

Colophon

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A spider sewed at night
Without a light
Upon an arc of white.
If ruff it was of dame
Or shroud of gnome,
Himself, himself inform.
Of immortality
His strategy
Was physiognomy.

--Emily Dickinson

* * *

October 16, 1796
Part I

Writers and poets claimed that one of the properties of poppy wine was to numb the senses and to give fleeting dreams more substance. It had an altogether different effect on Haidée. Yes, it eliminated her headache, but in the process it made her feel altogether more sensitive to reality. At the moment, she couldn't recall any of her dreams. Although under the circumstances, it was hard to recall anything when her favorite pair of slippers from Paris was sinking into the mud.

Haidée stood somewhat apart from the accident. The traveling coach had gotten stuck in the muck that was the temporary causeway from the mainland to Mont Saint Filan. The natural roadway which was studded with perilous traps of sinkholes and quicksand—one of which had ensnarled the back wheels of her transportation—was only revealed once a month when the full moon and the tides converged. Briefly, Haidée looked away from the men struggling to push the coach out of the mud to glance at the hulking monolith that was her destination.

The debris of broken shells and driftwood littered causeway led to an island shadowed in the late afternoon sun, its white cliffs burnished a dark copper in the light. Further in the distance was the sea with its ominous glitter—a threat of its return. The stink of sea life vied with the screeching seagulls overhead for loudness. Haidée watched one of the birds dig up a small clam from the exposed sediment and smash it onto a nearby rock to get into its contents.

Two men were pushing the back of the coach—one lean, one fat. The lean one said, “It’s almost there Felix. Have the horses pull it a bit more to the left...”

Felix the driver, a short wiry man with a wig that was a bit askew, clicked his tongue and grasped the reins on a pair of grays nickering in annoyance.

Haidée thought about helping, but getting further into the mud would ruin her dress. And she doubted that the men would even allow her to even touch the coach at this point. Instead, she concentrated on the bit of mud stubbornly clinging to the coach wheels. Something seemed a little odd about its shade of brown; it didn't match the rest of the soggy ground.

"Excuse me, Messieurs, but don't you notice that there's something strange about this whole situation?" she said aloud.

The fat man stopped for a moment to wipe his brow as the others continued working. The powder from his wig was mixing with his sweat making his florid face appear even splotchier. Maurice Ducos was a fellow vacationer who was going to meet up with some of his cronies on Mont Saint Filan for relaxation. Ducos wore an exquisitely tailored brown velvet coat that was now splattered with mud, but he didn't appear to notice that as he nodded to her in a condescending matter. "Do not worry your pretty little head, Mademoiselle, we will get free before the tide comes in."

"I wasn't exactly worried about the tide." Then she thought about the hat she was wearing. "And I don't have a little head," she said after a pause. The hat was another accessory that she had gotten in Paris—it was studded with brass buttons and trimmed in black satin that matched her slippers. There was even a large ostrich feather on top. The brim was long, shading most of her face.

The lean man snorted and glared in her direction, the late afternoon light glinting gold on his spectacles. He was the only man who wasn't wearing a wig. Instead, his dark hair was tied back in a queue, but the autumn wind was rapidly tugging strands loose. "Only a fool wouldn't be worried about the tide. Pay no attention to the Mademoiselle, Ducos. She's drunk."

Haidée couldn't quite remember the lean man's name. His last name was Renaud. His first name was far more vague. Jean? Jacques? Jean-Jacques? Who cared anyway? She didn't like him the first time she set eyes on him at the inn back on the mainland. Something about him was off—although she couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was. In comparison to Ducos, he was lean, but she had the impression that his overly large greatcoat was more of a deception. Renaud was one of those men of science—a follower of the intellectual movement. He was going to Mont Saint Filan to do some studies at its astronomical observatory which stood on a hill on the island.

Perhaps that was it—this was the first time that she had encountered a man whose brain primarily resided between his ears and not elsewhere.

"What I mean is that the mud is different here. It's as if it's deliberately trying to catch the wheels. And it's ruining my shoes."

“There are more important things than shoes,” Renaud replied. “I have a more practical suggestion. Why don’t we throw some of the trunks out to lighten the load? We’ll start with Mademoiselle Avenall’s things. Shoes and fancy dresses aren’t that necessary anyway.”

She crossed her arms. “Why don’t we throw your ego out first, Monsieur Renaud? I think it’s far heavier than my luggage.”

“Ha! Imagine that line coming from an actress.”

“Children!” Felix said repressively. The wiry man tried to frown reproachfully but he ended up looking like a comical gargoye. “Now is not the time to bicker. Push a little more to the left and I’ll see if these equines will put in a bit more effort in getting the coach out of this muck.”

Haidée wanted to stamp her foot and call them all names for ignoring her. But the mud—darkening by the second, it seemed—warranted far more attention than an actress throwing a fit. So instead, she pressed her lips together to prevent herself from making another remark and began drawing on the ground with the heel of her slippers.

She swept her ankle around in a semi-circle and closed the arc before bisecting it with a line that pointed straight towards the mud covered coach wheels. She whispered into the air and the temperature suddenly plummeted. She wrapped her arms more tightly against herself as the dark patch of mud began to shrink and with a final push, the men rolled the coach out of the mud.

Her head began to throb.

“What did I tell you, Mademoiselle?” said Ducos triumphantly. “We got the coach out of that quicksand and we have plenty of time to spare before the tide comes in.”

“Not that much time,” Felix cut in. “I suggest you three get on now.”

She got on first as Ducos helped her into their conveyance. When the coach was in motion once again, she rubbed her temples, wishing for her supplies that she had stuffed in one of her trunks.

“Are you feeling well, Mademoiselle?” Ducos inquired.

Haidée shook her head lightly. “I just need a drink.”

Renaud’s lip curled in sardonic response to her remark. “Figures.”

October 16, 1796

Part II

Motion sickness was for the feeble-minded, or at least that was what Haidée believed

before the coach had to traverse the thin path that zigzagged around up the cliffs of Mont Saint Filan. She sat stiffly in her seat with fists clenched and eyes closed in mock sleep. She silently swallowed, trying to keep the bile down in her unsettled stomach. By the time they reached The Comorant, an inn in the island's small village, she was ready to pitch over in a dead faint.

"The place does look lively, doesn't it?" said Renaud as he stepped out first to survey the surroundings.

Haidée soon followed somewhat shakily. The air outside blew coldly, hinting at the chilly night to come. The setting sun washed the sky in a nauseous orange color. She put a hand to her mouth and studiously averted her eyes from the scene above. The inn was a three story stone building, whitewashed and trimmed with flower boxes at the windows. Curtains were pulled aside revealing light within. Snatches of conversation and music drifted outside.

"I, for one, am looking forward to a hot bath and dinner," announced Maurice Ducos. The stout man marched to the front door and flung it open. Haidée, Renaud, and the driver Felix followed behind him.

The first impression that Haidée had of The Cormorant was that it was crowded and noisy. If this was the kind of patronage that frequented the Rue de la Seine Theatre back in Paris, the director, Monsieur Signe would have thrown a tantrum. An audience was supposed to be sober, attentive, and quiet. But that didn't mean that she didn't like the crowd—just that she was uncomfortable being among the people instead of in front of them on a stage.

"You've finally arrived! And at the nick of time, as well. They say it's less than an hour until the tide comes in," shouted someone from the crowd. A slightly balding man, middling in height and in dark non-descript clothes detached himself from the milieu of the busy inn tavern and headed toward Ducos. The two men clasped hands, apparently already well acquainted with each other.

"What a surprise," exclaimed Ducos. "It seems as if the entire place is full tonight. The locals?"

"Oh no," his friend replied with a wink. "They all arrived with me earlier in the day."

"Hopefully there is still room..."

"I reserved a bed already for you, my friend." Then the man glanced at the three persons trailing behind. "You have companions?"

"Other vacationers," Ducos replied, placing an emphasis on the word "other."

Further back in the inn tavern was a counter where the innkeeper was busy playing bartender, plying out drinks to his customers. He was a rather thin man with an

enormous moustache and a stained apron, and he sent out a strange, inhospitable glare as the new travelers headed towards his location.

“Monsieur Fasset,” said Ducos’ friend. “Apparently you have some new customers. I will be gracious and ask you for them, have you any extra rooms?”

Fasset cleared his throat in irritation. “No extra rooms. Not unless you want to sleep in the courtyard.”

Haidée put her hands on her hips. “I am not sleeping in some courtyard. Surely some of your customers would be so kind as to share some rooms to free up more spaces?”

“I don’t think so,” the innkeeper replied. “First come, first serve. Unless you want to share a room with some of my other customers.”

She huffed and couldn’t prevent herself from stomping a foot. “How rude! I am not that kind of woman.”

The innkeeper grunted. “One wouldn’t think so except for that monstrosity on top of your head. I usually don’t allow any of the demi-monde around in this establishment—not that there are any around here anyway.”

“I am an actress,” said Haidée, her voice rising. “And this monstrosity you speak of his my hat. It is of the latest fashion in Paris.”

“Bah, Paris,” Fasset said darkly. “And I don’t make exceptions for actresses either.”

“I’m afraid The Cormorant’s innkeeper thinks you’re too fast in either case,” Renaud told her, the edge of his mouth curved in amusement. “And it probably doesn’t help that you look like you’re about to regurgitate your lunch.”

She swirled around to pin Renaud with a haughty glare. “Just wait until I regurgitate my lunch on you.”

Ducos’ friend laughed. “Monsieur, you must have a devil of a time trying to control your wife.”

“My wife?” said Renaud with a horrified expression. Haidée blanched at the man’s implication. “She’s not my wife.”

“Thank God,” she muttered under her breath.

Felix shook his head. “You needn’t worry about me. I am staying with my sister and brother-in-law who live on the other side of the village. I am sure they wouldn’t mind having extra guests, if they actually had any room. They have a rather large family, I’m afraid. Six children.”

Haidée shuddered. Even if Felix's sister had room enough, she didn't think she could stand having a vacation with children running underfoot. She'd had enough bad experiences taking care of the brats of the well-to-do before she was fortunate to be discovered by Monsieur Signe to last her several lifetimes.

"There is the observatory, though," continued Felix. "I heard that they sometimes take on guests that the astronomers invite or when some of the dignitaries from the government come to visit. I am sure that they have some extra rooms."

"If that is the case," Haidée replied, "Then why haven't you gotten a room at the observatory?" She gave Renaud one of her pointed looks that usually made men whimper.

Renaud only grinned. "I was not aware that the observatory had any extra rooms. Besides, I've arrived on short notice so the director of the observatory does not know that I am coming. I did not want to suddenly impose on their hospitality."

"Somehow, I think worrying about imposing on their hospitality was the last thing on your mind," she replied. "But if there is room in the observatory, I suppose I cannot complain, even if the company is less than stellar. I would rather have a roof over my head tonight."

October 16, 1796

Part III

Felix had offered to drive Haidée and Renaud to the observatory which he claimed was not far from the village. Almost reluctantly, she had gotten back onto the coach, not quite looking forward to the ride even though it promised to be short and the destination a place with a bed. By the time they had reached the observatory, the sky was the color of her new navy riding coat that she had just received from the modiste before the theatre director had bid her adieu to her enforced vacation. It was too dark to make out the observatory with any detail. To Haidée, it looked like a large black lump with windows.

