned to reclaim her.

Abrielle's life experiences taught her that it was less painful to remain unconnected. A family tried to adopt her once, but she fought everyone until she'd been allowed to stay. She was determined that ultimately she would control her own destiny. Abrielle looked at the other sleeping girls and the dirty, cracked walls, as her mind relived the lifetime spent here. She hated this place, but maybe, one day, her real family would feel as guilty as Belle's had about leaving her here and come to rescue her. In spite of herself, Abrielle could not help but imagine such a moment.

The floor was too cold to want to get up and hide the other apples. She retrieved a third and nestled back down into the warm blankets with it. Abrielle closed her eyes and began to imagine again that oft dreamt of day when her family arrived. Her mother would hold her, press her tightly against her breast, and promise never to leave her again. Father would kiss her and tell her what a brave child she had been. They hadn't left her here on purpose, how could they? She didn't deserve that; no one did. What could she have ever done to make them leave her? The question troubled her and she quickly sent it adrift.

She would have three sisters: two older and one younger. Abrielle, of course, would be the prettiest much to their chagrin. Might as well have a brother or two also; the eldest would be a great disappointment to the family while the younger would be clever and nice. He would be her champion and ally, and they would write each other every day.

At her new home she would never be ignored or beaten by anyone, unlike here where she'd suffered injuries from some of the older girls. Her family would listen, she'd never go to sleep hungry, they would marvel at her cleverness, her kindness, and above all, they would love her.

Sadly these thoughts only nurtured bitterness. Buried beneath these fantasies was a pain she rarely acknowledged openly. Someone in this world had hated her enough to abandon her here. What would she do if she ever had the chance to confront them? When she awoke hours later, the remaining apples in the basket were gone, as was the one she'd cradled in her sleep.

*

It happened several weeks later. Morning service had just concluded, and they were all heading for the dining hall to break their fast when the shouting was heard. As the voices grew louder, the children collectively paused, some laughed as they speculated as to the cause of the raised voices. Several of the sisters began to head back down the hall towards the orphanage entryway when an echoing shot was heard. The large gates screamed open, then armed men and women came into view and began to storm down the hallway. Some in the mob forced the nuns against the wall; others began to grab children at random.

A symphony of terrified shrieks and cries blended with the thundering sound of running footsteps and angry shouts. Abrielle's eyes searched desperately for Paul as she was being swept up by the hustling crowd. A young girl directly beside her was snatched up and hauled away by one of the

invaders. Abrielle wanted to help her but was too frightened. She ran. They all ran.

The corridor ahead split: a set of stairs led to the boys' dorms, other hallways led towards the girls' dorms and classrooms, and a gate granted access to the courtyard. Abrielle fled across the cobbled stones of the yard and ran up another staircase, which led to the sisters' quarters. It was the furthest, safest place she could think of to run to. What was going on? Who were these people?

She reached the top step, only to realize that the imposing door before her was locked. She beat on it until her hands were numb, but no one came. There was nowhere to go and one glance from below would expose her immediately. Reluctantly, she hurriedly descended back into the chaos below. By now the armed adults were roving the courtyard, sweeping up the children before them. She managed to evade them and began to run towards the classrooms.

"Abrielle," Paul whispered as he emerged from a hiding place they often used when playing games. Wordlessly she ran to him. He grabbed her hand and began to lead her back towards the church.

"I think almost all of them went inside."

"Who are they?" she asked breathlessly.

Without warning each of them was seized by a firm hand as they passed the entrance to the dining hall. Shock and fear held their cries of surprise and alarm at bay.

"Be silent, children," a familiar voice instructed, "come quickly!" Sister Michelle released them, and they followed her without protest. As they passed the main entryway to the orphanage, they saw a black clad body on the ground. Abrielle began to scream, but Paul covered her mouth instantly. Sister Michelle ushered them into the church where they hid behind the altar.

"Who's ...?" Paul began to ask but was unable to finish the question.

Sister Michelle looked away and crossed herself.

"Sister Josephine, poor soul. She refused to let those Jacobin [1] monsters in. They killed her for it."

"Jacobins?" Abrielle managed.

"Yes, it's the Terror [2]."

This explanation meant little to Abrielle, but Paul seemed to understand. The noise of a door opening caused them all to duck lower.

"Michelle, are you here," a voice whispered, "I found Marie'."

Sister Michelle closed her eyes in relief for a moment.

"Bring her up here, Sister Annette."

The three year old Marie' looked pale, her eyes distant. Annette handed her over to Abrielle. She wrapped her arms around the girl as the nuns held a succinct discussion. Annette looked down at the crouching children.

"Do we tell them they're dead? We could lead them to the common grave," Sister Annette suggested.

"This is a mob. I doubt they'll know how many we have or who they are. We must say nothing."

"That must be why they're grabbing the children at random, hoping to make one of us confess."

"The Lord's mercy upon us," Sister Michelle prayed.

"What of the records?"

"I told her to destroy them, but you know how she is."

"Was," Sister Annette grimly corrected.

Silence.

"Any trace of the other four? Claire, Louis ...?"

Sister Annette shook her head.

“The children are scattered everywhere, and I have no idea how many members of that mob made it inside.”

The distant sound of more shots ended the conversation abruptly. The women exchanged a look of mutual resignation then Sister Michelle leaned over her charges behind the altar.

“No matter what you hear do not leave this church. I will come back for you.”

The promise held no comfort for Sister Michelle did not appear to believe her own words. Abrielle nodded dumbly. Paul’s expression darkened, and Marie’ continued to suck her thumb and twirl a strand of hair.

The nuns left, locking the children inside. Paul ran down the aisle and tested the locked doors immediately. Marie’ began to cry, the wails echoing off the stones of the church walls. Abrielle tried to console the young girl as best she could. Paul raced past her testing the storage room windows.

“You have to silence her!” he barked as he grabbed a tray from the altar and began to head back to the window in the storage room. Abrielle followed him with Marie’.

“Paul, what were they talking about? What’s the Terror? Does it have something to do with the revolution?”

He spoke as he went to work on a rusted lock.

“I’ve only heard a few things, down in the kitchens, you know, when I was being punished. A deliveryman was warning the nuns about the Jacobins’ hatred of the clergy. Told them to be careful or they’d end up meeting the guillotine.”

Abrielle considered this new information. Hadn’t their former king died by guillotine only last year?

“But why hurt us? We didn’t do anything.”

Unpleasant as life here could be, Abrielle did have to admit they were mostly sheltered safely away from the riots, mobs, the worst of the food shortages, and the general chaos that had infected her nation during its, as yet unresolved, revolution.

“I don’t think they care. There!” Paul grinned in triumph as the lock gave. They could sneak out the window and not a moment too soon. His clamorous exertions had masked the sound of the church doors shaking under assault from outside. Marie’ began to cry anew.

“Shut her up or she’s staying behind.”

The doors to the church crashed open, and they heard orders being issued. If they heard Marie’ now, they were all done for. Without preamble Paul grabbed her and threw the terrified babe out the window, the young girl’s cries were muffled for a moment. Abrielle stared at him in angry disbelief.

“How could you ...?”

“Some more back there!” they heard a gruff voice say.

They’d been spotted. Paul shoved her towards the window, but it was too late; a member of the mob was scooping Marie’ off the ground outside. She and Paul surrendered to the forces gathered within the church and were led back towards the courtyard.

By now many of the children had been located and brought to the familiar cobblestone square, along with the nuns. Abrielle and Paul were forced to stand with the other children, who were loosely assembled around the square. As she took her place among them, she noted the absence of several of the sisters. Could they be in hiding or were they also dead? A sharp toned voice brought her attention to focus. Sister Annette was being interrogated nearby.

“Very clever, Citizeness, but the fact that you’ve given each of the children new surnames changes nothing. We know you’re harboring the offspring of émigrés at this orphanage. We’ll have them or

we'll have your head."

The sister challenged him.

"Who are you to speak in such a manner to one who serves God?"

Annette's courage folded as the man loomed over the diminutive nun.

"A loyal patriot of the Republic [3], a devoted servant of Robespierre, and one who will not be swayed by a member of a clergy who have always sided with the corruption and abuses so prevalent in the Old Regime [4]."

He leaned forward.

"Would you rather they all be killed, huh? Tell us what we want to know or you can watch them march to the guillotine in your place, one by one, until you identify who among them is of aristocratic lineage."

The man lurched away from the bereaved nun.

He grabbed a frightened young boy and hauled him out before those assembled. A club now hovered menacingly above the child's head.

"If you care," he bellowed, "if you truly care for any of these ... children, you will give up those whose blood threatens to poison our new Republic."

"No. No, they're dead! Leave us in peace!" Annette cried out. The man crossed the yard and cruelly struck her. She crumbled. He eyed those before him forebodingly, waiting to see if anyone openly dared to challenge him.

"Monsieur," the clear, even voice of Sister Michelle cut through the silence.

"Citizen," the man ordered contemptuously.

"Monsieur," the nun repeated more gently, "there is no need for any of this. Yes, there are children here born of a certain heritage, but they have no knowledge of this fact. They never will. Sister Josephine, who you saw fit to slaughter at the gate, destroyed all records of this long ago. They are now as much Citizens of the Republic as you or I. Please, sir ... they are innocents."

The man leered at her as he hobbled toward her.

"Citizens of the Republic? This from one who twice addresses me in the old manner? As a monsieur of the Old Regime, with a title fit for slaves. They may be Citizens at present, but once they are again secured behind these walls, hidden away from our sight, you will undoubtedly return to teaching them the old ways of injustice and inequality, and return them to us as sources of corruption."

She held his gaze.

"We are all equal in the eyes of the Lord," she steadfastly affirmed.

"Let's test that."

The man signaled to two of his compatriots who grabbed Sister Michelle's arms and began to haul her towards an unfamiliar device in the rear of the courtyard. Strange, that hadn't even been here when Abrielle fled through here earlier. It must be something they brought with them. The mob of Jacobins forced the children to follow Sister Michelle.

"You can't do this!" a bruised Sister Annette sobbed frantically. She could barely walk, and blood ran freely from her lip. By now Michelle's guards had removed her habit and were tying her hair up. Abrielle studied the woman's face. It was calm; she whispered something—probably prayer—ceaselessly. Abrielle had never seen Sister Michelle without her habit on. She was quietly beautiful, motherly even, Abrielle reflected.

The impassioned agitation from the assembled sisters began to upset the children, most of whom were ignorant of what was about to happen. Confused, they wailed and again sought escape, but only a few managed to scurry momentarily away. Whatever was about to happen, the Jacobins meant for

them to see it.

Abrielle wanted to look away; Paul told her to. Her own mind screamed for her to do so, but instead she watched as Sister Michelle was strapped down onto a table of sorts. Her hands and feet were bound to it, and as they finished this process, Abrielle's eyes were drawn to the angled sheet of metal menacingly suspended above the brave sister's head.

“NO!” her mind screamed. She loved Sister Michelle. “NO!”

An unnatural silence, one tinged with anticipation and dread, suddenly descended upon the crowd. Then the sounds came. The God-forsaken sound of the rushing blade riding the rails, the hum of metal as it sliced through supple flesh and bone, and the dull thump which signaled the end.

The triumphant man reached down into a basket and held up Sister Michelle's decapitated head for all in the crowd to witness. Several of the children fainted or became violently ill. Her lips still moved slightly as her blood coursed down the man's arm. The Jacobins cheered; the rest wept.

“Let this serve as a warning to any disloyal Citizen who would see the ways of the Old Regime maintained. The old traditions are dead as are any claims from that cursed Regime. We will leave you now, but the doors of this orphanage must forever remain open to the Republic—lest another example is necessary.”

**

Had she been screaming? Abrielle's eyes blinked furiously as she tried to banish the nightmare from her mind and regain her senses. She'd seen her again. Abrielle's breath came to her in uneven gasps as the memory of the dream played upon her sleep addled brain. Was she still dreaming? Her damp hair clung awkwardly to her forehead, and she ran trembling fingers against the strands. Her breath was slowing beginning to regulate itself as the familiar sights of her room came back into focus. She hadn't been visited by this nightmare in some months. What could have caused it? Abrielle coughed. She wished she'd kept the basin in the room filled. Her body was ripe with thirst.

The sun was just rising. Perhaps it would help keep the ghastly phantom at bay. But she doubted it. The image had stalked through her mind for over four years now. Every time it seemed to have faded back into obscurity, it rose again to make her relive that moment forever seared unwillingly upon her soul.

Sister Michelle returned in many forms, all of them upsetting; sometimes in Abrielle's dreams, the events played out as they had, other times, like tonight's ghost, were more disturbing. In this dream, Abrielle was in the orphanage church. Paul was there, dressed in fine clothes, and then all had gone dark. She'd been alone. No, not alone. A rasping sound had echoed through the sinister gloom of the chamber. Her name; it had hissed her name, and then from the shadows, the awful thing had come: Sister Michelle's body, devoid of its head, dripping with glistening streaks of blood. The clutching hands of that abhorrent corruption had sought her, but so had that rasping, disembodied voice, “Abrielle.”

She clutched at the sheet for reassurance. It was a dream, only a dream. But Sister Michelle's death was not. That nightmare really happened, and she'd watched helplessly as the unfortunate woman was murdered before her. Death had been made real to her that day, and so was the certainty that she could not rely on the sanctity of the orphanage walls to protect her from the outside world. The lingering anger and guilt of that experience buried themselves deep within her, merging with all the unspoken sadness she repressed. The fact that for two years after Sister Michelle's death the gates remained open at all times only added to the children's collective anxiety.

The Republic had fallen, and the Thermidorean Reaction [\[5\]](#) and the Directory [\[6\]](#) had each respectfully arisen in its place. But uncertainty remained. France, both internally and externally, had

been at war now for most of her life, the threat of invasion constant. Recently, though, military victories and economic reforms were easing the chronic food shortages. Reformers also worked to ensure that The Terror was never repeated, but the fear that it could would never leave those at the orphanage.

Paul had left three years earlier in an attempt to avoid conscription into the military. He wrote to her at first with regularity, but during the past year or so, she'd received no words of comfort from her friend. He hadn't even written her with birthday wishes this year. His last letter, which she'd all but memorized by now, informed her that he was going to try to find work in a city to the north called Bordouex.

Abrielle sighed as she began to change. She'd seen so little of her own country, she wondered what life was truly like beyond the certainty of the world inside the orphanage walls. What did her future hold?

Soon she too would have to make her way in the world. To that end, she took to helping the nuns with a number of duties: tending the ill, teaching Latin or music lessons in the classroom, and translating letters and paperwork to name a few. She discovered a particular aptitude with languages and enjoyed working with them immensely. The words transported her beyond this mundane existence and allowed her to transform her identity as she wrote responses. She found this role playing quite appealing, but in many ways, it almost didn't matter what she did as long as her life remained her own and was not one led by another. Of course, nearly any job was preferable to the chore she'd been shipped off to aid with over the past few days.