It was Felix who knocked on the door. After a moment, it opened revealing an older man silhouetted by the interior light. The only hairs on his head were the tufts springing above his ears. He had thick eyebrows which were beetled as he observed the three people on the doorstep. "What is it?" he asked in a surly tone.

The driver was unfazed. "Good evening, Villiers. The Comorant is full tonight and I have two travelers with me tonight who need room and board."

"Vacationers?"

"Monsieur Renaud is a visiting astronomer..."

"I'll go see what Everard has to say about it." Villiers slammed the door shut.

“He wasn’t very polite, was he?” remarked Haidée.

“Villiers is one of the people who work for the astronomers,” Felix explained. “Do not worry too much about his attitude. He always acts as if his breeches are a bit too tight on his sensitive parts. Come to think of it, I haven’t really seen him being congenial except when someone else is suffering.”

“How boorish,” said Renaud. “Why hasn’t anyone turned him out for his surliness?”

Felix shook his head. “You mainlanders don’t understand. Workers are hard to come by, especially on this island. Except for once a month, this place is completely cut off from the rest of the country. It’s extremely difficult to get here or to leave without the causeway. The currents surrounding Mont Saint Filan make sailing treacherous. So I’m sure the astronomers had to make a choice—either to put up with Villiers, or to go without help.”

“Well, I suppose there could be worse things,” Renaud replied.

After a long moment when Haidée was sure that Villiers had decided to leave them on the doorstep to expire, he opened the door again, not bothering to hide his fierce scowl. “Monsieur Everard claims that there is room. This way, please.”

“What about our things?” Haidée asked.

“Don’t you worry about that, Mademoiselle,” Felix replied in reassuring tones. “I’ll make sure your things will get up to you. Is Claude in, Villiers?”

“He’s in, as you say, but that does not mean that he’s available.”

“Oh, stop being so sullen, Villiers,” came a voice from the interior. An energetic, whipcord thin man emerged and swept a low, dramatic bow. “Please come in. We wouldn’t want you to freeze on our doorstep. I’m Claude, by the way. Felix and I will bring your things in. And what are you standing like a thundercloud, Villiers? Aren’t you going to show our guests to their rooms?”

“Very well,” Villiers sighed, exasperated. “But may I remind you who’s higher on the hierarchy in this place?”

“Liberté, égalité, fraternité,” quoted Claude. “Just because your formal title is butler doesn’t mean that you’re any better than me. Besides, don’t you agree that I have more common sense out of the both of us?”

As Villiers beckoned for Haidée and Renaud to follow him out of the sparsely decorated stone receiving hall, she heard him mutter under his breath, “Cocky upstart!”

But Haidée paid little attention to Villiers’ disgruntled mumblings as she followed him

past the receiving hall to a long side corridor lined with sconces. The light flickered like unsure dancers, illuminating the bit of mosaic motif lining the tops of the walls. Every few paces stood statues the saints and disciples with their hands outstretched in the moment of piety. If she didn't know any better, she would have guessed that the place was a church of some sort, not an observatory.

A small flight of marble stairs trailed upward in a strange, lopsided spiral. She clutched the railing as she went up, feeling somewhat off balance with the combination of her headache, an empty stomach, and the aftereffects of her "medicine." She wasn't sure if it was all of these things that were making her see things, but she thought she saw something inscribed on one of the steps ahead. It looked like a very strange symbol of some sort, inked faintly so it would mostly blend in with the natural markings of the marble. She squinted and nearly tripped on her own hem.

A hand on her elbow steadied her. "Tippy?" Renaud asked.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp. "You assume too much," she replied stiffly. "My head is as clear as a bell. I'm just tired. Traveling does take its toll on a lady's constitution."

He gave one of his lofty smiles. "Well, if you say so. Don't blame me for contradicting a lady's word."

On the second floor, there was a hallway leading to a row of sparse wooden doors. Almost reluctantly, the butler handed them heavy iron keys and pointed to the rooms that were assigned to each of them. Haidée's room was the second to the last; Renaud's room was the last.

Villiers' eyebrows twitched as he took an obvious step away from them. "I am sure Felix and Claude will be up in a while with your trunks. Monsieur Everard will meet you in the dining hall in about half an hour." With that, he twirled around in an odd half step and promptly stalked back down the rest of the corridor.

Haidée put her key to the lock and it turned soundlessly. She turned to watch Renaud opening his own door. "He didn't tell us where the dining hall was."

"I'm not surprised. But I wouldn't think it would be all that hard to find," he replied. He turned to glance at her, but his eyes were hidden under the glare that the light made on his spectacles. "Perhaps you should ask Claude when he and Felix come up with your things." After that, he shut the door behind him, discouraging any further conversation.

She left her own door slightly ajar so that a sliver of light could penetrate the darkness of the room. In the dimness, she could make out curtains at the far end of the room. Cautiously, she approached and flung open the drapes to let the moonlight in. She coughed a bit as she disturbed the dust. Her room overlooked a bit of the island and in the distance, she could see the dark sea. The full moon was up, a round lantern amidst a sprinkling of stars. Silver highlighted a bit more of the room. Nearby was a canopied bed

and a small table with a candle and a plain metal box.

Haidée groped for the candle and went back out to the hall to light it from one of the lamps. Once the flame caught on the wick, she went back to her room and closed the door.

She had expected a rather sparse room—somewhat like that of a rather cheap inn. And with the religious motifs on the first floor, she had been more inclined to think that the astronomers at the observatory lived more like monks in empty cells with unforgiving wooden cots. Instead, the room looked almost like someone’s study—with the exception of the bed—that had been suddenly abandoned. The walls were lined with shelves of books stuffed in a rather haphazard fashion. Closer to the window was a large oak desk with a few blank papers scattered on its surface. A small pendulum clock with a gilded face sat on one of the shelves, silently counting the time. On the other side of the room was a wardrobe. She opened it, finding it empty.

Beside the wardrobe was a small thin door with a key stuck in the lock. She turned it and pushed the door open. She raised her light and glanced into an odd room studded with green-blue tiles. In one corner was a square table with a large mirror framed with the decorative swirl of wooden carvings. A claw-footed porcelain bathtub sat on the opposite end of the room. Directly across from her door was another door, presumably leading into the room next to hers.

“Merde!”

The angry shout appeared to come from the other side of the door. It sounded like Renaud. She pressed her ear against the opposite door and strained her ears. Nothing. She tried to turn the knob, but it wouldn’t budge. Perhaps there was a key on the lock to this door as well. She tried her own key to the door and to her surprise, the lock clicked. But before she could open the door, it was jerked open of its own accord.

“Mademoiselle Avenall, what a surprise,” said Renaud glaring down at her. “Have you ever heard of knocking?”

“I was curious,” she replied. “And you sounded like you were in distress. I thought it would be better to come to your aid and to ask questions later.”

“Me? In distress?” He looked past her shoulder to the strangely tiled room. “What an odd place. I gather my room is not directly connected with yours.”

“No. This is apparently one of those new bathrooms. Instead of leaving the toilette and the bathtub in a corner of the bedroom, it’s a separate room. I think there’s even a separate pipe near the tub to pump in water. I’ve heard of such things—in the homes of the very wealthy and the eccentric.”

“You have a quibble about hygiene? Don’t tell me you’re one of those backward thinking biddies who wash their faces every Tuesday and don white linen rather than scrub the

grime off their backs. But seeing that you're wearing that awful hat, and perhaps a wig as well, it wouldn't be too much a stretch of the imagination that you're masking some... defects."

"Think what you wish," she replied. "But I am not going to discuss my personal toilette or my fashion sense with you. You have no fashion sense anyway, so that is beside the point. What were you yelling about anyway?"

"I stubbed my toe," he replied easily. "Which is no problem of yours. And as for this room—I suggest you lock my door when you are using it. And I shall do the same."

"That sounds sensible. I have no desire to accidentally walk into this place if your pants are down."

He clicked his tongue in disapproval. "I thought actresses were all open-minded. I was thinking more about my own modesty."

"You? Modesty? I'm not sure the two go together."

"Mademoiselle Avenall? Are you in there?" called out Felix from just outside her bedroom. "We have your things. Where do you want us to put your trunks?"

"Your things have arrived," Renaud said in mock seriousness. "I'm sure you'll want to change into a dinner gown. That is of the latest fashion, of course. But unfortunately, you'll probably take an entire hour to put it on and you'll miss dinner."

"Just put them next to the wardrobe," she called out. Turning back to Renaud, she replied, "You're mistaken, Monsieur. I have no intention of changing into any fancy gowns. Especially since it wouldn't be appreciated by men like you." She slammed the door on his face and marched out of the bathroom to see to her trunks.

Renaud's chuckles drifted through the door.

October 16, 1796
Part IV

"Monsieur Galliard and Father DeLorme have also decided to visit us this evening," said Claude as he led Haidée and Renaud down a different flight of stairs. This one was narrow and cramped forcing them to go one by one—first Claude, then Haidée, and then Renaud bringing up the rear. "Monsieur Galliard is a friend of Monsieur Everard. Although Galliard mostly concerns himself with the daily tasks that being a magistrate on this island entails, he does have an honest interest in scientific matters."

"Galliard is an amateur astronomer?" inquired Renaud.

"Yes. He says he took up the hobby of sky gazing when he had matriculated at the Sorbonne when he was a younger man. I'm sure he will tell you all about it during

dinner.”

“And is this Father DeLorme also another astronomy enthusiast?” asked Haidée.

“Are you worried that the dinner conversation will bore you?” said Renaud.

“On the contrary,” she replied coolly. “I was hoping to learn something of the stars. I know little of the constellations.”

“Well said, although I’ll have to admit that most of the old bachelors in this observatory would find it a daunting task to teach a beautiful young woman such as yourself,” Claude replied. He turned back briefly to grin at her.

“Ah, Monsieur, you flatter me,” she said coyly.

Renaud gave a bark of laughter. “Don’t be fooled by her pretty eyelashes, my friend. I bet she’s probably a hundred and five under that powdered mask.”

At the bottom of the stairs, she gave a quarter turn before raising her chin and glaring. “It is no laughing matter to joke about a lady’s age, Jacques Renaud.”

He was smiling in vicious pleasure when he said, “My name is Jacot Renaud, Mademoiselle. And I hope you don’t forget it. Unless your aging memory fails you again?”

“Pardon me, but by the way you pronounce your own name, any reasonable person would be mistaken.”

Claude shook his head. “The dinner hall is this way.”

The dining hall was long, thin, and high. A table of polished cherry stood at the center, set with silverware, wine glasses, and white porcelain dishware decorated with painted rosebuds. A chandelier of iron and crystal hung suspended over their heads from an arched ceiling buttressed by fat, plain columns. At the end on the room was an enormous window paneled with a multitude of square glass, each pane no bigger than a handkerchief. The light thrown by the wall sconces and the chandelier reflected off the glass making them appear opaque, obscuring anything that might be seen outside.

Claude directed Haidée and Renaud to their seats. Already at the table were several men who hastily stood to introduce themselves. Leonard Everard, a rather tall but plump man with a meticulously curled wig and a faintly stripped brown waistcoat with square buttons, was the first to greet them. Renaud received a hearty clasp of the hands and an exclamation of surprise that he had arrived one month earlier than had been expected. Haidée received an impersonal, yet polite greeting with the comment from Everard hoping that the accommodations were adequate despite that fact that the observatory was not an inn.

Haidée noticed that the other astronomers, who tried their best to ignore her, were watching Renaud with ill-concealed malcontent. She had had little contact with the scientific elite—most of them considered the theatre a waste of time—but she had heard that intellectuals were often egotistical and too sure of themselves. Everyone else who worked in their own fields were often regarded as rivals of the utmost echelon. There were four of them, and they clustered near the far end of the table closest to the window. Edouard Garnier was a rather short, red-faced man with graying hair. She judged that he was probably still a few fingers shorter than she, even if she was not wearing any shoes. Garnier also had the odd habit of scrunching up his face whenever he was talking.

Raymond D'Aubigne was thin and bespectacled. His hair was the color of flax and he wore several fobs and a pocket watch on his waistcoat. He made an obscure joke about telescopes and the "coefficient of expansion" that made all the men laugh. Haidée frowned, sure that it was a dirty joke even when the mechanics of it completely flew over her head. Laurent Roland, if it was even possible, was thinner than D'Aubigne, and truly appeared to be one hundred and five. The old man walked hunched over and bore a wooden cane. His wig was ill-fitting and his skin appeared so papery that it looked like he could blow over at any moment. Xavier Legard was rather robust and appeared to be the leader of the group with his brash gestures and his flamboyant tongue. Legard reminded Haidée of some of the actors that she had worked with in Paris who specialized in playing dark-haired villains with swarthy complexions.

There was another astronomer who also worked at the observatory named Paul Ninon. However, he almost never came to dinner with the rest of the astronomers as he was married and owned a small cottage with his wife Josette in the village. Haidée thought it too bad that the Ninons were not attending the dinner—at least then there would have been another woman to talk to aside from the observatory servants, a maid she had glimpsed while walking to the dining hall and the cook.

The two other guests at the dinner, however, did not wear wigs. Father DeLorme was perhaps in his fifties, but he managed to cut a dashing figure in his entirely black frock and a shock of silver hair that looked like it had been mused by the wind outside just a moment ago. His eyes were a clear gray and he smiled congenially invoking blessings from God as he personally greeted Haidée and Renaud. The magistrate of Mont Saint Filan also seemed to deviate from Haidée's mental image of local politicians. Merle Galliard wasn't dour and stout. In fact, he looked like one of those young dandies who often hung about the backstage dressing rooms, hoping that one of the actresses would bestow her favors on one of them. If appearances were anything to judge by, Haidée figured that he probably only graduated from the Sorbonne a few years ago. With his shining brown hair and a mysterious scar on his cheek, Haidée fancied him quite dashing.

When she was introduced to Galliard, he made a gallant gesture of sweeping her hand up for a kiss before pulling the chair out for her. "I'm enchanted to meet you, Mademoiselle Avenall. You brighten up an otherwise dreary affair with us old cranks."

"You are certainly not old," she replied smiling. "You couldn't possibly be older than a

few years out of university.”

“You are correct, Mademoiselle, if those few years equals a decade and a half,” he replied.

As everyone was seated and Claude and the maid, a rather mousey looking girl named Colette, began to serve out the first course, Father DeLorme tapped his glass with a spoon. “I would suggest that we say grace before our meal, shall we?”

“Oh. Hm. All right,” said Everard reluctantly.

“What if we don’t believe in God?” Legard said loudly. His fellow astronomers nodded.

The rest of the dinner guests were silent. Galliard’s mouth was hanging open as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Haidée slanted a glance at Renaud. He seemed impassive.

“We’re atheists,” Roland explained in a rheumy tenor.

Everard gave an embarrassed cough. “Father DeLorme will do the blessing. I don’t see how that would hurt regardless of your beliefs.”

Roland subsided back into his chair. “Well, you have a point. I don’t see how a blessing will hurt out digestion.”

Legard wasn’t appeased. “Well, it will hurt *my* digestion. I do not wish to be subjected to something that is idiotic and superstitious. I’m going to take dinner in my room.” The man got up, scrapping his chair along the floor in an agonizing screech, and then flounced out of the room.

When he was gone, Everard said, “My apologies, Father. Monsieur Legard has been out of sorts lately. Problems with his current research as I understand it.”

The priest nodded sagely. “I will pray for him then. Hopefully his humors will align themselves back into accord with the natural laws soon enough. The Lord loves all of his flock, be they amiable or in need of some guidance. I have noticed that Monsieur Legard has never attended any of my Sunday services. Perhaps you can prevail upon him to try at least once.”

The head astronomer reluctantly shook his head. “Xavier is a hot-headed man. It is his personality, you see. He would take any suggestion the wrong way.”

“I see. Well then.” Father DeLorme folded his hands on the table serenely. “Let us proceed in asking for the Lord’s blessing for the meal tonight.”

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Part V

An agonized scream ripped Haidée from her nightmare.

It took her a moment to realize that she had not screamed and that she was sitting among the bedclothes of a guest room at the observatory of Mont Saint Filan and not sleeping amidst the feather down pillows that a besotted innkeeper had supplied her back at her stay in Étretat. But she had heard a scream. She was almost sure of it. Perhaps it was from the ghost of the dead astronomer.

During dinner, conversation had turned toward one of Renaud's acquaintances. Apparently, he had had regular correspondence with a Danton Neville who used to work at the observatory until just about ten days ago when he committed suicide by jumping off the bluffs on the west side of the island to drown in the churning waters below leaving nothing but a pair of shoes, a hat, and a brief note that just said "Au revoir." Renaud had claimed that he had no idea that Neville was in such a mental state that he was contemplating suicide—all of his letters to him were mostly about his recent observations about strange objects orbiting the moon and how well his research was going. And according to Everard, Neville did not exhibit any depression or paranoia before his death.

Actually, Haidée didn't believe in ghosts except when she was playing a character who believed in them. What she did believe, though, was that sometimes the impression of a violent death could somehow affect the surroundings and those who were close to the deceased. Maybe a piece of undercooked roast duck had disturbed her sleeping patterns or perhaps the thought of someone committing suicide so recently had rattled her more than she wanted to believe.

Rattled nerves made her think of her tonic. She had taken a sip of it before going to bed, but apparently that sip wasn't enough.

The scream pierced the air again, sharp even as it the sound passed through walls. A terrified man's scream. And then it was cut off abruptly, making her ears ring.

Without thinking of the consequences, she tossed the blankets aside and leaped out of bed, heedless of the cold stone floor chilling the soles of her feet. Her head rebelled at the sudden movement and for a split second, she didn't see the dark shadows of the bedroom. A bright, horrifying image flashed in her vision and she caught her breath—not sure if it was one of those eerily prophetic images that came with her headaches or merely a remnant of her nightmare that was already fading from her memory. Haidée staggered back up right and managed to make it to the door, which she pulled open.

Someone was already up with a candle in his hand, the light catching on his loose hair like a black halo. Jacot Renaud. He turned his head when he heard her door open. He frowned, causing his spectacles to slip down his nose. "Go back to bed, Mademoiselle."

"Oh, no. I'm not going back to bed ignorant of what just happened. I heard it. I know I did. And you did too."

“Well, the middle of the night is no time for a *lady* to be wandering around underdressed. Shouldn’t you be getting your beauty sleep?”

“Look who’s talking! I don’t see why I should be criticized when you’re only wearing your night clothes. And I was getting my beauty sleep when I heard that scream.”

They heard a bang from the other end of the hall and then two more doors opened, revealing two of the astronomers. Laurent Roland was busy tugging on a garish yellow-green robe embroidered with fraying gold threads over his night clothes, but he had completely forgotten his wig revealing a wrinkled, bald head. Edouard Garnier was rubbing his eyes and scrunching his face in an effort to keep awake. His gray hair was sticking straight up in a messy tuft.

“What’s going on?” Garnier yawned. “I thought I heard something.”

“Did someone let a bunch of cats in here?” demanded Roland as he tried to straighten up his robe and ended up dropping his cane.

Another door opened. Everard stomped out wearing a red night cap and matching slippers. His pudgy face was red. “Who’s making that infernal racket? If anyone is doing any experiments at this time of night, he’s going to be expelled from this august institution!”

“I’m not doing anything,” Garnier replied. He put a hand up to his mouth in a vain attempt to stifle another yawn. “I was in the middle of sleeping.”

“So was I,” claimed Roland.

“I was asleep too,” said Renaud.

The men turned to look at Haidée. She crossed her arms across her chest and scowled. “If I was the one screaming, every one of you would be deaf by now.”

There was another banging sound and then a hearty curse. Everard strolled towards one of the doors at the other end of the hallway, the second to the last before the main stairwell. The head astronomer pounded on the wood and demanded, “Open up, D’Aubigne! You’re making an infernal racket!”

The door abruptly opened, revealing the flaxen haired astronomer. He had a look of consternation on his reddened face. “I’m not making that damned racket, Everard! It’s Legard, I tell you. His girly screams woke me up from a sound sleep. I tried opening the door between our rooms, but the bastard has it locked!”

With that, Everard marched to the last door and pounded on it, yelling at Legard to unlock the door. No one answered. There was no screaming or strange thumps heard. That method exhausted, Everard commanded D’Aubigne to go to the servants’ quarters

to wake Claude and Villiers to help break down the door.

As D'Aubigne hurried away and the men began discussing how best to ram the door open, Haidée spoke up. "Why don't we try a key instead of brute force?"

They stopped talking to stare at her. "What, Mademoiselle?" Everard said stupidly. "Please, do not worry about this. You can go back to bed and let us men worry about this."

"She does have a point," Renaud cut in. "Don't you have an extra key to all the rooms? Perhaps Monsieur D'Aubigne's key would work since his room is connected to Monsieur Legard's room."

"All right. It does sound like a more sensible idea than breaking down the door," admitted the head astronomer.

Roland gave a hideous cackle, revealing nothing but gums. Apparently, the teeth he had flashed during dinner had been fake. "Oh ho, the great Everard bested by a woman. Perhaps we should offer her a position as a theoretical scientist?"

Garnier tried to hide a smile by yawning again.

Everard shot the old man a warning look.

Haidée managed a sly smile. "Why Monsieur Roland, you shouldn't make fun of me so. I am an actress, so it is quite plausible that I may be able to act like a theoretical scientist, but that doesn't mean that I would produce any research that would be useful to the scientific establishment."

"Actually, I don't think that would be such a disadvantage," Roland mused. "Theoretical scientists do a lot of hand waving anyway. Much like actors, I suppose. Don't you agree, Monsieur Renaud?"

At Everard's spluttering, Renaud replied tactfully, "I wouldn't know. I haven't much occasion lately to attend the theatre. I'm afraid that Mademoiselle Avenall is my only example. And the only hand waving she's done is to crack a fan. Or to pull out a bottle of her special medication."

"I have not cracked a fan," Haidée retorted. "You haven't seen me with a fan. And if I were to crack one, which I have never done in my entire life, it would be over your hard head."

October 17, 1796
Part VI

D'Aubigne pounded back up the steps, out of breath. Behind him were the observatory servants, Claude and Villiers. Claude was still trying to tuck his undershirt back into his

breeches. Villiers was wearing a very long night shirt—almost like a night gown—that was made of an odd white and blue striping pattern and reached his ankles.