There was a long standing tradition that in the fall the orphans were made available, for several weeks, to any local farmer who needed help harvesting crops. It was dirty, exhausting, thankless work with harsh hours spent in any type of deplorable weather conditions. Abrielle had been helping to harvest a wheat crop when she injured her ankle by stepping into an unseen gopher hole. An additional insult was garnered when she raked the offended ankle on a farming implement of some type, engendering a deep gash.

The injury was slowly healing, but at the moment, she still walked with a pronounced limp in the morning. Fortunately, it did seem to dissipate the longer she was up and moving, but the open wound had become extremely sensitive. Perhaps she would attempt bathing later today, though the bath's condition often left one feeling less clean than when they entered. The farm work at least solidified a deep conviction in her that she would never embrace a life that forced her back into the fields.

She groaned slightly at the state of her hair. Normally it was rather straight, but either from the damp air in the countryside or sweat-inducing dreams, today, the wavy curl, which sometimes appeared, refused to be brushed out. Frustrated, she searched for a ribbon or tie but found none. Perhaps one of the girls would be willing to lend her one; besides, they were undoubtedly responsible for all of hers going missing. She'd been very glad when this single room became available, but sadly, the tiny lock did little to prevent the theft of even the most minor luxury.

After spending two hours helping to prepare for the midmorning meal, Abrielle attended service along with all the other members of the orphanage. She then spent several more hours in the laundry mending clothing and supervising some of the younger boys who volunteered to catch mice in the kitchens and storage rooms. Their zeal often surpassed their logic when they found one, and too often, items ended up being damaged if a close eye wasn't maintained. Still her fitful sleep and the physical demands she'd been under made her fatigued. She ended up dozing for a time beneath a tree, recently stripped naked of its leaves, outside the kitchen. She awoke to Sister Annette, who'd become the head of the orphanage, gently shaking her.

“My apologies,” Abrielle said as she regained her senses. What had the boys broken while she’d slept? Surprisingly no chastisement came. In fact, Annette looked rather happy.

“Come with me please, Abrielle.”

Confused, Abrielle stood up and began to follow her towards her office. Her limp returned after her nap, accompanied by a new burning sensation in her leg.

They entered Sister Annette’s office to find two people seated within. The man, who now began to stand, was older but not yet old, of average height, and his face bore an expression she could not quite comprehend. The other occupant of the room, a pretty, young, blonde-haired girl, no older than ten, who gazed upon Abrielle with a mix of affection and wonder, remained seated. In the silence that reigned upon her entry, they regarded one another. Abrielle began to turn to ask Sister Annette what was going on when the man suddenly spoke. His voice trembled as he began, but it grew steadier as the words came forth. He addressed her in French.

“Bonjour, Abrielle. We’ve traveled a long way to see you ... this is Ailis and I’m ... I’m Quinn Tierney, your father.”

[1] radical faction, led by Robespierre, that was active 1789-1794 and created the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution.

[2] also called the Reign of Terror, lasted from 1793-1794 and decreed that any enemy of the Revolution be harshly executed.

[3] the First French Republic was established in 1792 to govern France as a replacement for the monarchy.

[4] refers to the political and social systems of power that ruled France prior to the 1789 French Revolution.

[5] 1794 movement to end the Reign of Terror and punish its leaders.

[6] French Revolutionary government from 1795-1799.

CHAPTER 6

BECOMING

Abrielle had never known that the heart and soul were capable of producing such wholly discordant feelings. In the seconds measured by the slave that is time, her world collapsed. How could this stranger come to her now, on the cusp of womanhood, and claim her as a child?

Yet, she wanted to be held, to be forgiven, to know acceptance, but this was wrong. Her father? And was this her sister? She'd been good enough for him to keep whereas Abrielle had not? Had the nuns kept all of this from her? The heat of betrayal turned her cheeks crimson.

Dreams were not meant to become real. But here was a vision of all she'd wanted twisted before her, mocking her. This man who hated her so much that he'd left her here. His own child; he'd left her! This brutal realization made her head dizzy. The grotesque demon from her nightmares materialized beside him like an angel of death. It was his fault. It was all his fault.

Suddenly all she'd endured in her life ignited into a white hot rage. The years of loneliness, fear, uncertainty, the confusion, the pain of one who has so shamelessly been cast aside consumed her heart. He didn't love her. He'd never loved her!

In three steps she reached this imposter, this monster, and slapped him as hard as she could. The bones in her hand vibrated with the impact, her heart sung with rage. Then she saw the expression of shock and horror etched upon the young girl's face. It mirrored Abrielle's own feelings of disbelief and confusion. The girl's soft face judged her without judging her, it calmed her; almost weakened her resolve, but she would endure no more betrayals. Her fate was her own, and she hated this man, hated the nuns, and refused to accept this false sister. It was all a cruel lie; she had no family.

Some primal force had been awakened. She felt no pain in her leg as she spun and fled from that horrible room. She needed to escape; this above all else mattered. Her steps came in rapid succession as she beat down steps, across cobblestones and over wood flooring. Her body felt light, nimble. Nothing around her seemed safe or familiar; Abrielle was motion without thought.

The few people she passed she ignored, her frenzied flight through the kitchen gained her a small knife, which she purloined before pounding down the rear stairwell to the storage loading area. A wagon, empty of all but a tarp and several barrels, was just pulling away. She leapt into the back unnoticed by the driver and quickly wormed her way beneath the heavy fabric. There hot tears erupted from her eyes, giving voice to the untold misery within. The emotional pain was blinding, and eventually, it led her into the dark embrace of sleep.

*

Abrielle awoke first in a state of utter bewilderment, which turned quickly to one of terror. Where was she? This was not home ... the orphanage. By appearances she was in a cabin. Of more immediate concern, though, was the fact that she was tied to a bed. Should she cry out? No, that would most likely only bring the person who'd done this to her. What about the knife she'd stolen? As she tried to move her body, a sharp pain bit through her leg. The pain echoed and pulsed all the way to her temple. Her startled cry did bring someone.

“Bout time,” the woman snapped from the doorway before disappearing.

She returned almost instantly with a slightly inebriated-looking man who wore a blood-soaked

bandage over one of his hands. Abrielle tried to control her fears but failed utterly, crying out urgently for help.

“Oh hush, girl. I won’t hurt you again. But you didn’t give me much choice the first time. We just want to talk to you. Besides, only the wolves will hear all that shrieking.”

She ceased her shouting as the woman sat down a safe distance from Abrielle. The man seated himself beside her and continued to draw from the wine bottle in his good hand.

“Where am I? Are you going to hurt me again?”

“You hear that, Noel? No, ‘course you didn’t.”

She stood slowly then bent over Abrielle and lightly touched a bruise on the girl’s forehead. She studied her eyes a moment, then apparently satisfied returned to her chair.

“You don’t remember me hitting you then?”

Her thoughts were a jumble. She shook her head curtly.

“Well, that’s what happens when you stab a woman’s husband.”

She tapped Noel who waved the blood soaked hand at Abrielle and proffered her the bottle, which she immediately declined.

“I did that?”

“Yes, we know you came from the orphanage in Bayonne. What I want to know is why were you hidden in the back of our wagon with a knife?”

How could Abrielle hope to explain her actions?

“Place musta really gone down hill since I left, eh, Noel?” She shouted these words at the man who watched her closely then nodded at the joke.

“He’s deaf?”

“Almost,” the woman nudged him lovingly. “Never fall in love with a man who serves in an artillery battery. Sooner or later they all end up deaf as posts. ‘Course if he hadn’t, God knows if we ever would have met. Well?”

“I ... I was running away,” Abrielle stammered. Slowly memories were returning.

The first time she’d awoken was because of the unwelcome sensation of cold air rushing all over her body. She dimly recalled seeing Noel’s surprised face over the side of wagon. That he was deaf helped to explain why her presence went undetected for so long. She’d taken no precautions in releasing her sorrows.

“Hitched a ride then because of that ankle?”

Abrielle nodded dumbly. The woman sat back in her chair.

“See Noel, you’re lucky you married me and not that Gabrielle creature you were so taken with. It’s these pretty ones who are always crazy.”

Noel snorted, rolled his eyes, and shook his head as he took another deep draught.

“I’m not crazy,” Abrielle said defensively.

“Hiding in strangers’ wagons, stabbing people in the dark, trying to run anywhere on an ankle that swollen and infected, through the mountains no less; no, you’re the portrait of sanity my dear,” the other woman scoffed.

Abrielle looked away, tears threatening to fall again. Would this awful day ever end?

“Now, now, no need for that. You just gave us all a good scare and a rude greeting. Are you hungry?”

The shifts in the woman’s mood were all happening so fast, but Abrielle did have to admit she was hungry.

“Noel, do something useful, ya great lug. Get us some bread, some of that stew, lots of water—

we're soakin' that ankle—and wounded or not that's enough from the bottle for one night.”

As the woman issued orders, Noel polished off the remainder of the bottle, but nodded in affirmation of her directives and headed somewhat listlessly out the door.

“Honestly,” the woman shook her head, “like a child, any excuse, any excuse. Saints preserve me. What's your name then?”

“Abrielle.”

“Anne D'Aoust.” She threw back the blankets and studied Abrielle's ankle.

“How long have I been here?”

“A few hours, but the trip from Bayonne takes about four or so. Well, I don't know how long it's been like this, but you've got a nice infection thanks to that cut. But all's well. You happened to pick a former military nurse's husband to stab. I think we can have you mended up in a few days. Now, unless you intend to repeat that lunacy from earlier, I'll let you loose. But I'm locking this door tonight, understood.”

“Yes, madame,” Abrielle asserted.

*

The cat turned half-opened, questioning eyes upon Abrielle. Why had she stopped petting him? Abrielle hastily repositioned Edgar and began to stroke his fur again. Approval was offered by the resumption of the oscillating drones issued by the cat.

“Don't know why I tolerate that creature, never been partial to cats, but he does keep the bat population low in the barn, caught three last month alone. Strange creatures, bats. Sometimes fly right by your ear at dusk. At least you never had to worry about them at the orphanage, eh.”

Anne prattled on as she raced through another round of sewing with Abrielle. Noel dozed by the fire.

“I swear that man goes through four pairs of work gloves per month: ripping 'em, losing 'em, putting 'em in ... never mind. You 'bout done there?”

Abrielle considered her attempt at mending a shirt, only to discover she'd somehow managed to attach it to the bed sheet. Both women laughed. Abrielle freed herself from the bedding, and on wobbly legs, crossed the room to retrieve the scissors Anne had deliberately left there. Her patient was doing much better, but the former nurse was determined to make her use the still-healing leg as often as possible.

“Didn't they teach you needlework at that place?”

“They tried. I usually was serving some type of penance during class, so I didn't learn much.”

“You're too bright for that type of nonsense. Now look, spread the fabric here, pin it back if you need to, but keep the material loose. You don't want to cut it too fine in case you make a mistake. There, good, now run the needle through like I showed you. Okay, all right, but keep the stitches closer together.”

Several times Abrielle suspended her task to keep Edgar's twitching tail out of the way, but this second effort was more successful. Her confidence boosted, she retrieved another item from Anne's basket to toil on.

For about an hour, neither spoke as they immersed themselves in their respective tasks.

“Don't take this wrong,” Anne quietly began, “aside from the stabbing, I like having you here ... beats talking to myself all the time, but Noel should be heading back to Bayonne in a week or so for some supplies.”

Abrielle nodded but said nothing. For the past eleven days, she'd been spending a great deal of time pondering what was to come. She was actually quiet fond of Anne and Noel D'Aoust, eccentric as they were, tucked away here in the Pyrenees, but she knew she couldn't stay indefinitely.

The D'Aousts had already practically adopted her in the short time she'd been here. In some ways it was only natural, after all Anne herself having been raised in the very orphanage Abrielle had fled. She'd met Noel shortly before he'd been wounded and cared for him afterward. They fell in love and moved to the mountains hoping that war would never find them here. Their farm would never make them wealthy, but it kept them fed, and so they returned a portion of that bounty to the orphanage in Bayonne several times a year.

Strange that she should come to find a family after so soundly rejecting another. Numerous times now she'd draw breath to confide in Anne the sordid details which had brought them together, but always she allowed the words to die unsaid. It was better that they evaporated, forgotten.

Did Abrielle fear that Anne might talk her into returning to the orphanage? Perhaps that was it. Or did she worry that to confide in her, to allow her guard down, might serve to bring them closer and prevent her from leaving? She struggled to understand her own poor heart.

"Anne ... have you ever been to Bordouex?"

Abrielle kept her eyes fixed upon the dance her fingers were contriving between needle and thread.

"Oh, might have passed through now and again when I was around your age. I think some of Noel's old military friends might live up that way. Why? You have a friend there. Family?"

"Maybe," Abrielle said quietly.

*

The embrace altered again. It began as the unexpected, jubilant reunion of old friends who had been separated a long time. She opened her senses fully to him. His clothes smelled of sweat and tobacco smoke; his hair tickled her ear. As it continued, their grasp softened with the growing awareness of the proximity of their bodies. Unspoken thoughts and feelings caused their muscles to shift, but neither relinquished the other.

Now that Abrielle opened her eyes, she discovered that they were staring into those of the perturbed young woman who'd been seated on Paul's lap when she had first entered the backroom of the *Liberte' Jardin Salon*. Abrielle held the woman's gaze, but she must have unconsciously begun to break her embrace with Paul, who sensing the change, released her, but not before kissing her on both cheeks.

"I didn't think I'd see you again. How did you find me?"

Abrielle held the other woman's gaze a moment longer before returning her attention fully to Paul.

"Are you kidding? I always find you," she proudly reminded him.

He grinned at her and waved someone over to place a request for food and drink. The woman shot Abrielle one last look of warning before moving off and to work on tuning her harp. Paul pulled out a seat at a nearby table for Abrielle then seated himself, running fingers through his hair repeatedly as if he was just waking up.

"So you're a performer now, a musician?" she asked as her eyes played about the room.

He nodded smugly.

"Play here, eat here, sleep in my own room upstairs. I love this place."

Abrielle smiled. This was about as happy as she'd ever seen him. Perhaps bringing her problems to him was the wrong idea.

“So what brings you here? Seriously, did they kick you out or something?”

She hesitated.

“I ... it was time for me to leave and ... I'm in trouble, Paul. I ran away. I have a little money, but you're the only one I could ...”

He took her hand.

“No, no, of course,” a slightly hesitant smile graced her lips as he continued. “They always need some sort of help around here. I know old Le Hir will be able to give you some type of work.”

They argued for several minutes over who would pay for the food when it arrived and finally decided that each paying half made the most sense. In truth, Abrielle had not eaten this well in sometime. She'd separated from Noel in Bayonne when he went inside a shop to buy some wares. She'd left the D'Aousts a note thanking them for their kindness, promising that she would both write and repay their generosity in full.

By now winter's presence stalked the French countryside, and early on in her trip, Abrielle decided to travel along the coast. Anne had provided her with a map and hidden some money inside the traveling cloak she'd given to Abrielle and would undoubtedly be quite cross with her the next time they met for abandoning Noel in such a manner, but it was necessary. Now if he was pressed by anyone at the orphanage regarding her whereabouts, he could honestly say he did not know. That is if he said anything at all; in the month they'd spent together, she couldn't recall the giant man ever uttering a word.

As plates began to arrive, laden with generous portions of food, she thought of how so many of her recent meals had been obtained. Abrielle tore into the bread, devoured the ham, and savored the cheeses. She hadn't realized how hungry she truly was until she looked up and noted that Paul had only eaten a fraction of what she had. He said nothing but poured her some more wine. She was already feeling its soothing influence on her nerves. Her body relaxed, and for the first time in two weeks, she allowed her spirit the luxury of doing so.

Abrielle was a thief. She'd performed the occasional transgression at the orphanage, everybody had, but her solitary journey forced her to develop a new degree of skill. Wherever possible she'd slept in barns and stolen eggs. The coastline was richly inhabited with fishermen, and she took to watching them, waiting for when they headed out to sea and then breaking into their homes. Everything she needed she took: food, wine, clothing items, blankets to cover herself, and once even a valuable looking ring. She felt no real guilt; if they'd lived with her in the orphanage, they wouldn't have burdened their souls over the loss of such trivial things. People stole from one another, be it physically or emotionally, and that's the way it was. She'd only had one close call when she fell asleep in a cabin, and by chance or fate, managed to awaken and escape seconds before discovery. It was terrifying but thrilling at the same time.

But now she was warm, safe, well-fed, and full of questions for her friend.

“So what is this place? A tavern?”

“Oh, no it's more than that. These salons are intellectual meeting houses; they're a holdover from before the Revolution. 'Course with Napoleon's edicts, who knows where this country is heading now,” he commented coolly.

Abrielle grinned at his seriousness. The Paul she'd known would never have concerned himself with such matters. She knew little about their new ruler, only that he seemed to promise hope for a more secure future. Anne and Noel had told her a little about him, but mutual lack of genuine

knowledge about the man had made their conversations brief.

“Well, he’s only been in power for a month or so,” she said dismissively. He wasn’t a Jacobin, and to Abrielle, that’s all that mattered.

Paul appeared to be having second thoughts about the whole conversation as his eyes darted around the room. Abrielle presented him with a somewhat puzzled look, but he made no further comment on the subject of Napoleon Bonaparte; instead, he left to go speak to the salon’s owner, Le Hir, about her staying on.

“Hey, come here.” At first Abrielle didn’t realize she was being spoken to, let alone who the speaker might be. She was surprised when she turned to discover the young woman with the harp waving her over. Reluctantly, Abrielle rose and walked toward the young woman who absentmindedly plucked strings as her rival approached.

“Paul is talking to Le Hir,” she stated, her head nodding in the direction of the men. “Are you planning to stay?”

“If possible, for now,” Abrielle replied disdainfully.

The woman laughed softly as her fingers began to pluck the strings more purposefully.

“You have a talent then?”

“What?”

“A talent. Le Hir only keeps those around with talent, as does Paul,” her fingers suddenly raced across the strings, eliciting a series of beautiful, lively notes. She abruptly ceased her playing, stopped the strings from vibrating, stood, and nodded for Abrielle to try. Abrielle primarily knew how to play the orphanage organ. But music was music; how hard could the harp be?

As she began to play, she quickly discovered that she could find some notes, but on the whole, found the instrument itself to be cumbersome. Her mind kept trying to turn the instrument into an organ, and so her hands played it as such. The result was an awkward and unwelcome noise. Pride kept her going until Paul came and touched her shoulder. Le Hir had not come with him.

“He said you can take cloaks at the door if you promise to never play that again.”

*

For the first few months she worked at the *Liberte’ Jardin Salon*, she saw very little of Paul. After spending days canvassing the town in search of him, this was more than a little disappointing. She worked in the front tavern of the salon, taking cloaks, serving drinks from the bar, placing food orders, helping in the kitchen, and occasionally showing some people into the backroom where Paul worked. He kept strange hours, and though they remained friendly towards one another, they also remained distant.

At first she shared a room with two other girls who also worked at the salon. Though they were pleasant enough to her, they too kept her at a distance and were often too involved in their own affairs to take much notice of her. Abrielle often felt as if no one really trusted her. Perhaps it was the environment they all worked in. While the front was often hot, loud, and crowded, the back was rather poorly lit, with a much smaller crowd, which often stopped talking the moment she entered. Paul and the other musicians, though, sometimes took part in these conversations; while other times, they seemed to play music to mask the discussions going on in the room.

She also noticed that Paul and the young harp player, Amelie, were very often together: touching and laughing. His aloof manner and insensitivity kept her up many nights brooding. How could he be so blind, so self-centered? Hadn’t he felt something as well when they’d held each other after so

many years apart?

Apparently he hadn't. She really was alone. Her sense of isolation and bitterness was only reinforced when she dwelled upon thoughts of the D'Aousts or the young blonde girl from the orphanage. For some reason, the child's mutual expressions of love and shock seemed to have permanently affixed themselves to her mind. Had she made a horrible mistake by rejecting their kindness so quickly?

During this lonely time, one of her roommates, Sarah, took pity on her and acceded to Abrielle's request that the girl teach her how to play the flute. Abrielle viewed this as a means to acquire a useful skill she could barter and as a rare chance to socialize. Sarah split her time between the backroom and the tavern, playing in one and serving in the other, though most of the time, all she really seemed to do was flirt with the clientele. Despite her efforts, Sarah, while offering her quality instruction, would remain primarily disinterested in getting to know her roommate.

The acquaintance was, however, to yield other benefits Abrielle could not have foreseen. When she left nearly three years after her arrival at the *Liberte' Jardin Salon*, she would be more or less proficient with at least six instruments and closer to Paul than she ever could have dreamed.

One afternoon Le Hir pulled her aside from her regular duties. Somewhat surprised, Abrielle followed him obediently into the backroom. It was devoid of any one but the compliment of players, all of whom bore mixed emotions of anger, apprehension, or fear.

"What's happening?" Abrielle inquired of Le Hir.

The man turned from her and picked up a flute.

"Can you play this?"

Abrielle hesitated, uncertain of what to say. Her last attempt to play an instrument impromptu had all but expelled her to the more menial duties of the salon.

"I ..."

"Speak up, girl. I need a player tonight. Are you capable yes or no?"

Le Hir practically thrust the instrument into her hands. The players present waited apprehensively for her to make a decision. Amelie glowered at her. Abrielle looked to Paul, but his noncommittal expression left the choice up to her.

"I'll try," she nodded.

Relieved having some decision reached, the other players assumed their instruments as Abrielle sat down at an indicated chair and studied notes. Her fingers moved unconsciously over the holes of the instrument as she read. Paul began to count, and suddenly, the unanticipated audition commenced.

The music was airy and upbeat, and Abrielle was surprised when after barely playing more than a minute, they all stopped abruptly. Le Hir was waving his hand.

"She'll do. Get her ready for tonight."

His instructions concluded, the salon owner vanished quickly to attend to other matters. A few of the players murmured reserved congratulations before they too vanished. Paul remained, as did Amelie. He touched Abrielle's shoulder gently.

"That was fine, but we've got a lot of work to do before tonight."

Abrielle smiled at him momentarily before remembering the odd circumstances which had finally brought them together.

"Where's Sarah? I mean, she didn't sleep in the room last night but ..."

Paul shook his head and began to walk back to his bass.

"That tramp won't be coming back."

"Amelie!" Paul warned.

She ignored him.

“She’s pregnant, hid it from all of us for three months. Le Hir didn’t even know.”

“Sarah mentioned she’s been instructing you,” Paul interjected as he delivered a look of recrimination toward his harp player. She did not seem fazed by his chastisement as she began to reprimand Abrielle.

“You have to do a better job with your count; it’s throwing the rest of us off our time...what are you smiling about?”

Abrielle tuned the unpleasant young woman out. This was her moment to savor. For the first time since leaving the orphanage, she felt truly needed.

“Come on, Amelie, go fetch the others. We’ve only got four hours,” Paul observed, “to get the show ready.”

“What show?” Abrielle innocently inquired.

*

Realization came to her in stages, and it was not until her seventh full performance that the epiphany was reached. The first three performances had her completely baffled as they made no sense, told no story, alternated wildly between music, conversation, and spontaneous dancing. Each was played out as if she were within an asylum show for lunatics.

When each performance was over, the select patrons, who’d been invited to attend, left using five separate entrances, and the players often packed up and left just as quickly. Being the newest member of the group, it was her inevitable task to pick up the room after all of the occupants had vacated. Paul seemed pleased with her musical talents, but offered no insights into these strange performances.

As she cleaned one of the tables alone after the third show, Abrielle made a surprise discovery. A piece of paper had been set alight using the candle at the table; however, it failed to burn completely. After casting about momentarily to make certain she would be unobserved, Abrielle picked up and studied the writing. It was a series of glyphs, numbers, and words taken from an assortment of languages.

Abrielle recognized it for what it was immediately; still it did not help to explain its presence. Were they being spied on or had someone in this room been spying on another? Could she hold some vital directive or damaging observation? If it were an encoded observation, made in jest between highly educated friends, could it merely be offering testimony that the show was a nonsensical disaster? She tried to picture who had sat at the table earlier and found herself unable to do so. Going against her natural inquisitiveness, she set the paper to the flickering flame, which enveloped it immediately.

The next show, she allowed herself the luxury of indulging her curiosity by carefully studying then committing to memory every face in the room; her efforts were to be rewarded the following show. She found it most interesting that all but three of the audience members that night had been present during the fourth performance. Even more intriguing was that while their performance was being carried out onstage, an entirely different play seemed to be being acted out among the audience. It was primarily nonverbal: hand motions, well-timed coughs, subtle nods, but all of these impacted the performance onstage. During the sixth show, she realized that patterns in these actions did play out. Her suspicions had been correct—the real show was being acted out by those surrounding the stage, but for what purpose?

One night she returned to her room only to discover that it had been vandalized. No, there was

intent here, her mind told her as she studied the sliced mattress, rummaged clothing, and the dispersal of her other few possessions. Immediately she sought out Paul, who for once was separated from Amelie. He was drinking alone at the bar.

“Someone’s torn my room apart,” she shouted into his ear over the din.

He shrugged and nodded but made no further comment until she informed him that it had obviously been searched.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested without waiting for her to agree. Paul grabbed her by the wrist and coaxed her quickly out the door.

It was summer, and the warm evening air revived her senses. When she began to talk, he walked faster, forcing her to keep up. He seemed to meander aimlessly, yet, purposefully away from the salon. They walked for sometime in relative silence before he shoved her roughly down an alley, which after a series of sharp turns, deposited them on the outskirts of Bordouex. He looked about, and when satisfied that they were alone, confronted her.

“You didn’t see anyone?”

“Paul, what’s ...?”

“Is it just your stuff or Sarah’s too? Was anything missing?”

The questions and the situation in general were beginning to annoy her.

“I don’t think anything’s missing,” she stated questioningly.

“You shouldn’t have come to me with this. I don’t want to be involved.”

“I only came to you because I thought you cared,” she said, backing away.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to clean up. You don’t want to be involved, I’ll handle it,” Abrielle declared sharply.

“Abrielle ... wait.”

“I’m done waiting.”

“What do you want from me?! I got you a job. You’re not on the streets like I was,” he reminded her.

“Who knows, I might have been better off than working with a bunch of spies!”

Paul froze for a moment, an unpleasant expression settling on his face. Abrielle shook her head and turned to run, but he grabbed her by her hair. He forced her against a wall, and she felt the cool metal of a blade against her back. She wanted to cry out.

“Did you kill her?”

“What? Who?” Her mind was racing.

“Sarah.”

The young woman’s image swam through her mind. Sarah was dead?

“Amelie said she was preg ...”

The knife pressed harder.

“Did you? Did you figure it all out and tell your master, huh?”

“No,” Abrielle sobbed, “no! Let me go, Paul, let me go. I don’t know anything, I don’t know ...”

He released her and tried to kiss her forehead. She smacked him and sat down against the wall. Her nerves all seemed to be working out of sync. How could Paul have done this to her? She picked up a handful of gravel and hurled it at him. She was about to throw another handful when he grabbed her wrist, forcing her to drop them harmlessly to the ground.

He grinned at her as if they’d just finished one of their old childhood games.

“I had to be sure. I told the others, but I had to be sure it wasn’t you. You’re not that good of a liar.”

“No, that’s your specialty,” she shot back accusingly as he reached down and offered her a hand.

“Fine. You’re right. I ransacked your room. But I didn’t lie about Sarah.”

“She’s dead?” Abrielle asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

Abielle allowed him to help her up.

“When?”

“Several weeks ago. Throat slit. Le Hir found her behind the salon.”

“Why would you think it was me?”

“Oh come on, Abrielle. You show up out of nowhere, try to have Sarah teach you music to get you into the backroom, and then she turns up dead all of the sudden.”

“I didn’t have her teach me the flute to get into the backroom, I did it because ...,” she couldn’t bring herself to admit her feelings, “because I couldn’t live like I had to before.” That wasn’t completely true either.

“What, as a penniless girl working for nuns?” Paul studied her face.

“No, as a thief,” she said as she met his probing gaze.

The last word echoed dully down the entrance to the alley. Paul’s expression suddenly changed from serious and sarcastic to outright bemusement. He began to laugh uncontrollably. Did he consider her that inept a thief? Regardless, his amusement on her behalf enraged her. She began to stalk toward him to make her feelings known when he suddenly waved her off and regained control of himself.

“Oh ... oh, Abrielle. You work in a den of thieves.”

CHAPTER 7

THE SLEEPING FLOWER GIRL

Abrielle sighed deeply. She didn't want to get up, not yet, not with him so close beside her. She turned to draw herself closer to him only to find the warm depression in which he'd lain vacant. It was the small fire kindling in the fireplace beyond that warmed her, not Paul. She closed her eyes and recalled the days when he would have been here, kissing her awake, embracing her, telling Abrielle he loved her. Those days were not gone, but their relationship was changing. Too often as of late, she greeted the dawn alone.

Something was troubling him; she propped his pillow up behind her, drew her long legs up to her chin and rested her head upon her knees. Her fingers absently began to trace paths across her skin the way Paul often did as she sought to reassure herself. No, she didn't want to be awake and face the questions that always seemed to plague her on mornings such as this. She and Paul had been together now for over two years, but where were their lives going?

She looked out the window at the autumn sunlight, which was in its own test with time. It was on a day such as this that she'd fled the orphanage and those who would have claimed her as family. By now she'd all but banished the memory of the man from her mind, but the young blonde girl remained. Where was she now? Did she ever wonder what had become of Abrielle or was that unwritten chapter of her life closed? Initially, Abrielle felt only shock and bitterness towards her, a favored child, blessed with all Abrielle had been denied.