“It turns out that we won’t need your assistance,” Everard told Claude and Villiers. “We only need a key. Raymond, doesn’t your key also fit into Xavier’s door?”

“Oh, that. I have no idea,” replied D’Aubigne. “I have never tried my key on his door.” He fumbled in his pockets and came up with two iron keys, one smaller than the other. He held up the larger one. “This one goes to my room. The smaller one is used for the connecting bathroom.”

D’Aubigne tried to open Legard’s bedroom door first. The key went in easily, but did not turn. So they all followed him back to his own room where he opened a small door, similar to the one that led into the bathroom that connected Haidée and Renaud’s rooms. It was another bathroom as well, but this one was tiled in a light gray.

Haidée stood back a little ways to observe the men go about the unlocking of doors with the utmost seriousness. She glanced around D’Aubigne’s lodgings, taking in a bed with a wrought iron frame, two squat wardrobes sitting side by side, a desk with a closed trunk wedged underneath, a padded chair stacked with papers with an ink bottle serving as a paperweight, and a pile of books just underneath a window in which the drapes were drawn shut.

“Ah! So my key does work on his door!” exclaimed D’Aubigne as everyone heard an audible click. He pulled the door open and walked inside first. “Le...” there was a horrified choking sound and then a thump.

“D’Aubigne!” shouted Everard. “Legard! Good God, what is this?”

She trailed in after the men who seemed to have forgotten her as they had their attention fixed on the commotion. The first thing she saw was D’Aubigne who was sprawled on the floor with his hands covering his eyes and moaning. She looked over Garnier’s shoulder toward the interior of Legard’s bedroom and her breath caught in her throat and her skin went cold and numb.

A candelabra sitting on a bedside table cast a golden sheen over the scene. The bed itself was one of those heavy wooden monstrosities consisting of a thick frame covered by a stifling canopy. But the green velvet bed curtains were drawn aside to reveal the interior—a smoothed over coverlet and pillows indicating that no one had slept on them. Across from the bed was an open window looking out over the dark island. The drapes slowly fluttered as a cold breeze drifted inside.

And then there was the body. Legard was kneeling on the floor next to the bed, naked. He was leaning face down on the coverlet, his arms stretched over his head as if he were about to pray or to receive a lover. But that wasn’t what made her feel light-headed and ill. There were markings on his back, strange markings that were black, unnatural and glistening. And the worst part was that those markings sparked a dim sort of

recollection in the recesses of her memory.

The others were silent, except for D'Aubigne's sobbing, as they struggled to take in the scene. It was only until Renaud made a move toward Legard that the others began to shift on their feet, murmuring incoherently. He stood over the body and put two fingers to Legard's neck. After a moment, he removed his hand and he turned toward the others with a slight downward tilt of his mouth. The angle of the light made the glass of his spectacles opaque, hiding his expression.

"He's dead," Renaud said flatly. "And probably not for very long. He's still warm."

"My God," exclaimed Roland. "How could he just die like that? His health is better than mine."

"Maybe someone killed him," supplied Garnier. The short astronomer walked around the bed and headed to the window to examine the pane and the outside ledge. "The murderer must have escaped this way."

"Save the speculations for later," said Everard. "Claude, go wake the magistrate. And Villiers, go get the village doctor. We don't want to make any unsound judgements. Legard could merely be in a comma. Garnier, close the window and help me get Legard back on the bed."

As the two servants hustled out of the room to get the authorities, Haidée edged around the room to look at something that caught her eye. Legard's room was unusual in that one side of his room was occupied with a fireplace framed with a white mantelpiece decorated with gilded molding. There was no fire in the hearth, but ash was scattered about the surrounding floor in a strange swishing pattern—as if someone had tried to clean it up with a broom. Next to the fireplace, at the corner, was a square writing table and a plain wooden chair pushed back as if someone had just gotten up from it. On the table were several sheaves of paper stained by an overturned bottle of ink. The quill was nowhere to be found.

"Mademoiselle." She looked up to find Renaud standing next to her. He was close enough that she could see his eyes behind his spectacles, dark and missing nothing. In a lowered voice, he said, "This is no place for a woman. Everard might not believe it, but Legard is dead. I am worried that these tragic circumstances will disturb your sensibilities."

"I'm not the one in hysterics," she replied, tilting her head to indicate D'Aubigne who had now curled up in a fetal position. "Your hands are shaking."

In response, she clenched her clammy hands into fists and shoved them behind her back. "That doesn't matter. I think I agree with Monsieur Garnier—that someone else must be involved in this."

"Damn it, you fools!" said Roland in sudden fervor. "Look what you've done! You've

destroyed the evidence!”

“It wasn’t me,” claimed Garnier. “I tried to put him face down on the bed, but Everard is much stronger than I am.”

“I thought they were tattoos,” the head astronomer huffed.

Garnier and Everard had managed to drag Legard’s body back on the bed, but this time he was lying on his back. The coverlet was smeared with the ink that had been on Legard’s back. Someone had managed to find a linen shirt somewhere and had draped it over Legard to preserve the corpse’s modesty. Or perhaps it was to shield the dead man’s nudity from sensitive eyes. That thought almost made Haidée scoff. She’d seen enough naked men to say that a corpse wasn’t going to make that much of a difference to her.

Renaud put his hands on her shoulders which made her suddenly stiffen. “What are you doing?” she asked suspiciously.

He steered her past the prone D’Aubigne and out of the bathroom. “You’re not one to listen to common sense, are you?” he replied. “Trust me, whether Legard died of natural causes or not, I do not suggest that you linger here. The magistrate and the doctor will arrive soon and as guests, we will merely get in their way. It is better to let Monsieur Everard and his colleagues to attend to one of their own.” Once out in the hallway, he dropped his arms.

“But it’s obvious that someone is involved in his death,” she protested. “You don’t think Monsieur Legard painted those symbols on his back by himself, do you? And while we’re out here arguing about this, the murderer could be getting away!”

Something dark glittered in his gaze. “You forget, Mademoiselle. This is an island and today is a new day. The tide is in. If there is indeed a murderer, there is no way for him to leave.”

October 17, 1796
Part VII

The morning was overcast—the clouds thick, heavy and gray, swirling overhead as a stiff breeze blew past the mourners. Large drops of rain began to fall, slowly as if waiting just for the right moment for someone to shift a foot there so it could land on a nose or even better, in the eye. Haidée couldn’t have planned it better if she was a director of a play, in charge of getting the scenery just right. The cool autumn day struck the right chord of somberness and dark eeriness that somehow, she couldn’t quite shake.

When the magistrate Galliard and the village doctor, a Doctor Martin, arrived at the observatory soon after the discovery of Legard’s body, the rest of the astronomers scattered out into the hallway where she and Renaud had been waiting. D’Aubigne had managed to pull himself together to drag himself out. And while they were waiting for the verdict, the flaxen haired astronomer had declared that he was going to the

servants's quarters to sleep for the rest of the night—if he could get back to sleep after the trauma that he had suffered. The other astronomers had looked at each other and had begun murmuring in low voices, speculating on what the doctor would say. Everard seemed adamant that Legard was still in a coma—but when the old, wrinkling doctor came out, shaking his head, the head astronomer seemed to collapse into himself.

“What a promising scientist!” he had wailed. “All gone to waste in his prime!”

Haidée shifted on her feet, thinking that the pair of shoes that she had donned for Legard's funeral was a poor match for the occasion. In fact, she was sure that if her choice of outfit for the funeral got out to the rest of society on the mainland, she would be ridiculed. No woman of fashion would ever wear a dark burgundy gown to a funeral. If she had known that someone on this godforsaken island would have the bad manners to die, she would have packed the appropriate mourning dress—which was black.

The servants, Villiers and Claude, had ended up taking Legard's body out of the room to be placed elsewhere before a coffin could be made. Where, she had no idea. But then upon reflection, she didn't really want to know where Claude and Villiers had put the body. She had seen corpses before—but they were of the theatre variety, either a mannequin made of rags or an actor smeared with red dye and clutching a blunted foil. But then the corpse was the least of her worries. There were the markings to consider—and she was reluctant to recall where she had learned that before.

The small cemetery beside the parish church was bounded by a wooden fence and a copse of bare trees. In the distance stood the observatory, a round Byzantine hulk upon a dark hill. By a series of ropes and pulleys, a four of the village workmen lowered a plain wooden coffin into the ground. Father DeLorme stood at the head of the grave with an open Bible in his hand. His assistant, a thin, pale young man, held a censer that spewed out noxious smoke, making those closest to the grave wipe their watering eyes with black lacey handkerchiefs. Haidée thought it extremely odd that Legard was given a Christian burial when the night before he had adamantly proclaimed that he was an atheist. But what was done was done—Father DeLorme, after all, was the only one on the island who had had any experience with burials.

Haidée discretely tried to pull her coat closer to her body. The wind seemed to turn suddenly cold as if someone among the mourners was trying to work a certain curious art. She studied the faces of all the mourners, but they were muffled either with handkerchiefs or collars and everyone was looking slightly away from the hole in the ground as if it were something unbearable and taboo.

Much of the village came out to pay their respects for the dead astronomer. She was quite sure that everyone in the village knew Legard much better than she, so politely, she stepped aside for anyone who wanted to edge closer to the focal point of the event. Father DeLorme began speaking in low, solemn tones, but she wasn't paying attention to the words. She had somehow found herself at the edge of the crowd. To her right was Maurice Ducos, the fellow vacationer who had a friend reserve a bed for him at The Cormorant. His hefty bulk was shifted forward as he strained to see what was going on.

To her left was one of the astronomers—the old man Roland. He was wearing a dark brown coat, but at least he was also wearing a black scarf as a concession to the occasion. He was gripping his cane as he listened to the sermon.

“Bah,” Roland said lowly. “Legard is probably rolling in his coffin. I suppose the priest does have his last laugh.”

“I’ve never heard Father DeLorme laugh,” Haidée said lightly. “I’m sure this is as much a shock to him as it is to us. Legard was murdered after all. What I don’t understand is why we’re having this funeral when we could be looking for who killed him. Besides, this is on such short notice that I couldn’t find anything proper to wear.”

“I agree with you that the murderer must be found, but I care very little for fashion,” replied Roland. “But what do I know? I’m just an old man. What Everard says goes. And you’ve noticed that Galliard doesn’t exactly contradict him. Ha! The young puppy thinks Everard knows everything since he’s in charge of the observatory. But I admit that it is a shock. People need to grieve before they can move on to anything.”

“That’s true.” She was silent for a moment before she said softly, mostly to herself as she remembered what Renaud had told her. “The murderer might be here among us.”

“Yes.” The old man slanted her a glance. “You’re a bright girl even if most of your brain is consumed by frivolous fashion. Who do you think it might be?”

“How would I know?” she replied. “I just arrived on Mont Saint Filan last night. You know the island far better than I. Did Monsieur Legard have any enemies?”

Roland chuckled and then coughed loudly before he hacked up some sputum and spat it on the ground. Several of the mourners, including Maurice Ducos, turned to the old man with glares. “Sorry,” the old man mumbled. When they turned back to hear the rest of the priest’s speech, Roland continued, “Legard acted like a blowhard. I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone viewed him as an antagonist at one point or another. Personally, I’m most suspicious of D’Aubigne.”