But the memory of that girl's look of shock and disappointment also remained. It connected them. Abrielle could see it clearly in her mind nearly every time she and Paul robbed someone, and slowly the guilt it caused was becoming more difficult to deny.

Still balled up, she rolled to one side and faced the fireplace. By now she and Paul's system of pickpocketing was fully perfected and they were becoming quite adept at burglarizing homes. Their target of choice simplified the matter. They robbed the summer residences of the social elite during the winter and their urban dwellings during the summer. Napoleon's policies and the legacy of the Revolution put certain controls upon the wealthy and influential, but did not eradicate them as a social class. Therefore, the Revolution's fervent quest for equality and justice for all still had yet to be realized.

Paul did not like Napoleon. In point of fact, he quietly detested him. He and the rest of Le Hir's regulars in the back room of the salon spent endless hours railing against Bonaparte's policies, which they maintained threatened to destroy all of the progress gained through the Revolution. It was not a wholly unfounded argument. The First Consul seemed to issue new laws and philosophical views on everything: economics, religion, civil law, education, the press, and the rights of women, slavery, and war to name a few.

The French armies which once fought in defense of their homeland now marched across Europe and even Northern Africa on missions of conquest, purportedly meant to spread the freedoms of the Revolution. His most recent threat to invade England inspired a new level of paranoia in both his followers and enemies alike. Under his rule, France continued to rise in prominence and wealth as country after country submitted to his superior military tactics and adhered to his edicts.

As he rose in power, Napoleon began to limit access to it for others, while maintaining that any

man who seized the mantle of enlightenment as he had was blessed with limitless opportunities. But those long-promised opportunities, first from the Revolution and now Napoleon, had yet to filter down through French society and be fully realized by all her citizens. Paul was constantly worried about potential spies, rumored to operate at every level of French society. Given the principle business interests of both her and Paul and the regular clientele at the *Liberte' Jardin Salon*, it was a legitimate concern.

The salon's chief business was to serve not only as a gathering place for political discussion, but also as a negotiating center for those trading goods and services on the black market. Since politics and illegal trade often went together, it was indeed a dangerous business to be in, especially as Napoleon's power grew. Their "shows" were actually an elaborate means of conveying information between clients for the negotiation or purchase of stolen goods. Additionally, they could also be used to mask the more direct discussions occasionally undertaken by the black market barons or serious political debates. Abrielle's role, as one of the players, had expanded greatly since those early days, and she now was in charge of altering the codes on a regular basis in case any French agents were watching. Her linguistic skills, ever increasing musical abilities, and dramatic flair made her a natural for such a job.

She and Paul should have been happy. They were comfortable, enjoyed one another's companionship, and were growing increasingly wealthy through their ill-gotten gains. But lately the success and security she craved only served to emotionally separate them. Did Paul truly not wish to be with her? They continued to discuss the subject of marriage, but despite their years together, they still refused to embrace it. Now it loomed silently over them, creating doubts and fears about their present and possible future relationship. But there were other things as well.

Though no longer working at the salon, Amelie continued to serve as a rival for Paul's affections. And although she could never prove it, Abrielle believed that Paul had cheated on her with Amelie on more than one occasion. Could he be with her now?

Abrielle shifted uncomfortably in bed. He'd been extremely distant for over a month. Might Amelie be to blame? Sometimes these thoughts obsessed her so that Abrielle had even gone so far as to try to spy on Paul, but quickly concluded that she'd never be good at it. Such things took patience and devotion to the task at hand, and deep down, Abrielle wasn't sure she wanted to know the truth. Paul was all she had in this world. She stretched out her body; the cool air tickled her naked skin. She was hungry.

An unexpected blast of very cold air forced her to seek refuge under the blankets again as Paul rushed into the room bearing a large satchel. She shot him a look of annoyance, which changed when, with great ceremony, he withdrew an apple and brought it close to her lips. She smiled at their personal joke and took a bite. He sat down, turned, and began to unpack more items from the bag. Abrielle brushed her hair's brown strands away from her face and draped her arm over his shoulder, resting a hand on his chest, and kissing his cheek. He kissed her arm but made no further comment.

"Is that fresh?"

"It was twenty minutes ago. It's pretty cold out though, so don't blame me if it's already hard."

Abrielle pressed her fingers to a loaf of bread.

"No," Abrielle shook her head as she chewed another bite of apple. "No, it can't be worse than ... than that bread they used serve us on soup day."

"Yeah, soup day," Paul mused. "I'd forgotten about those."

She rolled her eyes.

"One of the cooks told me that those were a week's worth of unsold loaves leftover from one of

the Bayonne bakeries. I'm amazed we never chipped any teeth. Oh, did you mail my correspondence?"

"Don't I always?"

"I know you do," she hugged him, "I just enjoy knowing that the D'Aoust's are getting ..."

"Stolen money? Black market profits? Ill-gotten gains?"

She hit him lightly.

"It's the least I can do."

"Actually, the least you can do is to send them nothing."

Paul would never understand her connection to the D'Aousts and complained nearly every time she asked him to post a letter laden with money. It was beginning to wear on her. She quickly changed the subject lest it lead to another argument.

"What else did you bring me? What time did you leave anyway?"

"5:30, maybe," he shrugged.

"So early?"

"I had to see someone."

At this, Abrielle abandoned her attempt to maintain a good mood in front of him.

"Who? Amelie?"

"It was just business," he shook his head in annoyance. "I needed some information. I could only work out a trade for some of that silver we picked up from that estate last month, so it took a while to get it all."

"Which pieces?" Her eyes narrowed.

"Ah, let's see, well, two of the platters, a couple of the serving sets, and that tea pot with the little design on the one side."

"Paul! You never even asked me about those. I was planning to use them when we ..."

He turned a fraction, his eyebrow arching somewhat. She'd personally taken those pieces so that one day, when they owned their own home, she'd have an elegant serving set.

"I didn't trade the candlesticks," he said by way of apology.

She pulled away from him and wrapped herself in a sheet.

"So what was so important?" she demanded.

"Hhmm?"

"You said you traded for information. What's so important?"

"Don't worry about it," he said dismissively.

Satisfied with his inventory of the bag's contents, he stood up and let the bag clatter to the floor. As he returned to the bed, she turned her back to him. He tried to kiss her exposed shoulder, but she pulled the sheet up.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she said curtly.

"Look I'm sorry about the silver ..."

"It's not the silver," Abrielle forcibly asserted.

"Then what?" Paul quietly asked.

She turned to face him.

"It's maddening to be so close to you but to have so little."

Paul blinked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You and your damn secrets; that's what I mean!"

“Oh God, is this about Amelie again? Dammit, I wasn't with her.”

He was breathing hard. Abrielle closed her eyes a moment before continuing.

“It's not about me,” Abrielle said quietly, “it's about us.”

Paul turned away when she opened her eyes. She began to gently massage her temples with her fingertips.

“Maybe I'm protecting you ... maybe there are things going on that are bigger than us.”

“We lead a dangerous life, and I can accept that as an excuse up to a point, but don't you want more than this? Paul, I'm happy with you. I love you. I'm just not always sure you feel the same.”

“What, bringing you breakfast in bed isn't enough?”

She held the sheet over her breasts as she stood up, pushing her hair behind one of her ears. Her sad, troubled eyes gazed searchingly into his. She would not be denied.

“What's troubling you?” she softly asked.

The moment breathed in time unto itself. She took his hand and kissed it.

“Please, Paul.”

He sat down with her on the bed and held his head. Abrielle began to rub his back soothingly.

When he finally spoke, he muttered his words so badly, she was compelled to gently prod him to repeat them. There was no mistaking them the second time.

“I think I found my parents.”

Her hand came to rest on his back; the only sounds of life in the room came from outside.

Paul shook his head to the unspoken question in her eyes.

“It's complicated ... I, I'm not even sure if ...”

He looked away, his voice choked with emotion. As his spirit faltered, Abrielle pressed herself against him. He'd finally reached out to her; they would find a way. Love and fear united their passions well into the afternoon.

*

“It was back in August, when we were having problems. I was trying to fence those paintings we stole in June.”

“The ones from Agen? Is that how you paid for the dress?”

Paul kissed her tenderly. She grinned at the memory of his expensive gift.

“I used one of Rivard's contacts, strictly a small timer, but very efficient. We met in Limoges, and everything was going well until he set eyes upon one of the paintings. He studied it forever: the frame, the brushstrokes, even the way the light brought out the color. Then bold as anything declared that he knew who the painting belonged to.”

“Was he going to blackmail you?”

“That was my first thought, but then he began to study me; my face, that is, and nodded a lot.”

“What was in the painting?”

“A portrait of some type; to be honest I didn't even remember taking it. We'd put quite a few already in storage, but I'm fairly certain it came from Agen. Besides, the other paintings all seemed much more valuable to me, so I never really paid much attention to it. Rivard's contact claimed to have once been a servant in the household it was from. He said one of his duties had been to dust all of the paintings, so eventually he remembered each to the last detail.”

Abrielle considered the possible validity of this as Paul continued.

“He pointed out some scratches on the frame. He said the marks were made when they'd hurriedly

moved the paintings to a country estate just before the Revolution broke out.”

“But he wouldn’t tell you whose?”

“Exactly, he only said that if I was the one who’d taken it then it was poetic justice. I shouldn’t have let him see how interested I was. He offered to tell me more but only if I could get him a large quantity of quality silver for another client of his. That’s where I was this morning.”

She hugged him.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Her head cupped possessively over his shoulder.

“I wasn’t sure what to do. I went back to Agen two weeks ago but had trouble finding the place again.”

“Oh, that’s right, we robbed that one at night,” she recalled as she sat back up.

“Yeah, and apparently it’s had more than a few owners since the Revolution.”

Abrielle propped her head up with her hand.

“So he told you this morning?”

Paul nodded with vacant eyes.

“How do you know he wasn’t lying?” she asked.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” he replied after a prolonged pause.

“What is?”

“Okay. I know you don’t like to talk about this, but I have to. The day the Jacobin mob came to the orphanage, Sister Michelle and Sister Annette were gathering us up in the church, right?”

He was right. She never liked talking about that day, but she nodded. She needed to hear this.

“Now I can’t remember every name they said, but there were five or six of us, including Marie’. Both Michelle and Annette mentioned that they needed to hide us. Annette even wanted to show them the mass burial grave and all that.”

It was coming back to her but slowly. At the time, she’d assumed that they were simply trying to hide any children who they could find, but reflecting on it all now, they had focused primarily on the safety of a few.

“Then out in the courtyard, they asked Sister Annette and Michelle where the aristocratic children were.”

“I remember,” Abrielle’s voice was heavy with breath.

“It was us,” Paul finished.

Abrielle’s mind couldn’t accept this. She sat up and turned from him.

“They lied,” Paul asserted.

“What?” she asked incredulously.

“Sister Michelle told them that the records were gone and that all of the kids had been given new names. But what if they didn’t destroy the records and our names are our own? Then the Jacobins might have found our names on some list at the orphanage and killed us that day.”

Abrielle was barely listening. If all this were true then Sister Michelle had died to save them—to save her. She felt numb and repulsed. She wasn’t worth saving; why had Sister Michelle done it? Why hadn’t Annette told Abrielle the truth afterward? She’d always pitied the woman after the terrible events of that day and tried to be friendly toward her. Was this betrayal of Abrielle her thanks?

“Rivard’s contact told me this morning that the painting belonged to a family called Cheval. They’re aristocrats from Tours.”

Paul, an aristocrat; could his theory be correct; could all this mean that Abrielle was also French aristocracy? It suddenly seemed possible. But unlike Paul, she’d never been christened with a

surname. Why was she so undeserving of one? She thought back to the man and his daughter at the orphanage. What had his surname been ... Tierney? They certainly were not nobility. Which was the truth? Could she actually be the daughter of French nobility or could that man have really been her father?

She felt Paul wrap an arm around her bare waist.

"We should get some dinner," she declared as she pushed his arm away.

"I'll go down and get something in a few minutes," Paul promised. "So what do you think?"

"About what?" she absentmindedly replied.

Paul laughed.

"All this," he waved an arm expansively, "it's like a fairy tale. Trade a troll some silver and find out you're a prince."

"Please, Paul, I really am hungry," she intoned.

"Hungry, huh?"

He tried to kiss her, but she pulled away. His levity in the face of all this was unnerving.

"This isn't a story, Paul. Every time the past has come looking for me, it's only brought pain: first Sister Michelle, then those people at the orphanage, and now this."

"It also brought us closer together," he pointed out after a moment.

Abrielle stared at him in disbelief as reality shone. Was he really this stupid?

"You want to find these people, don't you?"

"Why not?" He smirked.

She shook her head, went behind the screen, and began to dress, too upset to continue the conversation. Abrielle could hear Paul following suit on the opposite side.

"You don't want to give up the adventure, right?" he taunted.

The stitching on her dress' sleeve tore as she jammed her arm roughly into it.

"Abrielle, scourge of the law abiding," he declared, raising his voice.

She didn't even bother with stockings; instead, she hastily drove her feet into her shoes and began to tie her hair back. If this didn't stop, she really would murder him some day.

"... Angel of the Underworld," he continued.

"Enough!" Abrielle snapped.

The pain was too close to the surface for her to hold it in. She aggressively charged out from behind the dressing screen.

"They don't want you, Paul. They never did. Don't you see? For over twenty years, they could have come back for you. They didn't. There are no riches waiting for you, no country estate, only pain and rejection."

"How do you know?" he shot back immediately. "Your family came back for you, didn't they? Or half of them did anyway."

She was too stunned to speak. Paul pressed on seemingly indifferent to the effect his words were having.

"You never even found out why they left you there, did you. It's been an excuse to hide behind. It probably never occurred to you that maybe they didn't have a choice." He paused but she said nothing. "Well, I do. I'm going to Tours, and then we'll see what the Chavels have to say."

He stood and left the room, shutting the door firmly behind him. Humbled, Abrielle sank to the bed and stared blankly into the waning fire. She watched it die then sat alone in the dark. Paul did not return to her that night.

The rain finally stopped falling but left the sky trapped in a sea of harsh grey clouds. It mirrored the gloom within the small carriage. Abrielle shifted the travel blanket for what felt like the hundredth time. It kept slipping with the vibrations of the horse's hooves over the assortment of terrain they'd encountered. At long last they were near Tours.

"Could we eat before we see them?"

These were the first words either had spoken in several hours. By now they had argued to the point where silence was preferable. Paul did not immediately respond as he pretended to be busy concentrating on the road. She'd never been to Tours and honestly would have preferred to have avoided this trip all together. Uncertain of what to wear, both donned fine clothing, which each had to admit the other looked stunning in. For a time, they even called a truce as they put their differences aside to secure appropriate transportation, in this case, Le Hir's personal carriage.