“Monsieur D’Aubigne?” said Haidée, surprised. “He is the astronomer who shares a bathroom with Monsieur Legard, correct? He seemed severely traumatized by Monsieur Legard’s death. A killer certainly wouldn’t react that way, could he?”

“You tell me,” the old man replied. “You’re an actress.”

She frowned. “I suppose shock can be feigned convincingly.” She thought of a play she had done two years ago where she had played a grieving widow. She had bawled and cried crocodile tears and had no doubt that everyone in the theatre didn’t believe her. Then there were those more subtle instances when she had cried to win the director’s sympathy—the director never believed her tears. But then everyone in theatre tended to disbelieve each other. As for ordinary people, she doubted they even thought of acting when they confronted something as sudden as a death. But with Roland’s words, a seed

of doubt was planted in her mind.

Roland wiped his mouth with the end of his scarf. “D’Aubigne does have cause to dislike Legard—perhaps even to the point of hate,” he whispered. “When he first came to the observatory, Everard put him under Legard’s tutelage. They worked together for some research about studying the parallax of stars. When it was time to present the research at the Royal Academy, Legard claimed most of the authorship even though we all knew that D’Aubigne did most of the work. But no one did anything—Everard said nothing about it. And when the person in charge condones something like this, it is hard to bring this issue up.”

“But is taking credit for someone else’s work really enough reason to kill?” mused Haidée.

“You do not understand the world of academia, Mademoiselle. Intellectual minds have tried to kill each other for much less. It was soon after that when D’Aubigne managed to convince Everard to let him go on the research alone. But that’s the problem. D’Aubigne is very good at doing the work, but he is poor on ideas. Legard is very good on ideas but he is not very good at doing the work. The two need each other even when their personalities do not mesh. Perhaps D’Aubigne realized this and it was too much for him.” Roland cleared his throat. “But what do I know? Take the delusions of an old man as you will.”

Shrewdly, Haidée asked, “And what was your relationship with Monsieur Legard?”

“He was a fellow astronomer and a fellow atheist. That is all.” Roland coughed again, but this time, it sounded somewhat false to her ears. “Pardon me, Mademoiselle. It seems as if the weather has gotten quite cold. I’m afraid my constitution isn’t as good as it used to be.”

Haidée turned to look at the rest of the mourners, but out of the corner of her eye, she observed the old man switch the cane to his other hand and make a strange shuffle with his feet. Her own feet felt suddenly chilly. “That is unfortunate, Monsieur,” she replied softly. “But fear not, I am quite sure that Father DeLorme is almost done with his elegy and we’ll soon be able to go back inside.”

October 18, 1796
Part VIII

Haidée took the gravel path from the observatory to the village. She had decided to wear her walking boots--a sturdy pair of black footwear that she had ordered from an exclusive cobbler who had set up shop on the banks of the Seine, just outside the squalor of Paris. She was also wearing a yellow walking dress and a thick brown jacket which hid the ruffles of canary colored lace on her bodice. The outfit was completed with a bonnet that had a wide brim to shield her eyes and a pair of white gloves. The air was crisp although it was still somewhat overcast like the day of the funeral.

The observatory was not far from the village of Mont Saint Filan. It was perhaps less than a mile according to the gravel path. Usually, Haidée did not walk around Paris--she took a hired carriage instead--whenever she needed one. Here, on an island, ordering a carriage was too over the top considering everything was within walking distance. The only reason one would rather ride a carriage would be if one didn't want to get any exercise.

Haidée had nothing against exercise--as long as she didn't have to exert too much effort. Why run when one could walk from one point to another? And she was in no hurry to get anywhere--not since she was on vacation. An enforced vacation.

Approximately five days prior to her arrival to Étretat, the coastal resort town that was the main land connection to Mont Saint Filan, Haidée had been ensconced in her Paris town house wondering if she was slowly going mad.

The headaches had been severe and the strange waking visions that she got when the headaches were especially acute were at the least, disturbing. She had told Monsieur Signe, the director of the theatre, about them and he had brushed it off as her overwrought nerves.

"Pah, pistol fights and bloody sword wounds," the director had scoffed. "That is nothing worse than a particularly exciting bit of drama on stage. Although I must admit that the rabble has gotten quite restless lately."

They had been sitting at a discrete café overlooking the Seine River--it was a private table, away from prying eyes. Haidée had managed a lofty smile at Signe's blithe comment even as she sipped her drink--a poppy wine substituted for the red. At the time, she had felt quite lucid although now she wondered if she had looked too worn out to Signe for him to have made the suggestion of vacation.

"It's been a week since the play has closed and I haven't scheduled anything until next spring, unfortunately."

"You were *forced* to reschedule to next spring," Haidée had murmured. "What were you thinking when you had us open that satire on the storming of the Bastille? That is too recent--the wound in the public heart is still too raw. Of course, there would be a backlash."

Signe had given a disgruntled huff. "How was I to know that the French mind was still so conservative? Liberty, they say, and yet they don't practice what they preach!"

"At least you can afford to close for the winter season."

"Yes, because the theatre is still funded by certain wealthy patrons who don't care what sort of controversy is stirred up." He had paused for a moment before saying, "Speaking of controversy, what of those letters that you had been receiving?"

She had taken another sip of her tonic to fortify herself about thinking about those letters. They were threatening letters by rather irate theatre patrons about her last performance. But those letters weren't so bad that she would have been forced to hire a bodyguard. Or at least she didn't think so. "They haven't stopped, if that's what you're asking."

"All of this is just additional stress for you, my dear. I don't want you to be completely unhinged when spring arrives and our new play opens. Since the theatre itself is on a sabbatical right now, why don't you take a vacation yourself? Perhaps somewhere restful in the country."

She had shuddered at the suggestion. "Spare me that idea, Signe. I am no country girl. Farms don't have fashion or gossip. And you know I live on fashion and gossip."

"Sometimes there is such a thing as too much of a good thing."

And then one thing led to another and she had found herself packing two trunks and dismissing her house staff for the month. She took a coach out of the city with the final destination of Mont Saint Filan. Signe had somehow convinced her that the island off the coast of Normandy was an excellent vacation spot with all the advantages of the country and the amenities of the city.

"Just like that English city called Bath," Signe had said, "Except without those infernal hot springs."

Of course, Signe had never visited the place. He had based his recommendation from a friend of a friend. And after what she had gone through the past two days, she doubted that she would ever trust Signe's suggestions in the future.

October 18, 1796
Part IX

The rustic atmosphere of the village made Haidée think of coarse linens and bad shoes. The smell of the place was no worse than the city. If she wanted to be honest to herself, the smell was actually better. The village of Mont Saint Filan had little place for farm animals so the island wasn't overrun with stinking cows and pigs. Unlike the city where the air seemed to settle down around the buildings and stifle people at days at a time, the ocean air currents carried most of the scent away leaving an almost astringent, salty odor. One of the things that Haidée didn't like about the city, but never said aloud to anyone, was the city folk's penchant for dousing themselves with heavy perfumes to mask their body odor. Unlike herself, most city folk disliked bathing but still liked to smell "fresh." Unfortunately, masking did not always go over so well.

The gravel path from the observatory to the village terminated into a paved square at the center of the village. On one side was the inn, The Cormorant, which stood three levels high in a rough hewn gray stone. The shutters were closed—apparently all of the occupants were still asleep or away. The other buildings were made of a similar material,

most of them also two or three stories high, and a main street ran from the east to the west with the inn as the center point. Few other villagers were about, seemingly busy, although they had enough time to shoot her odd looks. Her fashionable day walking costume was obviously out of the norm.

She headed west on the main street with no particular destination in mind. She had left the observatory around nine-thirty, after a brief breakfast in the kitchen served by the mousey and shy maid, Colette. The cook was nowhere to be found, although Colette had mumbled something about “picking apples for the noon pie.” She had eaten alone. Nine-thirty was quite early for her—Haidée usually got up around noon when she lived in Paris—but the astronomers had gotten up even earlier around six in the morning, no doubt to immerse themselves in their research and as an attempt to forget about Legard’s strange death.

The way Legard died bothered her. It also bothered her why no one on the island seemed so up in arms about it. Perhaps Legard had many enemies on Mont Saint Filan, even more than that old astronomer Roland had dared to tell her, and that they were all glad that Legard was gone. But not knowing all the details, she felt it was unjust. Even if Legard had been a miserable human being rather than just being merely annoying as she had briefly observed on her first night at the observatory, it was still wrong to kill him.

Most of the houses along the main street appeared to be residential. A couple doors down from the inn, however, was a sign hanging over a small shop with only one word, “rue”, being the only one that was readable. The rest of the sign’s paint had peeled away leaving only the darkened wood underneath. Curious, Haidée approached the front steps when the door to the shop opened suddenly, making her jump reflexively backward.

“Pardon me, Mademoiselle,” huffed a shop patron. She looked up to see that it was Maurice Ducos. “I did not see you there.” He was carrying a rucksack of something. Groceries, she assumed, since a loaf of bread was sticking out at the top. “I hope that you are not hurt?”

“I am perfectly fine, Monsieur Ducos,” she replied. “I was out taking a walk and I saw this shop. You are out shopping for food? I thought that the inn also provided the meals.”

“Humph,” Ducos replied with a shake of his head. “You should be glad that you are not staying at the inn, Mademoiselle. The innkeeper is a tyrant underneath his laid back veneer. He says that he does not serve lunch, only dinner! My friends and I have taken turns coming to this grocery to get something before we perish of hunger.”

“Oh, how dreadful,” she tsked. “Doesn’t the innkeeper know that being so strict with meals will drive his clientele away?”

“On that count, Fasset is quite clever,” Ducos said. “He owns the only inn on this island.

And there is no way off of this place until the tide goes out a month hence.”

“Quite true,” she replied in a commiserating tone. “Unless one would care to make a swim for it to the main land.”

“I would sink like a stone,” Ducos exclaimed. “Besides, what sane person would want to swim? Water is bad for you.”

Haidée wrinkled her nose. She didn’t want to be reminded that certain people wouldn’t want to bathe even if their life depended on it. “Water is only bad if you drown in it.”

The door to the grocery swung open again, revealing a tall, broad shouldered figure with gleaming brown hair. It was the magistrate, Merle Galliard. He was holding a rucksack as well, but when he spotted Haidée, he made a surprised exclamation and swept into a bow before taking her hand and placing a kiss on her fingers. She should have been pleased that the only good-looking bachelor on the island was paying so much attention to her, but instead, she was somewhat irritated that her pristine white glove was now dotted with saliva.

“Mademoiselle Avenall! What a pleasure to see you this morning!”

“What a coincidence, Monsieur Galliard,” she simply greeted. She wasn’t quite sure if the pleasure was mutual. “You are also shopping for food like Monsieur Ducos?”

“The boy invited himself along,” the portly vacationer explained. “He wants to see how well we visitors to Mont Saint Filan are doing.”

“I’m just being an attentive magistrate,” said Galliard, smiling and revealing dimples. “I hope that all our visitors to Mont Saint Filan have a pleasant visit to this quaint island, bar a few out of character mishaps.”

Haidée didn’t think that murder was merely a “mishap,” but she decided not to comment on that at the moment. “I suppose Mont Saint Filan is a quaint island—depending on your definition of quaint.”

Galliard laughed. “You have such a humor, Mademoiselle.”

“I didn’t think I was that funny.”

“It was sarcasm then?” He sounded clueless. “What brings you out on this overcast day?”

“I wanted to take a walk and to look around at the village,” she replied. “The place is quite small, so I’d imagine that I would be heading back to the observatory soon.”

“If that is so, please let me accompany you back,” offered Galliard. “Surely you would enjoy some company in your walk? Or perhaps you would like to join us for luncheon?”

She saw a surprised look briefly come over Ducos' face before he quickly masked it. Apparently, Maurice Ducos was in charge of the meal at the inn and Galliard had little authority to invite anyone, even if he was the magistrate. She shook her head. "I would not want you to take you away from your meeting with Monsieur Ducos. I am fine by myself—there is a certain adventure about exploring a place oneself."

"If you say so, Mademoiselle." This time, a shadow fell over the magistrate's face, the scar on his cheek making him look even more stark than he really was. "But please, do remember what has happened on this island so recently. Mont Saint Filan is a serene place, but it would not be very wise to venture to too many places alone. There is danger. Do not forget that."

"Yes, about that danger," she said. "Surely you are still looking into what happened to Monsieur Legard?"

"It was an unfortunate happenstance with Legard. An assistant and I are doing all we can at the moment," he said solemnly. "Rest assured that we will do all we can."

When the two men finally bade her a good day and strolled back down the lane to The Cormorant, Haidée sighed, pensive.

October 18, 1796

Part X

"Oh my."

The snap of a fan caused Haidée to pause at the threshold of the store. But upon closer scrutiny, the proprietress did not appear to be talking to her. The aging woman in a low-cut green gown and a powdered wig decked with matching ribbons was fanning herself as she stared out the shop window at the retreating forms of Ducos and Galliard. The woman then turned her cheek slightly to observe her with an ill-concealed disdain.

"You must consider yourself lucky, Mademoiselle," she said to Haidée, "to have caught the eye of the magistrate."

Her lip curved in a wry smile. "And your point is?"

"He went to the Sorbonne," the proprietress added. "He is a highly intelligent man and he knows he has his pick."

"Hm. Well, if it eases the fear of this island's young ladies, I am not on the menu. I'm Haidée Avenall—just a visitor, that is all."

The shopkeeper clicked her fan closed and made a moue with her artificially reddened lips. Haidée mentally shook her head at the misuse of cosmetics. Had the woman never

heard of the word subtle? “I am Georgette Beauchamp and I own this store. And what do you mean about not being on the menu? That sounds atrocious. Are you married?”

“Does it matter if I am?” she simply replied. Then she turned back to survey the store as Georgette made disapproving noises at the back of her throat.

The store itself was crammed with shelves of jarred and canned food. She saw no bread about and wondered if Ducos had gotten his elsewhere. And if that was the case—certainly, there was a bakery on this island as well. She perused the shelves, but as she turned a corner, she nearly bumped into a middle aged man in a worn gray jacket and a fraying black waistcoat bent over to read one of the can labels.

“Excuse me, Monsieur.”

The man straightened up and Haidée noticed that he wore a very strange tri-cornered hat and that his hair was a rapidly graying red. His rheumy blue eyes gave her a cursory glance before he turned his attention back to the cans. “Mademoiselle, what are you doing all the way back here? Surely, you should be back at the genteel atmosphere of the observatory. I cannot imagine an actress of your caliber coming all the way to a backwoods grocery shop.” His accent was odd and she couldn’t quite place it.

“You have the advantage of knowing me while I do not know you, Monsieur,” she replied. “Are you English?”

“My father was French and my mother half-Irish. I lived in Ireland until I was seventeen,” he responded. He tapped a finger to his chin and then took two of the cans. They were marked sardines. “And it is hard to miss an actress if she has come to a small island for a vacation. I saw you in a play when I once visited Paris. It was a play about a ghost and revenge, I think. I forget its name. You were still quite raw then, but it was obvious that you would be a rising star.”

“That play,” she said, “was very popular. But I did nothing but scream and faint in that one. The director did not trust me yet with any speaking roles.”

“My name is Seymour Davenport, Mademoiselle Avenall.” He held out his hand and she shook it, amused. The English and the Irish—for in her mind, they were all the same—had such strange notions for customs. “I work as the observatory’s librarian.”

“I have not seen you there although I think you were mentioned,” she replied.

“That’s because I live in the village like Paul Ninon. And I’m not surprised that the other astronomers have not mentioned me. I am not a scientist. I merely catalogue books and to them, that is as equivalent as a clerk. Not very important.”

“That is too bad,” she said. “Where would they be without anyone organizing their work?”

“Where indeed?” said Davenport. He picked up a jar of berry preserves on a nearby shelf. “You are touring the village, I take it?”

“Yes. I decided on taking advantage of my vacation.” She bit her lip thinking. “Although it hasn’t been quite what I expected so far.”

“Ah yes, the unfortunate matter.” He was scanning another shelf filled with tins and frowning. Haidée looked at the tins as well—they were all painted in flowers or pastoral scenes and the labels proclaimed them to be canisters of tea. “If I may say so, despite disturbing your sensibilities, I would gather that you were there at the scene?”

“I was.” Davenport had moved on to another aisle in the store—this one supplying paper, ink, and writing implements. She watched him closely as he considered the bottles of ink. “It was disturbing to say the least. Did you hear about the details?”

“Only that he died in the middle of the night in his room. I heard that it may not have been an entirely natural death.”

“Hm. I thought it quite unnatural. Tell me, Monsieur Davenport, what do you know about inks?”

He turned to regard her solemnly. “You must have a reason for asking me that question.” He jerked his head toward the counter where Georgette was hiding behind her fan. “It is obvious that you are trying to find out something,” he said lowly. “Let us talk about this elsewhere.”

She gave a sharp nod.

In a normal voice, he said, “Have you been to the Green Café, Mademoiselle? It is just down the main street.”

“No. I had the impression that most of the village was residential.”

“Oh, there are interesting places tucked here and there,” he replied. “Let me purchase these and I’ll show you.”

She followed him back to the front counter where Georgette totaled Davenport’s purchases and he paid for them before putting the odd assortment of cans and jars into his own rucksack. “I heard that you are going to the Green Café,” the proprietress said silkily as the observatory librarian was preoccupied with his things. “You are quite fast, aren’t you, Mademoiselle?”

The word fast didn’t have a very good connotation coming from her. But then she had heard worse. Sophisticated Parisian ladies had far subtler and sharper tongues when they wanted to flay a perceived rival. “I’m afraid my city ways must come as a shock to you,” Haidée replied. “The customs in the country must be very sedate indeed.”

“Sedate?” said Davenport. “Don’t you mean slow?”

“Perhaps,” Haidée said coolly. “Although I wouldn’t think of the village matrons as very slow.”

The proprietress made a strange sound at the back of her throat and slammed her hand down on the counter, and in the process, broke her fan. “I am not a matron!”

“Oh, you aren’t?” Haidée gave a mock dip of her head. “My apologies, Mademoiselle.” Then she headed out of the shop after Davenport.

October 18, 1796
Part XI

The Green Café was merely a few steps down from the grocery selling tinned foods and various other items. The café itself looked more like a dark shop stained with years of heavy smoke. Squat pots filled with dying mums sat on the ground next to the building, right under the window. The wood framing the windows and doors were a muted dark brown color looking like old, chipping accents on the building façade. There was a sign leaning against the door, the chains that had been used to hang it over the door, broken. Only the word “café” was carved onto it—the sign itself, which must have been green at some point in its history—had now oxidized to black.

“I’m sure this isn’t anything that you’re used to back home,” said Davenport. “But other than the tavern at the inn, which no doubt is busy with all the vacationers that had arrived the other day, this is pretty much the only café that Mont Saint Filan has.”

Haidée discretely sniffed the air. There was a filmy quality to it, as if the smoke and the beer from the previous night hadn’t completely aired out. “I suppose I will survive, Monsieur Davenport. I do not expect much in the way of choice outside of the city.”

Inside, the main room was equally as dark. The observatory librarian chose the table closest to the window. But even with the overcast light illuminating their seats, the sole maid of the establishment brought over a candle to be placed on the table top. She looked around noticing that they were the only ones in the café and the maid appeared to have no interest in them as she retreated back into the kitchen to bring out some hot cider.

“Not very many people come here during the day,” said Davenport, noticing her observations. “It gets more crowded during dinner time. I have to tell you, though, most of the locals prefer this place to The Cormorant. There are too many outsiders there at the inn, you understand.”

“With the exception of myself?”

“I think you might be more than you appear, Mademoiselle Avenall.”

“Monsieur Davenport, you are talking to an actress. I can make myself appear as if there is more to myself when there is nothing behind my face.”

“Ha!” His eyes were shrewd. “If that is what you want to tell me, then I will say no more about the subject. What do you want to know about ink? Have you run out?”

At that moment, the maid returned with two wooden mugs filled with steaming cider on a tray. She placed them on the table with a somewhat careless air and then sauntered off. It was then that Haidée noticed that an enormous white cat had followed at the maid’s heels and then climbed onto a chair next to the observatory librarian. The cat’s fur looked particularly long and luxurious—unusually clean for an animal that appeared to have no rich and pampering owner looking after it. The animal peered at the two people seated with one yellow eye and one blue eye and then yawned, revealing sharp teeth and a tiny pink tongue.

Haidée had the strangest sensation that the cat was a spy. But it was no more than a simple animal, surely. She wished for her tonic, but since she didn’t have any, she tried a sip of the cider instead. It tasted bitter and reflexively, she put her hand to her mouth and coughed. The cat didn’t even blink.

Davenport downed his own drink with seemingly little effect. “It’s an acquired taste,” he said. He put a hand on top of the cat’s head and scratched. The cat’s eyes slitted in pleasure. “This is Neige.”

“Your cat?”

“He follows me around. Sometimes.”

She nodded and then turned back to Davenport with her hands folded on her lap. The cider may be an acquired taste, but she had no inclination to actually acquiring that taste while she was here. “I noticed some ink at the observatory,” she said, carefully to modulate her voice towards a somewhat bored curiosity. “It isn’t the same as the kind that I’ve been using. It doesn’t look like the kind in Mademoiselle Beauchamp’s shop either.”

“What do you mean it isn’t the same kind?” said Davenport. “Black ink looks all the same.”

“The bottle,” she explained. “The body of it was round, like that of a summer gourd and it had a long thin neck—too thin for a pen but it was enough for a quill. It was somewhat old fashioned although I have no idea what sort of stopper it had—as I saw no small glass caps or pieces of cork in the vicinity.”

“That is odd. Everard and his fellow astronomers prefer to have their supply of ink shipped in separately from the mainland. You must have seen the carts of supplies that came to the observatory in the morning when the tide was out.”

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I arrived quite late."

"Well, no matter. This happens every month. The astronomers prefer to use an English ink that holds quite fast to the paper and is slow to run if the paper is accidentally put in water. It comes in a bottle about the size of my palm." Davenport held out a large hand and curled his thick fingers inward to demonstrate. "It looks more like a jar than a vial as you had described. The lid is a flat, copper-plated disc that can be screwed on."

"No, that definitely does not sound like what I had observed."

"If that is the case, then I do not know what to tell you. I have no particular preference for which ink to use and I do not pay much attention to those things. If it were a book, I could be much more helpful. Otherwise, I can only think of one possibility—someone had decided to try another brand."