Actually obtaining it was nothing short of a miracle. Le Hir was one of the most subtly paranoid men she'd ever met and always seemed to think those around him were about to betray him. Consequently, favors of any kind were always greeted with both suspicion and a liberal number of questions. They'd managed to convince him that Abrielle wished to see her great-aunt whose existence she'd only recently learned of. To this end, she'd forged several letters after rejecting the idea of passing off Anne D' Aoust's as evidence of the mythical aunt's existence. Ultimately the paper Anne wrote on was too cheap to make the ploy believable.

Still the carriage was an elegant conveyance with a well-cared-for mount to match. Paul seemed to need his parents to see that he too had made something of himself despite their potential disregard. But to Abrielle, the clothes and the carriage could only maintain the illusion for so long. She feared how he might handle the situation if too many questions were asked.

But then again, she herself was not thinking too clearly right now. In the days leading up to this trip, she'd found sleep all but impossible. Troubled dreams forced her awake and bid her to stay there lest she attempt to sleep and fall prey to their wicked ministrations once more. Her waking mind offered only similar tortures as she was forced to play out, over and over again, her final hour at the orphanage.

The anger, humility, deep sense of betrayal, confusion, bitterness, the desire to love and be loved wrapped themselves around the moment, forcing her to ceaselessly question her actions. She was angry with Paul for doing this, but it was an anger primarily fed by fear. He refused to believe that they wouldn't embrace him again as their own. Would he still need her after today, if his parents accepted him? Would he cast her aside?

Paul finally deigned to answer her question.

"I'll drop you off at a café."

Too hurt to respond, she turned her attentions out the window. The most important moment of his life, and he had no need for her support. Yes, he would cast her aside.

She felt his hand reach out for one of her gloved ones.

"Sorry. I should have stopped earlier," he said by way of apology.

Abrielle made a polite noise but said nothing more.

In twenty minutes, they'd located the Cheval estate. In ten she was standing on a street corner in the damp cold outside of a café, alone.

"Just eat and head back toward the house," Paul suggested.

She nodded.

“What, no kiss for luck?”

Reluctantly she leaned forward and briefly kissed his cheek. Moments later he was gone.

The simple meal of soup and bread was awkward as Abrielle was uncertain if she should take her time eating it or should rush so she could get to the Chevals faster. Much to her dismay, several of the café patrons took more than a passing interest in this unescorted, beautiful, immaculately dressed young woman. By the time she left, a respectable mist began to coat the somber world outside, but fortunately it also seemed to prevent even her most attentive audience members in the café from following her.

Lost in thought, she took several wrong turns and was compelled to retrace her steps in the inclement drizzle. By the time she reached a corner of the main road, the only thing she truly desired was to get out of the incessant mist. Fortunately, the building on this corner was bestowed with a sizeable overhang. Eagerly availing herself of its use, she leaned against the brick wall a moment and closed her eyes.

“Bonjour, mademoiselle, are you all right?”

Abrielle opened her eyes and was surprised to find a rather poorly dressed young blonde girl staring up at her. She carried a basket, which held an assortment of delicately wrapped flowers within it. The petals radiated a warm collage of vibrant colors. On such a drab day in which the world itself felt so weary, the child shone like a beacon of purity.

“Are you lost? You looked frightened just now?”

The genuinely concerned girl, no more than eight by Abrielle’s estimate, gazed openly up at her. Abrielle smiled in appreciation of this small act of kindness. It was so rare in life and such a gift freely given to her by one so young. Something about this girl was warm, familiar, and Abrielle felt an abatement of her defenses. She lowered herself closer to the girl’s eye level.

“I was heading for the Cheval residence and was lost for a time. Can you tell me if I’m headed the right way now?”

“Oui, it is beyond the bend,” the cherub pointed cheerily. Her arm wavered a little as she shivered in the damp, cold air.

“Thank you. Were you on your way home?”

The girl sighed.

“No, I must try to sell these flowers or my father may lose his shop and our home.”

“Your father’s shop sells flowers?”

“No, Father makes candles but puts most of the money he makes into growing these flowers year round. You should see his gardens.”

Abrielle smiled politely.

“Couldn’t he just be a candle maker, and then you wouldn’t have to be outside on a day like today?”

The girl shook her head.

“No, he lives for his gardens. He would not be happy, and I cannot disappoint him.”

Abrielle was not normally one to fall for such stories, but she could sense no duplicity from this child. She began to barter for her flowers, smelling each variety as she chose. Her gloved fingers caressed the delicate petals. They had not wilted since being cut from their stems and exposed to the cold. She hoped it meant that the girl had not been outside for too long then. For her own part, Abrielle was becoming increasingly aware of the falling temperatures and moved to conclude the transaction by handing her a charitable portion of the coins she carried. The girl’s eyes lit up.

“Thank you, mademoiselle,” she leaned forward and spontaneously kissed the older woman on

the cheek in gratitude for such unexpected generosity. The gesture touched Abrielle. Who did she remind her of?

“Go home,” Abrielle ordered with a smile. The girl curtsied and began to walk away then stopped and removed the cloth, which protected the flowers in her basket and gave one freely to her benefactor. They’d just finished waving a parting farewell as the girl disappeared around the corner when Abrielle heard her name frantically being yelled.

“Abrielle! Abrielle! Hurry! We must leave!”

Paul was leaning out the side of Le Hir’s carriage screaming so harshly that he distorted his words. Confused by both his words and actions, she began to chase after the carriage, which was wobbling wildly as he careened around the corner.

“NNOOO!!!” Abrielle wailed.

The surrounding buildings muffled the sound of the thundering hooves and the yelling. The girl never had time to move or to react with more than a look of shock and astonishment when death came. Abrielle rounded the corner only in time to cry out as she witnessed Paul’s carriage run the young flower girl down. His attentions were fixed solely on Abrielle, and it was not until the wheels cleared the girl’s fragile body that realization dawned.

Bright coins and colorful flowers highlighted the crimson stain created when the girl was drug first by the trampling hooves of the horse and then the slashing wheels of the carriage; so much blood for one so small. Abrielle’s legs refused to move at first, held in place by the abhorrent sight before her.

The next minutes were largely a blur of sensation. Paul trying to restrain her, repeatedly pulling at her and yelling for her to come with him; the sound of running boots and heels, echoing off the stones of the road and the surrounding structures; the cacophony created by voices raised in alarm, grief, and anger; the warmth of the blood as it soaked through the fabric of her cream colored dress when Abrielle threw herself down beside the girl.

Unlike the rest of her body the girl’s face was unmarred by the violence that had taken her life. It was tranquility; she was sleeping, just sleeping. It happened just as she’d rounded the corner and seen the girl’s face that recognition finally came. This girl’s loving manner, those eyes, her expressions, even at the moment of her death were those of another young girl she’d carelessly abandoned four years earlier. And the guilt of that choice rent her asunder. As others gathered around her, Abrielle clasped the bloody child in her arms and wept for the loss of such a sweet soul, for abandoning her sister, and for the first time in years, for herself.

*

“I’ve come to say good bye,” Le Hir repeated. He was the first visitor come to see her in the four months she’d spent in prison and certainly one of the last people she could have foreseen coming to her. She was embarrassed that he’d come to see her. Abrielle was no more than a shadow of her former self. The harsh life of her younger days paled in comparison to this new reality.

She’d bathed no more than three times since her internment; her hair was now a molded mass that crackled when she slept on it. The frigid months and lack of food asserted a marked physical toll upon her as did her fellow prisoners. This morning, for instance, she bore another black eye, another earned in a ceaseless series of fights. She coughed nearly constantly now and itched with flea and rat bites. Worse still was the yawning emptiness within. She would never be happy again.

“Monsieur,” she paused to clear her dry throat, “it is most kind of you to make such an effort on

my behalf.”

He made no response so she continued.

“I must apologize for not being wholly honest with regards to the use of your carriage. Was it very much damaged?”

She could barely meet his eye.

“It is serviceable now, though all the blood soaking the inside necessitated new seating be secured for it from Paris, no less.”

Inside? The image of the dead flower girl returned to her. Le Hir waited. She sat up a bit.

“I do not doubt your word, Monsieur Le Hir but I cannot see how ... blood from the accident could have soaked your seating.”

She didn't get back in the carriage in her bloody dress did she?

“Accident? Good God. Do you think you have been imprisoned all this time because of that child in the street?”

Abrielle fully raised her swollen face to greet that of her former employer.

“Has no one told you that you are to die within less than a month by guillotine?”

Her lips parted in disbelief. Her eyes tore from his and uselessly studied the table they sat at while she fought to process his words. Finally, her own returned.

“If not for the flower girl then ... then why am I to die?”

Le Hir leaned forward and looked evenly into her eyes.

“Why, for the murders of Madame and Monsieur Cheval, Abrielle.”

CHAPTER 8

ENTERING ELYSIUM

She finished heaving into a bucket. Le Hir offered her his handkerchief. With trembling hands, she ran the cloth over her sweat and tear stained face. She clasped the bucket again, unable to breathe; the last minutes of Sister Michelle's tortured end assaulted her mind.

"I'm innocent," she gasped as Le Hir presented some water to her. She drank it reluctantly, "I know nothing of their deaths, only the child's."

Le Hir looked away, uncertain for the first time since their meeting had begun.

"Paul has testified otherwise," he reported.

Though she still trembled, her mind seized upon that name as a sailor in a tempest raged sea grasps flotsam.

"Paul," she whispered, "He said it was me? That I killed his ..."

Le Hir nodded gravely, "Before he escaped two months ago."

For a long moment nothing happened. Then she flung the bucket into the nearby stone wall of the cell, smashing it. Guards rushed into the room, but Le Hir waved them off. She raged, pulled at her shackles, which were bound to the floor, until her wrists bled, and cried out in misery. Le Hir watched all of this silently only speaking again when her energies were largely exhausted.

"Now, I simply came to say good bye," he reminded her.

"Please, you have to help me," the last word was choked by sadness. She was alone. She was going to die. As he stood a change came over him.

"Help you? How could Le Hir help you? You've been dishonest about the nature of your trip; you've led the authorities he's worked so carefully to fool or bribe to his door and exposed his own criminal activities. He has knowledge of your own illicit activities, which could only hurt you further. No, he cannot help you. I already have."

Abrielle's head throbbed. What was he saying?

"What the devil are you talking about? You're Le Hir!"

"Correct. I am Le Hir." He waited a moment but his impatience got the better of him, "Oh come now, Abrielle, have four months here really dulled your mind so rapidly? I expected better."

This was insane.

"You're not Le Hir?"

The man favored her with a tight smile.

"Also correct. But who then is Le Hir, except a name? One of many I use as my purposes warrant. It will soon be discarded until it is needed again. But I still have work left to finish in his guise."

"Who are you?"

The question amused him.

"A surgeon, a butcher, a tavern owner, an artist, a false friend come to the aid of another of his kind; I am above all of these, a loyal servant to my master," the smile vanished, "My most important role, however, is as a shadow, with anonymity as my shield. That is how we survive."

"You're a spy?"

He nodded.

"One who has taken an interest in your talents and abilities. If not for them, you would already

have been executed for the murder of the Chevals.”

A flicker of hope stumbled through her heart.

“Then you believe me innocent?” she asked weakly.

“You are a known thief, a talented actress, in general as well as in the art of deception, a person who’s established past is questionable at best, and your accomplice in crime has provided testimony against you. I have no reason to believe you. You are scheduled to die in two weeks for those deaths.”

His pronouncement on her life angered her anew. Why toy with her like this?

“Then kill me! Other than prolonging my anguish, why keep me alive another two weeks?”

He slowly drank from Abrielle’s cup of water.

“You maintain that Paul is guilty?” he inquired upon finishing.

“I never said that.”

“There was never a need. If you are innocent, then he is guilty. I am giving you two weeks to prove either his guilt or your innocence. After that . . .,” he waved a hand dismissively.

Her hope began to dwindle. How could she prove anything if Paul was gone? She’d only learned of the Chevals’ deaths and her imminent end less than half an hour ago. She was no spy. Surely if this man was one, why had he been unable to find Paul during the past two months? What if he was lying about Paul? Who did she trust?

“I’m not sure I can,” she shakily asserted.

“Then you offer me nothing and I will say good bye.”

He rose to leave, turning his hat thoughtfully in his hands. She needed to be strong.

“I’ll do it,” the declaration raced from her in desperation.

He smiled thinly.

“You’ll be released as soon as you’ve bathed and eaten. You will be watched so don’t try to run. Two weeks.”

Le Hir, whoever he truly was, made to leave.

“How will I find you?” Abrielle called to the retreating man.

“I will await you at the salon. If you are successful, we will discuss a new beginning for you. If not, your fate is fixed. Au revoir, Abrielle.”

*

Sister Annette genuflected before the cross. The prevalent stiffness in her back made her motions awkward; she couldn’t wait for spring to arrive. It was time. The damp days of autumn and winter always made her joints inflexible and those seasons unpleasant. She crossed the church and nodded to the last two of her order as they made for the exit.

As she approached the confessional, Annette reminded herself that she’d have to remember to douse all of the candles before locking up the church. Donations were slow this year, and their supply of candles was all but exhausted. Besides, Sunday services in the spring always seemed to attract more potential parents and she wanted to make certain their initial impressions of the orphanage were positive. Perhaps the priest awaiting her in the confessional would help her extinguish the taller ones.

She pulled aside the dark red curtain and sat down on the hard bench within.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been two weeks since my last confession.”

Annette was momentarily distracted as she tried to recall all her recent faults, so the delay in the priest’s reply did not register promptly.

“Father?”

Maybe he had stepped out.

“I know you have sinned,” a harsh feminine voice suddenly intoned. Annette attempted to peer through the screening.

“Who’s there?”

“I have a pistol aimed at you. Don’t try to leave.”

Annette heard a metallic click as the aforementioned weapon was armed.

“What do you want?” Annette managed after rejecting the notion of fleeing; the risks too great.

“Your confession,” the voice cynically sneered.

“You’re not a priest. You cannot absolve my sins I ... I can’t give it to you.”

“I’m not interested in forgiving you,” the voice said bitterly. “Step outside of the booth. We have sins to discuss.”

With measured motions, Sister Annette slowly drew back the curtain and exited the confessional. A tall woman, dressed in red stood before her, the pistol she brandished shook only slightly in her outstretched hand. Her face was obscured by an impenetrable black veil.

“If you run or scream I will shoot,” the figure vowed as she sized up Annette. “We’re going to your office.”

Dumbfounded, Annette turned towards the doors of the church.

“No. The back walkway and stairs will do.”

How did this woman know about them? Only the nuns ever accessed them. As she walked, Annette’s eyes roved over the burning candles which were familiar, flicking, and indifferent to her situation. The trappings of rituals she had long found comfort and strength in. Would she return to snuff them out? The stranger callously relieved the church of one before they proceeded out the backdoor.