October 19, 1796
Part XII

Signe had said that there was such a thing as too much of a good thing. Well, when she got back to Paris, she was going to shove those words back down his throat. She was getting too much a vacation. Everything seemed too relaxed. So relaxed that she felt like a tightly wound coil about to go off at any moment. Aside from her jaunt to the village the previous day, she had done absolutely nothing. The astronomers were too busy with their work. The servants were working. She couldn't even do any adequate snooping—as the bedroom that used to be Legard's had been locked back up.

"Are you sure you can't take off today?" Haidée whined as she paced near the back door of the observatory's kitchen in short, restless strides. In her hand was a bottle of tonic.

Colette shook her head as she finished packing the luncheon basket that she had requested. "I'm sorry, Mademoiselle. I must work." Then the mousey maid furtively glanced back at the cook who was on the other side of the room stirring a pot on the oven. The cook was a large, heavy-set woman who wore voluminous muslin skirts and a white cap over wiry hair. "Madame Boulanger would be livid if I took off without prior notice."

The maid wasn't much of a talker, but Haidée was desperate for some companionship. "Madame Boulanger works you too hard."

"No, not that much. She is simply very strict."

"And I am too liberal, is that it?" The maid seemed surprised at her edgy tone. At her expression, Haidée stopped. "I apologize, Colette. Eight o'clock is too early for me. Even my medication wasn't sufficient to completely awaken me."

"No one asked you to wake at an hour that you are not accustomed to, Mademoiselle."

Haidée was silent at that remark. She felt that it would be too strange for her to admit aloud to her reasons for getting up early. Colette might think her mad or obsessed. Instead, she stuffed her tonic bottle into the basket when the maid had finished putting everything into it and then tucked the basket handle onto the crook of her arm.

“Will you be back for dinner?” Colette finally asked.

She paused before putting her hand on the knob of the kitchen’s back door. She turned her head slightly to look at the maid and then the cook. Madame Boulanger had paused in her stirring and had ambled over to ponder a spice rack. Haidée wasn’t fooled. “I will be back before dinner,” she said loudly. “And judging from the weather when I looked out the window earlier, I would very much appreciate it if there were some cold hors d’oeuvres for the evening meal.”

“Mademoiselle!” Colette whispered horrified. “You know Madame Boulanger despises unwanted visitors. She’s going to make the exact opposite as you say.”

Haidée winked at her before opening the door and taking a step through the threshold. “That’s exactly what I’m counting on, my dear Colette.”

Outside, the wind was brisk and cool, but the sky was far lighter than the previous days. It was a deep turquoise blue and the clouds overhead were fluffy bits of meringue, swiftly dusting across the horizon with the breeze. Haidée was glad that she had chosen a much stiffer coat to put on over her walking dress—this one was done in a severe military style, long and black with shiny brass buttons. She chose to wear a pair of black boots as well as a matching bonnet over her head. The loose and curling red-brown locks flowing out from beneath the bonnet meant that she had decided not to wear the wig. Which was just as well, she had reasoned when she had gotten dressed. She was taking a walk outside, alone, and no one at the observatory seemed to particularly care about what she had on her head.

Opposite to the main path that connected the observatory to the village was another smaller dirt path that wound around the observatory’s back garden and out over to the edge of the island. Haidée set out on a sedate pace, walking a bit first and then stopping beside a shrub of roses or a patch of herbs to simply take things in, to idle, and to empty her mind of anxieties.

Past the garden gate, the path meandered around a long strand of trees crowned in bright red and gold leaves. The wind occasionally managed to tug a few into the air, making them land onto the still green grass like copper coins in a wishing well. Haidée was reminded of a gypsy woman who had briefly taken her in shortly after the death of her mother. Madam Zéphyrine was an unusually sedate example of her kind—she dressed and acted like a seasoned matron. But there had been a hint of other to her. Perhaps it was the tilt of her eyes or her very faint, unplaced accent. And then there had been her bracelet, worn golden discs hooked together by a fine gold chain. She had been about twelve—still a child—and somehow, the combination of a matron’s appearance yet the faint odd air made Madam Zéphyrine all the more appealing.

She had asked her once about her bracelet, and the gypsy woman had merely given her a mysterious smile. “You could say it is an heirloom,” Zéphyrine had replied. Other than that, she had not explained.

But that didn’t mean that she was always stingy with her knowledge. There had been a day similar to the autumn day she was currently enjoying, nearing the end of October. The gypsy woman had taken the day off from her customary stitching work and was puttering around her house with a jar of blue paint and a brush. She had been touching up on some odd geometric designs that were painted in the doorways, around the windows, and even on the lintel on top of the hearth fireplace.

“Is this a traditional design of the gypsies?” she had asked.

“No, child.” Zéphyrine had been sitting on the chair, concentrating on a swirling pattern underneath one of the windows in the sitting room. “The origins of these marks are much older. Perhaps even older than the oldest histories. Every year, before All Souls’ Day, I renew them. They have a kind of power to keep certain things away.”

“Are they like the bells on the dressmaker’s that keep the ghosts out?” she had asked, not understanding.

The gypsy woman had laughed. “No, not like that.”

There were small schools, even in Paris, that catered toward wealthy and talented young men who were curious about learning “the nature of the world.” The intellectuals mostly ignored them, thinking that they were nothing more than places where one learned parlor tricks and games. But when there had been kings, it was an undisputed fact that these small schools held an appreciable amount of power over the nobles. Soothsayers and oracles had enjoyed high esteem before the Revolution. Outside of those schools, there were the solitary practitioners—who were also always known to be men.

When Zéphyrine had begun to teach her, Haidée quickly realized that she was not learning the typical old wives’ folklore. But one couldn’t tell just anyone that a spark could be generated out of thin air or that one could make a bird fly backwards if one had the proper tools and the proper words at one’s disposal. And then, when she had departed from the gypsy woman’s care, she had worked hard to hide what she had learned.

But then she had started getting the headaches and the visions. She wondered, briefly, if this skill of hers was not merely a skill but a part of her—like breathing. If she didn’t exercise herself, she might inadvertently stifle herself.

At that thought, she shook her head. How silly! She didn’t need to exercise that particular skill to survive. No one wanted a woman who could start a bonfire with just a line in the sand. She was finally nearing the end of the small bit of woods. Beyond, she could see the edge of the island that would drop off in sheer cliffs into the sea. The path

itself wound along the edge and towards a low stone wall that separated the relatively flat grassy part of the island with the downward slope of the hill that led into a small bit of farmland. She stopped by one of the last trees and sat down on a nearby flat stone for a brief break. Haidée set her basket down and took off the cloth covering the contents—intent on getting her bottle of tonic for a fortifying sip.

But before she could reach in to get the bottle, a furry brown head with shiny black eyes poked out of the basket with a biscuit in its mouth.

Haidée shrieked and ignominiously tumbled off of her stone seat.

October 19, 1796
Part XIII

Haidée's first thought was that the thing in her basket was a rat. Or maybe it was a squirrel. Slowly, she got back up on the rock, not even bothering to dust off the dirt sprinkling the hem of her dress. The creature had climbed out of the basket to sit on the ground next to it. It held the biscuit between its paws and nibbled on it as it watched her curiously. She had the odd sensation that actual thoughts were going on behind its beady black eyes. Maybe it was planning on eating the rest of her lunch.

She grabbed her bottle of tonic and twisted off the cork. She took a swig, heedless of whether or not that was really a lady-like thing to do, and let the sweet liquid trickled down her throat. Then she corked the bottle and put it back into the basket, all the while not taking her eyes off the creature. It definitely did not look like a rat or a squirrel. The creature's coat was a shiny brown and its body and tail sleek—the perfect shape for crawling through narrow holes.

“You're a marten,” she said aloud. “How on earth did you get into the basket without me noticing?”

Of course, the marten didn't reply. It simply cocked its head while it ate, giving the impression that Haidée's question had been quite ridiculous. No one asked how martens got into things. They just did.

“Go away. Shoo.”

The marten didn't budge.

Haidée sighed loudly and slumped over. Half-heartedly, she began flicking the dirt off her hem. “That was my food, you know. Did you eat everything else as well?” She didn't even pause to see how the creature would react to the question. “My God, look what I'm resorting to—talking to an animal just because there is no one else around to talk to! I hate this vacation. You know, I'm half tempted to jump into the sea and to swim back to the mainland despite what they say about the riptides.”

The marten finished the biscuit and then scuttled back to the basket to peer inside.

“Signe is wrong, you know. I am not stressed out. I’m not burned out. I think he was blaming me for his own bad choices of plays. Perhaps when I get back to Paris, I’ll hire myself out to a different theatre company.” She cupped her chin in her hand and stared, unfocused at the land in front of her. “That is, if the letters have stopped. But I suppose there is one good thing about this island. You only get mail from the mainland about once a month when the tide goes out.”

There was a chirp in the vicinity of the basket. Haidée glanced at it and found that the marten had crawled back in and had curled around a glass jar of cherries to take a nap. She didn’t have the heart to drag it out. Besides, the thing could bite her if it suddenly decided that it didn’t like her.

“I should have brought a book,” she murmured. “Books pass the time. And if I finish all the ones I brought with me, I could raid the observatory library. This reminds me, I should ask Monsieur Davenport where exactly it is located.” The observatory itself still seemed like a collection of confusingly twisted corridors after her few days of stay. She knew where the dining hall and kitchen were in relation to her room. And she knew how to get to the front door of the place. But elsewhere? She’d probably need a golden ball of yarn to mark her passage.

But instead of heading back down the path to get on the main road to the village, she picked up the basket—with the sleeping marten still inside—and headed further down the path towards the wall that bordered the farmland.

The wall was perhaps two feet tall and made of large loose stones fitted together like a very complicated puzzle. Haidée leaned over to place the basket on the ground on the other side before hiking up her skirts and hopping over the wall herself. Once on the other side, she brushed the dirt off the nearby stony ground before sitting down and leaning against the wall. The air seemed marginally warmer. Or perhaps it was because it was later in the day. The sun was overhead—Haidée guessed it was noon although she had the suspicion that she was an incredibly bad judge of time.

On the farm land side of the wall, the land rolled downward, the grass becoming more yellow as it grew toward the nadir point of the island. There were more trees here, but it wasn’t the kind of trees over on the other side of the wall. These were squat, almost dwarf-like in their domesticity and their leaves a dull red, almost brown in contrast to the wilder trees. All the possible beauty these trees could have had was channeled into the fruit, large red and green apples that hung by their stems like small, fat desperate children still clinging to their mothers.

Haidée leaned back until her head was tilted up to the sky to look at the clouds. She fancied that she saw the shapes of ships and ladies with tremendously large gowns.

She had been fifteen and it had been a few months before she had managed to find a position herself at a wealthy bourgeoisie household as the caretaker of children even though she still had been a child herself. She was still living with Madame Zéphyrine at

the time. It had been in the early hours of the morning before the sun had risen and the fog of the late night still lurked a few inches off the cobbled streets. A small boy had pounded on the door and had demanded the services of Madame Zéphyrine because his master was dying.

Haidée had been used to these unusual calls for Zéphyrine. She had never asked what the gypsy woman did on these jaunts out for these emergencies—she had simply assumed that Zéphyrine did what she had taught her to do at home—the drawing of certain protective symbols. But this time, the gypsy woman had roused her from her own bed because she needed an “assistant.”