The short trip proved uneventful. Still, the woman shoved her roughly into the room as soon as Annette finished unlocking the door. Seconds later they were locked within. The lone candle cast a myriad of shifting shadows, which were largely dispelled when the woman lit a lamp behind Annette’s desk. Both sat down. The woman seated herself in Annette’s desk chair. For a long moment, her unseen eyes studied the room silently. The only thing Sister Annette was studying was the pistol aimed at her.

“Please, my dear, there is no need for that.”

The stranger’s focus returned to her.

“That’s right; you haven’t been around many of these ... except when the Jacobins came and that man struck you with one.”

That voice. Annette’s fears wavered as her resolve rose.

“Yes, they came, everyone knows that.”

“Does everyone know about Sister Josephine’s list?” the woman asked.

“There is no list,” Annette promptly asserted.

As the seconds passed without retort, Annette’s sense of uneasiness returned. The other woman seemed to relish this discomfort, indulging it fully before responding to the denial.

“Really? I haven’t even mentioned what might be on it. I’m sure Josephine kept lists on any number of things, running an orphanage takes a lot of organization. Which list are you denying exists?”

Annette cursed her own lapse.

“It is no concern of yours.”

“On the contrary, it is everything to me.” The figure’s free hand removed her veil. Annette was speechless. The girl looked so ghastly in the lamplight that one could have mistaken her for a ghost.

But then again she was a ghost, raised from the past. Her pale complexion, only served to highlight the sickly, sunken eyes, one of which bore the traces of a disquieting bruise.

“Abrielle?”

Sister Annette didn’t want to believe it was her. The girl was so changed.

“I want your confession,” Abrielle said. “Give me the list.”

“Your father’s name isn’t on it,” she said quickly before adding, “he left a letter for you, though.”

“I don’t care about my father,” the younger woman said harshly. “Tell me about the list. Where is it?”

“It won’t help you find your mother.”

Abrielle stood up and pressed the pistol firmly against the nun’s temple. She could feel her pulse throbbing against the cold metal.

“Killing me won’t help you.”

“They’ll kill me in two days if you don’t,” Abrielle said breathlessly, digging the metal in harder against Annette’s head.

“Who? AH! All right, all right.”

The pressure eased.

“It’s in this room?”

Annette nodded.

“Get it.”

Abrielle covered her with the pistol as Sister Annette retrieved the yellowed papers from behind a loose brick in the fireplace. Abrielle grabbed the pages from the nun and desperately searched for the name her life depended on. All her other attempts had failed. If she couldn’t prove the connection, they would kill her. The man who continued to follow her every move since her release firmly convinced her of that. Her emotions surged as she read the twelfth name on the list. Paul had been right: he was aristocracy by birth, and he was a Cheval. She released a trembling sigh that echoed through her frame.

With a sense of grim determination, she continued to scan the pages for her own name. When she found it, the entry contained only her first name and the year of her birth; but her last name and the identity of her mother and father were burned from the page. A quick scan of the remaining pages revealed that only her last name had been obliterated.

“Why?”

“Sister Michelle knew ...,” Annette trailed off apologetically, grieving inwardly for the loss of her friend.

“I wasn’t here when this was written, and I don’t know why Josephine made that list. I think as the Revolution grew more violent she thought that if we had a record of your backgrounds, it would be easier to protect you. I know she hoped that some of the families who fled France might reconsider what they’d done and send for their children, but they didn’t. All of you came to us for different reasons, and I’m sorry to say that some of your families never wanted to be reminded of your existence again.”

Sister Annette paused a moment, uncertain if Abrielle was truly listening.

“They paid us to take you, some to annihilate all traces back to you. That may be why your last name is missing. Josephine and Michelle changed some of your names but kept others. Sister Michelle wanted to destroy the list outright but Josephine was reluctant. Michelle was working on memorizing it around the time the Jacobins came. After she was murdered, well, I couldn’t bring myself to burn it, so I hid it. I meant to tell each of you about your backgrounds when you decided to

leave, but each time it seemed like too much of a burden to unleash upon you as you were starting new lives. After your reaction to your father, I decided never to tell anyone.”

Abrielle hardly heard Sister Annette’s last words. Her father had at least returned for her. Did her mother’s family hate her so much that they’d tried to erase her very existence? Is that what Paul had discovered about his own family, that he was nothing more than an unwelcome reminder of the past?

“Abrielle, what’s happened to you?”

“I have to go,” Abrielle said quietly, unable to even look at Annette now.

Numbly she requested that Sister Annette unlock the door. She began to do so then paused.

“Wait.”

The nun went to her desk and began to hurriedly rifle through a stack of papers. It took several minutes but she managed to retrieve the letter Quinn Tierney had left for her to give to his daughter should she ever return. Abrielle glanced at the words and addresses inside, and without further comment, took it and Sister Josephine’s list. She paused in the doorway.

“I was never here,” she commanded, then left, determined she should never set foot in that terrible room again.

*

How long was he going to ignore her? Abrielle paced like a caged lion through the empty room. Well, not completely empty. Le Hir sat on stage seemingly untouched by her actions as he ordered the painter to continue crafting the mural he was working on. The artist, however, seemed genuinely relieved when another figure entered the room from backstage and Le Hir lazily waved the painter away. He left without even making eye contact with Abrielle.

The newcomer leaned over Le Hir and began to whisper into his ear. Occasionally both would glance at Abrielle as they spoke of her. The muted conversation must have ended with some type of joke at her expense for they both looked directly at her and exchanged a knowing laugh before the man departed. Le Hir waved for Abrielle to join him on stage.

“Le Hir is redecorating his former establishment,” he waved expansively. “What do you think?”

Abrielle looked at the once familiar setting of the salon, now vacant of both its furniture and patrons.

“Interesting, will I get to see it when it’s finished?”

Bemused, Le Hir smiled and held out his hand.

“What have you brought me?”

“Why don’t you just ask your friend, or is he too busy holding that pistol on me behind the curtain to tell you,” she challenged.

This time he laughed. It was the first time she could ever remember the man doing so.

“Call it a final rite of passage. What gave him away?”

“Nothing. I simply don’t trust you.”

“Good. Never do. But I am pleased you understand our natures.”

His companion stepped out from behind the curtain and searched Abrielle for any hidden weapons. He took Josephine’s list from her, handed it to his master, and vanished as Le Hir indicated that Abrielle be seated in the vacated artist’s chair. He studied the list without commenting. The minutes passed like hours. Anxious to relieve the stress, she began considering the incomplete mural of the spy before her.

“Tell me about the woman you interviewed in Tours,” he said without looking up.

“Which one?” Abrielle countered.

She’d spent five frustrating days in the town trying to learn more about what had transpired at the Chevals'. Most of what she uncovered was either hearsay, conflicted with prior information, or only added to her confusion.

“The only one who told you anything of value, the former servant. How did you gain her trust?”
Is that what her shadow had been whispering to him about?

Abrielle tried to recall the details of the conversation, now a week old. The woman in question had been an older servant in the household. With the deaths of her employers, she and most of the staff were either actively looking for work or had already left. One of the worst parts of her mission was trying to devise plausible reasons for her to be asking such questions. A little money for bribery would have been useful, but after leaving prison, she’d returned to Bordouex only to discover her and Paul’s cache of stolen goods empty. She briefly considered writing the D’Aousts requesting a loan but was too embarrassed and worried about what questions being asked. In the end, she’d settled her financial woes by picking pockets as she traveled. Her shadow did nothing to intervene, and she was too desperate to care if he saw. This method, though successful, slowed her progress immensely and ultimately jeopardized Abrielle’s chances of completing her mission within the allotted two weeks.

“I told her that I was a servant, acting as an agent on my employer’s behalf, to investigate if anyone who’d been serving the Chevals would be worth interviewing for a new position at my master’s estate.”

“She believed you?”

“I told her what she wanted to hear,” Abrielle shrugged, “After that, she talked freely.”

“And?”

Abrielle tried to recount the events dispassionately, but it grew more difficult as she spoke.

“She heard more than she saw directly. Her position afforded her only intermittent contact with visitors. Paul ...,” this was difficult, “... and another woman in fine clothing arrived around one o’clock.”

“Kindly provide me the description of said woman.”

It was a profile Abrielle was far too familiar with, and her sense of disgust registered clearly in her tone when she spoke the name.

“It was Amelie.”

“How can you be sure?” Le Hir pressed.

“The way the servant described Paul and her acting when she brought them refreshments, the physical description, and the dress she wore.”

“Why should the dress be significant?”

Her eyes turned downcast.

“He gave me one just like it seven months ago.”

The spy sat up straighter.

“Your conclusions?”

Abrielle’s heart flooded with emotion. There was only one rational explanation. The truth had rarely tasted so bitter.

“That he was going to leave me and begin a new life with Amelie using the Chevals' money.”

Le Hir nodded solemnly as he studied her.

“And this list you’ve brought me is supposed to prove his motive for murdering them?”

She smiled awkwardly.

“You know Paul and his temper. I think they...that the Chevals rejected him as a son a second time

and he got angry.”

She tried not to think about the lurid descriptions the servant had provided regarding the condition of the bodies. It was too brutal.

“Why didn’t the servants stop this crime?”

The question refocused Abrielle.

“The woman told me that, at some point in the conversation, Madame Cheval ordered two of the servants to discreetly obtain the authorities and commanded the rest to remain in the kitchen. She must have felt the Chevals could handle the situation until the law arrived.”

“Unfortunate for all that, they couldn’t,” Le Hir commented. “Well, we know what happened next with Paul. What about Amelie?”

He was toying with her now.

“I did what you wanted. I proved Paul’s testimony against me is a lie. I don’t care what happened to her!”

“Of course you do. Would you like me to tell you?” Le Hir asked coolly.

“You found her?”

“She was executed a month ago; she died most painfully, if it helps.”

Abrielle was astonished.

“For this?”

“No, for the murder of our dearly departed friend, Sarah. Poor girl, learned too much too quickly. Amelie got suspicious and put an end to her. Fortunately, she never discovered that Sarah was working for me. If she had it would have ruined the entire purpose behind setting up this salon. I do not take the deaths of my operatives lightly.”

Abrielle stared at the mural, as a new and terrible truth descended upon her.

“You used me as bait ... bait for your trap.”

“To a degree, but I assure you the Cheval murders caught me off guard as well. I never knew the boy had such rage in him. For whatever its worth, I do think that Paul loved you and genuinely tried to be your friend, but ultimately, he was unwilling to trade his true passion for you.”

Abrielle drew her eyes away from the painting.

“He wants to lead an uprising against my master,” LeHir explained. “I am charged with ensuring this not happen. Salons were hotbeds of Revolutionary activities and ideas before the monarchy fell so we use them now for our own purposes. By publicly establishing them, I play the piper for the rats, and they all come to me freely and bring about their own destruction. Paul has risen to a position of power within the ranks of those seeking to once again destabilize France. Good God, can you imagine it, a New Terror, more blood in the streets.”

Her heart trembled with a new fire. That Paul had once witnessed such brutality and would work to see it happen again was appalling.

“Their funding comes from robbery, extortion, blackmail, trade on the black market,” Le Hir explained.

In other words, Abrielle had unwittingly been aiding the birth of a new revolutionary movement.

“What happened to our cache?”

“Oh I’m sure Paul cleaned that out before he vanished, not that I wasn’t tempted when I found it. You two had quite the impressive stockpile. By the way ...”

Le Hir leaned back as he reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a sizeable sum of francs, which he handed to her. She didn’t want his money or his pity.

“What’s this for?”

“Those letters you sent to your friends, the one’s Paul was supposedly mailing with money enclosed. He never sent them the money. If you still wish them to have it, there it is, or what I estimate you planned to send.”

“What?” she breathed incredulously.

“He was using it to help pay for Amelie’s living quarters while she helped him continue to organize their forces, most of whom are now dead, jailed, or in hiding. Hence, the emptiness you see around you, and so tomorrow, Le Hir too will vanish and I will begin life anew.”

Abrielle felt weak but she must know.

“What about me?”

Le Hir covered his mouth with his hand as he smiled and tapped his upper lip.

“As any good spy, I am always looking for potential assets. Without listing all of my reasons, I believe you to be a natural for this kind of work. And I can offer you one thing you’ve never really had before.”

He waited.

“What’s that?”

“Power,” he replied.

Abrielle’s lips parted minutely as she tasted the word, savored it. All her life she’d suffered and survived. Here at last was a chance for her to embrace destiny by choice and to control her own fate. Slowly a grin crept across her face. The spy master smiled in acceptance.

“Good. Now, if you would be so kind, Abrielle, go outside and try to find our artist friend. I’d like to get this done some time today. And send that money to your friends. I’m sure they will be glad to hear from you. I trust I need not remind you to say nothing of our arrangement to anyone.

She nodded, averting her eyes.

“We will begin your training tomorrow when we will both assume new identities.”

“What shall I call you from now on?” Abrielle asked as she stood to leave.

Le Hir seemed to consider the question a moment as if weighing unseen factors in his mind.

“You may call me Bellange.”

**

Abrielle considered the small house before her. She could smell the enticing scent of smoke from the fireplace. It would be dark soon. The sun and its warmth always faded so quickly in late November. She’d done all she could to prepare herself for this moment, but still she hesitated. Bellange trusted only her with this mission, she reminded herself. Did he consider this a final test or was this some perverse gift? Indeed, his words had sent her racing across the whole of France in order to get here on time. She was exhausted, having only stopped once in three days, but this was something she had to do, not for Bellange but for herself.

Much as she sometimes admired the spy master, it was doubtful she’d ever come to trust him. She knew far too well how manipulative he was. He would use any advantage he could to gain his true objectives. Abrielle was glad she’d taken the precaution of destroying Quinn Tierney’s letter to her before leaving for Bellange’s training facility. If she lived beyond this hour, perhaps one day she would use the enclosed addresses she’d memorized, but she refused to give him any more power over her. He craved secrets; her family’s existence was one she would deny him.

But this was not about Bellange. With determined steps, she started once more toward the building. Despite her many journeys in the name of the Empire, she’d never actually been in this region of eastern France. How long had he been here? If not for the disastrous loss suffered by the Combined Fleet at Trafalgar over a month ago, she wouldn’t even be here. Her talents were to have

been employed in occupied England, but instead, fate had destined them to be together once more. Very soon she would know the truth, and regardless of what she discovered, Abrielle knew her life would never be the same.

When she knocked softly on the door, all sounds within ceased. Several seconds passed before a challenge was issued.

“Who’s there?” the voice on the other side barked.

Under the circumstances, any sane person would have either answered or ducked in case shot suddenly poured through the wood of the door. But Abrielle did neither. She silently stood her ground. She was resolute that he would come to her, and if she died for that choice, so be it.

Only a diminutive sound alerted her before the door was pulled open. She did not see the gun pointed at her. Instead, Abrielle concentrated on looking into the eye that aimed it.

“Bonsoir, Paul.”

Paul kept the shotgun trained on her, clearly unwilling to believe she was truly there.

“No, no you’re dead ... in prison.”

“May I come in?” she requested.

His eyes searched the gathering darkness beyond her. Was she alone? With the gun still hovering, Paul suddenly grabbed her and flung her inside. He briefly checked outside once more before slamming the door shut. He looked thin and haggard. Both Paul and the small house were stained with the strong scent of alcohol. His eyes burned with uncertainty as he examined his old lover.

“The cloak, take off the cloak,” he ordered. Abrielle obeyed and allowed him to satisfy himself that she carried no weapons. None would be needed. Finally she lowered her hands as he raced to the windows until he was confident that they were alone.

“What do you want?”

“I want to talk, Paul,” she said simply.

“So talk,” he barked.

“Please ...”

Her eyes darted between his and the gun he still clutched. With obvious reluctance, he finally submitted to her plea and set the shotgun onto the kitchen table. He sighed.

“I’ve had dreams of this, you know. It’s those eyes of yours; ever since we were kids ... they kept me honest.”

“You know why I’ve come, so be honest with me now...what happened that day?”

The question seemed to fragment him, and it took Paul a moment to work up his courage.

“The girl I killed, it ... *she* was an accident,” he began defensively.

“Sssshhh.”

Abrielle shook her head, crossed the room to him in three steps, and put a finger to his lips.

“What happened at the house, Paul?”

His eyes retreated from hers momentarily.

“Yes, I know. Tell me about the house.”

When he looked up again, his lips formed a terse line.

“You were right, okay! Is that what you came to hear? I shouldn’t have gone. They acted like I’d made the whole thing up, like I was crazy. My own mother claiming she had no son and my...father,” Paul shook his head as fought back tears, “I shouldn’t have gone. I shouldn’t have gone.”

Abrielle wrapped her arms around him and he held her. It all was so familiar; the sensation of his body against hers. He choked back sobs as he kissed the top of her head.

“I thought I lost you that day.”

Her heart strained against her mind. The memories of their life together were too strong. Her heart ached. In that moment, she didn't care about conspiracies, his crimes or her duty. Even his infidelities with Amelie seemed but dim, unpleasant memories. He still needed her. There was a chance. The moment gave her the strength to ask the question, the only one that mattered. She pulled back from him, wiped away his tears, and gazed deeply into his eyes.

“Did you tell them it was me?”

He looked back at her searchingly.

“At the prison, Paul. Did you tell them that I killed your parents?”

An eternity passed between them with only the words of their souls filling the void. Their expressions did not alter, but her heart did. She knew. At last, she drew back from the abyss.

“Kiss me.”

The words were barely past her lips when he pressed his to hers. The passion, once so craved, so well remembered, burned between them. His hands clasped her, and for a moment, one of hers dove into his hair and clutched the strands on the back of his head. Behind her the other hand paused deliberately over the object on the table before she allowed the kiss to end. Without another word, she walked away, tied the black cloak over her shoulders, and opened the door.

“Abrielle.”

She paused just outside the doorway.

“How did you find me?”

Abrielle's voice trembled with emotion.

“I always find you.”

Then she nodded to the dark figures concealed outside on either side of the door. Her eyes never left Paul's as he watched in horror as the two Imperial Guards she'd brought stepped heavily inside. They never wavered as he reached for the useless gun on the kitchen table, which she had jammed. Only when his eyes turned to her rich with a last desperate plea for mercy did she allow herself to look away.

Her breath escaped in even clouds of steam as she listened to the last moments of Paul's life. When she knew it was over, she began to walk away from the house. There was no need to wait for the guards. Without looking back, she pulled the cloak's black hood up and began up the small but steep incline on the muddy road. Abrielle and the dying embers of the sun disappeared into the heavy gloom.

CHAPTER 9

FRAGILE

The selection of food before her covered everything from the mundane to the exotic: wines, fine cheeses, tender meats, seafood, steaming soup, fresh fruits, colorful vegetables, a variety of breads, and rich desserts graced the table. Candles shone like small stars over the impressive array of choices. But Abrielle could barely stand to look at any of it, let alone to eat it. She took only a roll as she studied her new, well-lit surroundings. It was not so much a cell as it was a room. Bars remained over the windows, but it seemed more likely that this space was originally intended for use as a storage room than a cell. The room held an opulent dining table, a very comfortable looking bed, clean clothing, a table and mirror, several embroidered chairs, two armed guards, and Chloe.

The lavishly dressed spy also deliberately failed to partake in almost anything that the table had to offer. She sipped a glass of wine and waited for Abrielle to reveal something to her. But Abrielle's eyes were downcast. When she chewed any of the roll, it was very slowly, almost unconsciously. In fact the only thing that her prey seemed to notice was the full moon shining through one of the windows. Chloe had never seen the woman so meek and distant. Was it an act? Or did it tell her something about what might have happened during Abrielle's mysterious absence? Chloe motioned to one of the guards behind her and whispered instructions into the man's ear. He and his companion left immediately to obey. Abrielle never looked up.

No words broke their silence, even when the guards returned with hot water and towels. Under Chloe's orders, they made the unresponsive Abrielle stand then walked her to a nearby canvas chair. They deposited additional items on the table and left, locking the door behind them. One by one, Chloe leisurely removed the expensive gloves from her hands. She crossed the room, removed something from a drawer, and then returned. She met no resistance from Abrielle as she straightened her legs out, forcing her to lean further back in the chair.

Gently, Chloe poured a small amount of hot water over Abrielle's hair then began to rub the soap into the snarled tangle. She took her time as her fingertips loosened both knots and grime. Her light movements were soothing. From her reclined position, Abrielle could see even more of the moon. Her eyes fixed upon it as Chloe's efforts slowly restored her hair to a more familiar state. As time passed, Abrielle shook slightly as the cold night's air played across her damp head. Chloe rang the water from Abrielle's strands as she toweled them off. The drops burst upon the stones of the floor and cascaded out through small drains along the wall. Chloe considered Abrielle's gaze.

"Does he hold your secrets? What does he whisper to you, Abrielle, from such a distant and lonely place?"

Abrielle heard these words, felt the warmth of the speaker near her ear just before Chloe changed the position of her chair. The moon vanished from view.

Chloe eased herself onto Abrielle's legs, the silk of her stockings rubbed invitingly against Abrielle's bare skin. She took a cloth, dipped it into the still relatively warm water, and used it to trace away the dirt on Abrielle's face then neck.

"Such a thing could only be jealous of the warmth between us tonight," Chloe lips parted as she patted Abrielle with a towel. Her breathing slowed. She leaned forward and tenderly kissed Abrielle's cheek then brought her own to rest against it.

“But this won’t do. Not tonight. You must give me more.”

Chloe slowly withdrew and guided Abrielle out of the canvas chair.

She stood behind Abrielle who heard the hum of the object before she felt its presence over her shoulder. The dull side of the knife blade edged menacingly along the side of her neck, then shifted and sliced below the knot holding her gown up. Cool air rushed over her back and exposed shoulder; her other arm held the cloth over her breasts. Chloe struck quickly at the second knot leaving all of Abrielle’s back and shoulders exposed. Abrielle fought to keep her breathing controlled. She could hear Chloe doing the same.

It became more difficult when Chloe lathered her hands with soap then began to run them over Abrielle’s back, shoulders, and neck. She caressed the skin, massaged the muscles, and closed the gap between their bodies. As Chloe rinsed Abrielle, she blew hot breath over her damp skin. Abrielle's nerve endings sang. This time she did not bother with the towels, instead Chloe wrapped her arms lovingly around Abrielle as she kissed her exposed shoulders. Abrielle’s chin trembled. Chloe held her more tightly and sighed.

“Oh Abrielle, to see you here, like this, saddens me ... and excites me,” she whispered intimately. One of Chloe’s hands moved from around Abrielle’s waist and wrapped around the hand Abrielle was using to hold her gown up. She felt Chloe’s soft lips caressing her neck. Her fingers worked to lace themselves among Abrielle’s own. She laughed lightly at Abrielle’s resistance.

“Going to Bellange, that was clever, very clever. I thought you hated him too much to ...” Chloe’s fingers suddenly began to caress Abrielle’s throat.

“Some spies grow too dangerous; so now I hold your life in my hands, not Bellange. And you will not leave this prison until I am satisfied that you are not a traitor.” She stepped back now, admiring Abrielle’s shivering form.

By now Chloe was herself quite chilled and eager to remove her own damp clothing. To Abrielle’s great surprise, she moved a privacy screen between them and placed a dry robe over top of it for her. However, this offered no relief, it taunted her.

It was all part of Chloe’s cruel game, and this time, Abrielle could see no way out of the trap. Chloe had her. If she tried to escape from this room, Chloe would kill her. If she killed Chloe, the guards would kill her. So, she was to share Bellange’s fate. Abrielle was to be repaid for her own cruelty. Numbly she finished washing herself with the now cold water. As she did so, the room grew progressively dimmer as Chloe extinguished candles. Abrielle prayed silently as she assumed the robe: *Aut viam inveniam aut faciam. Either I shall find a way or I will make one.*

Abrielle emerged from behind the screen to find Chloe waiting for her. She’d changed into a pale blue gown. A lone candle remained alight upon the table and another by the bed. A quiet triumph glowed in Chloe’s eyes as she looked into Abrielle’s and saw understanding. They sat down upon the foot of the bed. Chloe’s hand began to caress her leg. Abrielle couldn’t look at her. She closed her eyes. Abrielle hated Chloe, but she hated herself even more.

What good had she ever been to anyone? If she wished, Chloe could probably keep her here forever for her own amusement. Maybe she deserved this. Her own pain and all of the sadness and misery she’d inflicted upon others lay bare before her. And then Chloe was kissing her lips, and Abrielle was kissing her back. For a moment Abrielle lost herself to the sensation of the physical, the pleasure of it. But ultimately it only served to remind her of how alone she really was. When Chloe spoke, she slowly opened her eyes.

“Now,” she licked her lips, “my dark, wandering angel, what has taken you from ... us, for so long?”

When it happened, it was so unexpected that there was never any hope of stopping it. In the dim flickering light of the candle, Abrielle suddenly saw the two objects, which the guards had placed upon the table. The walls she'd spent a lifetime erecting crumbled. There were no defenses left to her here in this crucible. A few sputtering gasps escaped before the tears came.

“Abrielle, what ...?”

And then the torrents of pure grief came, and Chloe could not escape it. The passionate sorrows were unleashed all at once. Bewildered, Chloe attempted to calm Abrielle, only to discover her efforts brought forth even more intense sobs. She was completely inconsolable. Her wails turned to screams then reverted back. She clasped Chloe so hard she was choking her. Heaving breaths and surging emotions made any words she might have been saying completely unintelligible. In the face of such overwhelming grief, Chloe's own defenses lowered and she held Abrielle, for the first time ever, as a friend. Whatever was happening, Chloe knew she was not the cause of it. She held her as wave after wave of unceasing misery wrenched Abrielle apart.

The only person who'd ever truly loved her, who'd accepted her unconditionally from the moment they'd first met was gone.

“Ailis, oh God, Ailis!” Her sister's name brought even more tears. “I watched her die; for weeks ... I watched her die ... but I couldn't ... I couldn't help her! I loved her!”

Her frame trembled uncontrollably as she buried her face into her hands. She'd been strong for so long. She had to be, day after day, as she watched Ailis grow weaker. She'd held together; she'd stayed strong for Ailis, for Tara, the Shaws, for Ernest. Abrielle had always had to be strong. Now as she lay shattered upon the altar of grief, she realized it no longer mattered. For so long, serving that need had kept her from her sister. It turned her into a killer. It had controlled her destiny. But she could not allow it to keep her from saving Tara. *Either I shall find a way or I will make one.*

She wiped the tears away as best she could. She would surrender herself fully to Chloe. It was the only possible way to regain her freedom. It was the only way to save Tara. Abrielle's lips again found Chloe's, and she struggled to loosen her own robe. They kissed for a moment before Chloe shoved her harshly away.

“How dare you toy with me,” Chloe said haughtily.

“No, I want to ...”

“NO!” Chloe burned with jealousy and anger. Abrielle was playing her. She didn't care that this Ailis was dead, she hated her. There would be no victory tonight. Chloe ran to the table with the drawer and took out her knife.

Abrielle lay upon the bed, half disrobed, taunting Chloe.

“Please, Chloe, please. I'll do anything you wish, but you must let me go. You must let me save my niece.”

“You have no niece, you traitorous cur! And even if you do, I'll see to it that you'll never see her again. Guards! Guards!”

Abrielle had only seconds now.

“Chloe, Bellange was going to help me find the gypsies who are holding her. That's why I went to see him. They're here in France.”

The lock turned.

“He was going to help me find the Moon Shadow clan.”

The door flew open and the guards entered with weapons drawn. Chloe ignored them. Had there been a flash of recognition across Chloe's face when Abrielle shouted the clan's name? No one moved.

“Chloe?” Abrielle begged.

“Seek comfort in your trinkets,” the spy bit out as she left the room, her guards trailing close behind. The door was locked, then all was silent. Abrielle closed her robe and walked across the cold stones to retrieve the objects from the table. Exhausted she took them back to the bed with her. She fell asleep, clutching both Ailis’ flute and Tara’s blanket like a lost and frightened child.

**

CHAPTER 10

THE DEEP WINTER

She watched the flame as it slowly drank the candle. Fire consisted of such a strange nature. It consumed until it destroyed even itself. If it were a living thing, if it could reason and choose, would it still do so? Would it attempt to adapt in order to avoid such a fatalistic destiny? Or must all things, even when given choice, adhere to their natures?

The little flame did all it could to beat back the darkness, but ultimately it was a doomed battle. The candle would be devoured, the light extinguished, and the darkness would prevail. During her unhappy weeks here, Baseria had found that the darkness always won in this place. Worse still, her own world had grown dark and silent. The last Seer had no power, and she knew she would die in this cold, isolated, bastion of darkness. A draft stole the flame's breath, and the room resumed its natural state.

Absent a twilight glow, there was no true day here and that faint, treasured light had long since transcended the sky. Baseria sat in the blackness and listened. The perpetual sea winds moaned in abject sadness against the stones of the fortress. Why would they wish to penetrate a place so cold and cruel? They were free. If this place possessed a name, she had not learned of it. In a sense, it did not seem to deserve one; it was the absence of everything. The fortress was a long-forgotten sentinel left to guard the polar night in an unyielding wilderness. How her enemies ever found this place at the edge of the world was a mystery. Even before the separation of the clans, her people had never been explorers or sailors. They were stewards to secrets bound to ancient myths and the prophecy. What insanity could have brought them all to this desolate landscape?

Baseria pulled her cloak more tightly around her, too lonely, too sad to question any more. A new sound attracted her attention. At first she took it to be the somber, soothing song of whales she occasionally heard. No, there was more to it than that. Perhaps another bear had come too near the fortress and killed another guard whose mind was numb with cold and empty of spirit. It had already happened twice that she could recall. No, the noise was both from within and without. Her nerves jumped slightly as a knock was issued upon her door.

"Ba? Are you in there?"

"I'm trying to sleep, Etolie," she lied.

The door opened anyway.

"Something's happened. You'd better come," Etolie suggested, ignoring her friend's countenance.

"I don't want to," Baseria replied simply. She was tired, too tired to invest herself in any more woe. Besides, she still could not forgive Etolie. Despite the winds, the noises grew louder. Ignoring her feeble protestations, Etolie grabbed Baseria's shoulder and shook her.

"Wake up. He's here," Etolie proclaimed.

"Who?" Baseria's spirit sank as her thoughts turned to the Moon Shadows' dark Master.

"Frankenstein. He's here," Etolie excitedly affirmed.

For the first time their eyes met. Etolie nodded to her friend's unspoken request for confirmation.

"You've seen him?" Baseria asked.

"Two ships came in. They're offloading new prisoners and the wounded right now. I saw him," Etolie managed a weak smile.

A great weight shifted within Baseria. She did not even try to understand her emotions.

“Where? Where is he?” she demanded as she pushed past Etolie and headed out the door.

“I think they were heading to the chapel ... Ba, slow down, Ba!”

She didn't. Etolie could catch up. Here at last a dim flame of hope burned in the darkness. He was here. They had not been abandoned and left for dead.

Baseria barely eyed the row of prisoners being led through the main gate. She slid on fresh snow as she tore across the common area and into another turret, which contained a staircase that would lead her down. By design, fate, or accident the fortress was now claimed equally by both the sea and the land. Portions of it, seemingly unreachable across the frigid water, rose up out of the sea or perched on the rocky cliff-face. At first Baseria had dismissed these as mere ruins, but over time, she'd seen lights ablaze within them above the pounding waves. She could only guess that one might reach them by some, as yet undiscovered means, when the tides were low.

At the bottom of the icy turret, she turned sharply to her left, climbed a short set of stairs, and entered the chapel. The structure was the creation of sheer will, having been forged by hollowing out a portion of the cliff, and was suspended just above the pounding waves below. A small group of men were just finished placing someone onto a long wooden bench.

“Go back,” one of them growled when Etolie rushed into the chapel. Apparently none of them immediately noticed Baseria's entrance. She now ignored their command.

“Is he hurt?” she urgently inquired.

The man was about to answer when another voice, deep and terrible, interceded from the doorway.

“You will tend him.”

Baseria's heart trembled. He had returned. At some unseen signal, the men vacated the chapel. She felt Etolie clasp her hand.

“Alone.”

Baseria was too frightened to turn and gaze upon her abductor whose gigantic form filled the chapel's entryway. The massive shadow receded momentarily as one of the men reentered and drug Etolie from the room. She overheard the creature giving one of the robed figures instructions as the doors closed. Then they were alone.

Baseria tried not to worry about Etolie as she ran towards the form outstretched on the bench. She could only take grim comfort in the thought that until they escaped, none of them were truly safe. She was in just as much danger as her friend.

Ernest was unconscious. Baseria conducted a hasty examination, which was hampered by the dim lighting. They'd wrapped him in heavy blankets, but the clothing underneath was singed and very damp. One of his cheeks was peppered with bits of wooden shrapnel, and his right hand bore a very angry gash. She allowed her fingertip to hover over the wound.

“Jesus,” his eyes suddenly shot open and he coughed violently and began to struggle to get up.

“No, no calm down. Everything's ...”

He rolled away from her and immediately became sick upon the floor. Baseria patted his shoulder reassuringly.

“Are you all right?” she asked when it was over, but there was no response. He'd lost consciousness again.

The door opened and one of the Moon Shadow gypsies entered, accompanied by one of the robed figures, who remained in the doorway. The gypsy kept a wary eye on her as he lit several of the altar urns. She was grateful for anything that could dispel both the gloom and the chill from the large space.

“The Master asked if you will need anything,” the gypsy stated indifferently.

Baseria nodded at Ernest.

“What happened to him?”

The man said nothing. Inwardly, she sighed.

“A few more blankets would be helpful and some water or food, perhaps.”

He left without further comment, and the robed guardian again sealed the door behind them.

Baseria pushed another bench near Ernest and sat heavily upon it. She was exhausted. The cold did drain her so. She wished they were closer to the fire, but that would have to wait until Ernest could offer some assistance in the matter. Despite her shivering, she nodded off and awoke hours later to discover that the items she'd requested now lie nearby. Ernest was clasp his head in pain. She stood and laid him fully onto his back. The motion made him wince. Ideally, she should have gotten him out of his damp clothing, but she doubted her efforts would succeed. She piled more blankets on him and placed several under his head.

For the next several hours, he wavered between stomach churning episodes of pain and tranquil slumber. Baseria ate a small portion of the food that the Moon Shadows brought but tried to save most of it for Ernest. As the dark hours passed, the fires gradually faded, compelling her to shelter with Ernest for warmth. Only the dull roar of the surf echoing through the stones beneath and their puffs of breath reminded her that they were not in a tomb. In spite of his deplorable condition, she found Ernest's mere presence an enormous comfort. She pressed herself more tightly to him.

“Where are we?”

The words provoked another fit of coughing. Embarrassed she slid away from him. She was relieved that the water in the bucket was not frozen.

“Slowly,” she admonished as he choked unpleasantly while drinking. The flickering glow from the waning fires hurt his eyes and he blotted them out by using his arm as a shield.

“Where are we?” he repeated.

“Are you all right?” she asked in the Germanic tongue.

He considered the question.

“Baseria, please.”

It was reassuring that he recognized her at least.

“On an island, somewhere in the Arctic. I don't know much more than that,” she admitted.

“Norway,” he muttered, “the ship that attacked us was from Norway. That's probably where we are.”

“You were attacked?”

He breathed heavily a moment but managed to control himself.

“Military ship. They waited until the storm broke. Both sides sent boarding parties. There was an explosion, and I was blasted into the sea. I don't know what happened after that. How do you know this is an island?”

“I've been here for weeks, and they all know it's an island,” she pointed out sarcastically.

He smiled weakly.

“I suppose they do.”

“Well, you must have won because Etolie said that two ships docked, and I saw prisoners being led into the fortress.”

“Fortress? I thought I'd dreamt that.”

Baseria burned with questions. What had become of her family? Why had they been brought to this horrible place? How would any of them ever escape?

But she held back. She didn't want her faint hopes to die too quickly. Unless he'd brought others, escape seemed impossible for it was not the fortress which prevented it but the frigid sea.

"Have they told you why they brought you here?"

He took his arm away from his eyes as he waited for her response. She shook her head and blinked back tears.

"No," her voice strained as her fears surged.

She turned from him. Baseria felt the tips of his fingers touch her lower back through the blanket.

"Baseria ... Baseria, do they know... do they know about you?"

The gentleness of the question caught her off guard. She lowered her head.

"They're not sure."

His hand slipped away.

"They can't find out," he whispered after a moment.

She gripped herself.

"I'm so frightened, Ernest."

Again he touched her lightly.

"Where are the others? Are they alive?"

"Etolie, she ... tried to kill herself. On the ship, she ... I stopped her."

The dark memory of her passage to this prison tore at her. Her best friend tried to jump overboard, to drown herself, right before Baseria's eyes. She'd come within seconds of succeeding, of dying exactly as Baseria's sister and her cousin had. Baseria stopped her, but the animosity born between them in that moment would not fade.

The incident also unwittingly incited new debate among her captors as to which one of them was the actual Seer. This discussion put Etolie's near abduction prior to the attack on the camp in Hungary into a new light. After the night the prophecy was shared, they apparently hadn't been sure which girl was rumored to be the new Seer, so they'd taken them both. In the minds of their captors, Etolie's attempt to end her life meant that she might have more to hide than Baseria did. And so they waited and watched them both.

If she'd allowed Etolie to jump, it might all be over. By now the Moon Shadows and their dark Master would have drawn their conclusions and carried out their vile plans. But by saving Etolie, she'd stolen her choice and prolonged their mutual suffering. She turned to Ernest, desperate for comfort.

"We have to escape," she declared, "before they ... why are you looking at me like that?"

Ernest hid his eyes immediately. He couldn't bear to look at her. If he did she would again see the accusation alive in his eyes and she would ask questions that were too painful for him to answer.

"I'm tired," he said flatly.

"There's food here," she finally replied, feeling suddenly uncertain.

"I just need to rest. We'll talk more, later."

He slept.

*

Something had changed; though he was only half awake, Ernest could sense it.

"At last, you stir, Uncle. Is it still too bright?"

The voice came from the end of the benches Ernest lay upon. He opened his eyes fully and saw the cloaked mass seated there beside him.

“Baseria?”

“The girl has gone back to the others for a time. I wanted to return this to you. It was dropped to the deck as you were thrown overboard.” The diseased hand presented Ailis’ journal to him. “That it still survives at all is a miracle.”

The ardent longing in Ernest’s soul reawakened as he took the treasured journal. He’d almost lost her again. The unseen face studied him, the head beneath the cloak turned slightly.

“Why did she love you?”

“You’ve read it?”

The hidden head nodded thoughtfully.

“I wanted to know my aunt.”

“And do you now?” Ernest could not keep the anger from his voice.

The great being answered.

“Enough to understand your pain,” he replied.

“You know nothing of my pain!” Ernest’s words slapped against the stone walls of the chapel and then echoed in the silence that followed.

“She did.”

The violation was too much.

“Get out.”

“Answer me,” the man’s voice was like the hum of a blade, one dedicated to hitting its mark. “Can you feel her presence here among us in this place of worship?”

Ernest turned from the creature who would not be denied.

“She saw something in you. Didn’t she? Something kindred, yet wholly unique, a bond that forever enriched her life until ...”

“Please ...,” Ernest could hear no more.

The thing’s enormous hand forced Ernest to turn back. He stared unwillingly upward into the sickening yellow eyes.

“I honor your great sorrow, Uncle, for it is the angels who have sinned. It is for their greed that you suffer, after they fell shamefully from the heavens, claiming in their anguish one so cherished.”

“And did your greed cause you to fall from the heavens never to return?”

Gleaming teeth leered at him from the blackness of the hood.

“I wonder if you will ever be prepared to hear my answer. Just as I wonder how you will live now that such a light has passed from this world. Can pages full of her memories preserve her for you? Or will you spend your days in endless lamentation, offering alms, hoping she will hear?”

He leaned closer.

“How will you answer your own child when the day comes and she asks, ‘Why did she love you?’”

Ernest wanted to throttle the life from this thing. Ignoring his dizziness, he shot up from the benches and reached for its throat. For a moment the creature offered no resistance for he’d long since ceased to fear his own ending. The concealing hood began to slide off. Then he gripped Ernest’s own throat firmly.

“You seek to assert yourself over my domain? Then look upon me! Look upon me, Frankenstein, for I am Death!”

The hood removed, a nightmare of living death towered over Ernest crushing his windpipe.

“You must fight me now, Uncle! Fight Death as you have your whole life. It is the only way you can save her. It is the only way to save yourself.”

With a final squeeze, the monster suddenly flung Ernest backward. He sprawled onto the stones, desperate to force air back into his lungs. The harbinger of darkness resumed his hood.

“Why struggle?” he railed, “What keeps you in this bleak world without her? Fear of death?”

“Tara,” Ernest rasped, “Tara.”

“And yet you abandoned her to come here. Why?”

“The girls you took ... I have to,” he coughed as the room spun, “take them back, only way to save her.”

The shadow knelt and leaned closer.

“But if you succeed, you will still be alone and so will your daughter. Forever, alone. Both of you merely existing without your love, without your soul, without your wife. I know your pain, Uncle, for it is mine also.”

“Do not torment me!” Ernest cried.

“I do not. I seek understanding as you do. I rage against death as you must. But you must also accept that she will die. Your daughter will die without you, without her mother. And you are powerless to prevent it. Just as you were for all who have gone before you.”

The abyss of his soul rang hollow for the dead. It cried out for forgiveness from the living. But the fiend was right. The hours left to hope were faint. He could think of no means to escape this fortress and the frigid seas it guarded. And what of Abrielle and what of Tara? He had destroyed them by coming here just as he had destroyed Ailis by leaving her.

“We are all that exist, you and I; all that is left of the Frankensteins. But you would reject me, destroy me, and hunt me to the ends of the earth before you would embrace me as family.”

Ernest smiled bitterly.

“Before I can do that I must know where your father is. Where is Victor?”

“I told you. He is dead,” the other affirmed. “He died on the Arctic ice ten years ago. There was nothing to be done.”

“He died by your hand?” It was as much a question as it was an accusation.

“No, by his own choices. He succumbed to the elements while aboard a ship of exploration.”

“But he meant to destroy you?”

“Yes,” the creature wheezed.

“Why?”

The question was considered.

“Because his madness made it such that he could not bear to know that I lived. All will be made clear to you when I take you to where he now lies.”

“It is here?” Ernest whispered after a measure of heartbeats.

“It is within reach. There will be time to discuss my father, but for now, you should know that my forces actively seek to secure your daughter and her safe return. She is family, wrongly taken, and she will be avenged.”

The creature seemed to relish this last word, drawing it out in his harsh, rasping voice.

Ernest felt uncertain of what to say but finally settled on a question.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You chose to come,” the shadow reminded him.

“At your behest. You’ve spoken to me of destiny, that boy dying by the river in Hungary, one of your people. The last words he spoke were of you and immortality. That you awaited me here, with the women you have taken.”

“Immortality,” the being sighed, “the collective dream of humanity, its great sickness. How could I

offer such a thing? There is no permanence in this life. Do you mistake me for a god?"

"Isn't that what your people think, these gypsies here, isn't that what you are to them?"

"Is that what I am to you?" He paused before continuing. "Gods are too lonely. Perhaps that is why death exists, to remind us of them. My people follow me because they believe. I give them hope. I would do the same for you, Uncle, if your mind is open and your heart is willing."

"If what you say about Tara is true, then you have already given me hope. But let these women go. What purpose can there be in holding them in this wasteland?"

The immense creature stood menacingly.

"They cannot go," he declared, "their destiny is fixed. All else depends upon them and the Seer."

"The Seer is dead," Ernest affirmed.

The sneer returned.

"The shell is dead, but the Seer remains and she is here. And I will use her powers to recapture that which was wrongfully taken from me long ago. If you do not interfere; if you aid me in my efforts and embrace me as family, then I will do all within my power to restore that which was so unjustly taken from you."

There was something in his tone that Ernest did not understand. With a swirl of robes, the creature turned to leave.

"Do you speak of my daughter?"

"No, your wife."



Pete Planisek lives in Columbus, Ohio, where he teaches English, runs Enceladus Literary, and is co-host of an entertainment podcast called *Hindsight is 20/20*. He is hard at work on *Frankenstein Book III* and a host of other writing projects.

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