She involuntarily shivered although there was no breeze. Haidée closed her eyes, wishing that she didn’t have to remember.

The boy who had called on Zéphyrine had led them through the alleyways with nothing more than a single lantern held aloft. Haidée remembered it as a harrowing journey in which she imagined every flickering shadow as a lurking cutthroat simply waiting for the opportune moment. The house of the boy’s master had been a townhouse—obviously that of the wealthy, but the decay of the older, smoggier parts of the city had begun to eat away at the edges.

A cadaverous butler had greeted the trio and they were soon ushered towards the master’s bedroom. Meanwhile, Zéphyrine had taken out a folio from the sack that she had carried and was holding up an odd parchment—the color of bone—before they entered the room. The first impression Haidée had had of the master bedroom was that it was dark—unnaturally dark—darker than the streets outside. There had been only a single candle burning weakly at the bedside and it took a while for her vision to adjust.

But after a moment, she had begun to notice more things—like the wardrobe in the corner and a broken mirror leaning against the wall. And then there had been the bed, a huge cavernous thing covered by black curtains. But they had not been completely black—something had shimmered in the folds of the fabric and the dark bedposts, something that had appeared to be a strange, unnatural shape. A creepy feeling had skittered across her skin as the implications slowly sunk into her brain. But before she could actually grasp what those symbols could be, Madame Zéphyrine had stepped forward to drag the bed curtains away.

Haidée suddenly stood up and paced away from the wall, feeling quite restless and disturbed. A bit beyond the small orchard was a stone farmhouse with a roof of gleaming red tiles. She saw no person or animal around. At the nearest tree, she picked an apple and then hiked back to the wall. By the time she climbed back to the place where the basket was, the marten had awoken from its nap and was watching her as she sat down and took a napkin from the basket to wipe the apple.

This time, though, the marten didn’t appear to be very interested in food. Instead, the animal hopped out of the basket to explore its new surroundings. Haidée watched the creature out of the corner of her eye as she bit into the stolen fruit. The flesh was crisp

and sweet and the juice cool upon her tongue. The taste washed away some of the horrifying tang of her old memories—but not all.

Later, after the sweat-drenching ordeal of what had happened at that decaying Parisian town house, Haidée and Madame Zéphyrine had finally gone back to their own home for breakfast. At the time, Haidée hadn't wanted to eat. She had simply wanted to stumble back into bed, into an exhausted heap, and to sleep the horror away. But she had known that Madame Zéphyrine did not suffer laziness, so she had gone ahead to warm up some porridge.

It had been then over breakfast that the gypsy woman had seen fit to explain to her the significance of the markings upon that bed in the master bedroom.

“Those marks are forbidden,” the gypsy woman had begun without preamble.

Haidée had been about to spoon some porridge into her mouth, but the spoon had halted halfway there and the porridge had dribbled back into her bowl.

“They're used for the dead,” Zéphyrine's eyes had flashed with warning. “They're used for harnessing a life. Or giving life where there isn't any.”

“Those marks are against the natural order, then?” Haidée had said.

The gypsy woman had nodded. “And as using your abilities to tend a dying fire might exact a toll, you can imagine what kind of price one would have to pay if one tried to bring a person back to life.”

October 19, 1796
Part XIV

The marten chattered in sudden agitation, breaking the train of her reverie. She looked down at the apple core in her hand and tossed it down the slop and watched it roll down the grass. The marten had scampered up to the stone wall and was crouched near her head and tugged on a nearby lock of hair. Haidée sighed and turned to scold the animal for its impertinence, but it darted just out of reach when she moved and chattered again. The marten gave her a hard beady-eyed stare, swiveled its head toward the other side of the wall, turned back to her, and once again looked out.

Now curious, Haidée shifted to her knees and peered over the wall. At first, she didn't see anything other than the green land, the trees, and the sky. But as she shifted her gaze off toward the edge of the island and the sea, she saw a tall black figure with his back to her, looking out into the water.

Its job done, the marten stopped squeaking its alert and pounced off the wall to land on her shoulder. But Haidée hardly noticed the liberties the creature was taking as she squinted against the late morning light. The figure with his dark hair pulled back seemed familiar to her in his ill-fitting coat. As his unfashionable wardrobe took hold in

her mind, she finally remembered his name. Jacot Renaud. And then she wondered how she could have forgotten the irritating man so quickly.

For a moment, she watched him, but soon grew bored when he did not move. She was about to turn back to her own musings when he suddenly crouched down, letting the end of his coat flap outwards like a pair of ominous black wings. He leaned down and the light caught at his spectacles which were dangling on one had, making it brightly glitter like a large topaz. He was looking down, inspecting the ground.

Haidée frowned at his abruptly strange action. Didn't he say that he was an astronomer coming to the observatory on Mont Saint Filan in order to further his own experiments? Why was he out here in the wind and the air when he should be inside doing calculations and calibrating various astronomical instruments?

And then she remembered a bit of conversation she had heard before—at dinner on the first night that she had arrived on the island. Renaud had said that he had corresponded with an acquaintance at the observatory, another astronomer who had committed suicide not to long before.

Something flickered in her mind, ideas fading in and out and not quite connecting. She bit her lip as the thought coalesced that perhaps there was something that she was missing.

The suicide, she thought, had happened at that spot—or at least as she had understood it. Danton Neville was said to have stood at the west end of the island and had jumped. The most logical explanation for Renaud's presence—was that he was here to see where his friend had died. But somehow, looking at him crouched on the ground, Haidée found hard to believe.

She bent lower so that only her eyes were over the wall. She narrowed her gaze, thinking back to the night that Legard had died. Renaud had been the first out of bed and into the hallway. But who could say that he wasn't actually coming back from somewhere else and that Haidée had in fact caught him trying to go back into his room? There were many things that she did not know about her fellow traveler and that made her suspicious. Perhaps she should also start asking questions about the suicide and what Neville's relation to the other astronomers at the observatory had been. She could start asking her only apparent objective source, Davenport, the observatory librarian.

But even with that newly formed plan, there was no way she could get to the village now—not with Renaud standing in full view of the path back to the observatory.

He put his glasses back onto his face. Then he took something out of his coat pocket, a glass vial and a spoon. Amazed, she watched Renaud scrape up some of the dirt on the ground with the spoon and poured it into the vial. Then he placed a stopper on the vial and flicked the spoon to get the rest of the dirt off before putting them back into his pocket. But he wasn't done. She saw him take out a handkerchief to pick up something else from the ground before straightening back up. The marten on her shoulder began

chattering excitedly and Renaud chose that moment to turn toward the wall. Haidée gasped and flattened herself below the top of the wall.

“Do you always make a racket at the most inopportune moment?” she whispered harshly to the marten who had jumped from her shoulder to her lap and was bobbing its head, trying to get her attention.

The marten, apparently, had noticed something about the scene that had alarmed it—and it seemed to be trying to tell her something. Or, her tonic was taking an effect on her mind and she was ascribing something that shouldn’t be ascribed to a small crazed animal in the first place.

She slumped over and took out the bottle of poppy wine as the marten commenced to run around in circles, chittering to itself.

“Being a lunatic isn’t helping your cause,” she murmured. “I am not going to look over while he’s still there.”

The marten finally stopped and stared at her. She fancied that the animal was looking at her in disbelief.

“Well, what can I say?” she replied, half convinced that she was pretending to talk to a real companion instead of acknowledging the fact that she was just babbling to a dumb animal. “I’m a coward.”

She opened the bottle and downed the tonic in one large gulp. The marten squeaked, and to her, it sounded like disapproval.

October 20, 1796
Part XV

Haidée awoke to the sound of scratching at the window. She blinked and blearily stared up at the darkness. The sound came again and automatically, she stumbled out of bed, clutching one of the sheets to her chest. She ambled over to the window and tugged away the curtains and peered out into the inky darkness.

A small thin shadow lurked on the left end of the ledge. Haidée found herself opening the right window pane and the small shadow quickly streaked inside just as a gust of wind rammed itself against the building, bringing with it thick drops of rain. She quickly closed the window and fumbled with the tinderbox at the stand beside the bed and eventually lit a candle. The shadow had leaped onto the blankets and had curled up at the foot of the bed. The marten, apparently, knew an accommodating human once it met one.

Haidée sleepily shook her head, trying to process what had happened. In the previous afternoon, she had waited until Renaud had left the spot by the path to go back to the observatory for her to make a move. But once she had climbed back over the wall, the

marten had deserted her by quickly climbing up the nearest tree. After that, she didn't think that she would see the small creature again—even if she had to admit to herself that it was kind of amusing with its antics. Martens were wild creatures and it was highly unusual in the first place that it had associated with her. And she had assumed that the only reason it had picked her was that she had food.

And now, the marten was asleep in her bed. That was quite smart of it, now that she thought more on it. It was beginning to rain outside and certainly, a warm and dry place in a human dwelling was more appealing than some knothole in a tree. She let out an involuntary yawn and thought that she had better get a couple more hours of sleep before daybreak. She had overheard the cook, Madame Boulanger, mutter about having to make more meals because the observatory librarian was going to come by the next day to do some work. Haidée made her own plans which involved getting some information from Davenport.

But as she was about to blow the candle out and head off back to bed, something nearby caught her eye. The solitary flame threw out odd, flickering shadows, but some of those shadows falling upon the desk nearby seemed to be odder than usual—less angular and more rounded. The desk itself wasn't very remarkable. It was made of heavy, dense wood and there wasn't anything on it other than the semblance that it had been recently abandoned: a couple sheets of blank paper, a pen, and a cylinder of ink that was more square-like than the vial that Haidée had seen on Legard's desk or even the ones at the shop in the village.

Haidée approached the desk with more curiosity than caution and raised her candle to look upon it. Set back in the desk were a row of drawers and cubbyholes for sorting out letters and organizing writing implements. But those held little of her interest. It was the sides of the desk—the molding decorating the left side of the small drawers—that held her attention. The shadows cast by those sides didn't seem to quite fit with everything else.

She ran a hand along the side of the desk feeling smooth wood until her nail caught upon something. A thick card of some sort was wedged in the crevice between the molding and the last drawer. With her thumb and forefinger, she grasped the card and slowly slid it out. It was a card cut into a circle. In the candlelight, the thick paper itself appeared yellow, almost brown, and thick script in black ink was written in a spiral, starting from the center and ending at the edge.

She recognized the type of writing. It wasn't the usual kind of writing people found in books or that one used to write letters and missives. It was the kind used by people who manipulated nature. Some of the symbols were familiar to her, but most of them not. They had a very stiff and formal feel to them as if they were used for a singular yet complicated process. Haidée wasn't particularly troubled by these particular runes because although they were formal, they didn't seem unnatural. The marks did not feel activated. In fact, they didn't feel like they had been activated in quite some time. Besides, they weren't anywhere near as disturbing as the marks she had seen used on the dead or dying.

On the other side of the card, it was blank, except for a small signature near the edge that said, “Nicolas Bisset.” Comparing the signature and the symbols, Haidée concluded that the author of both were one and the same. But what exactly was the circular card used for? And who was Nicolas Bisset?

Another yawn interrupted her musing and reluctantly, she placed the card back on the table. She headed back to bed and blew out the candle before curling back underneath the blankets.

October 20, 1796
Part XVI

By the time Haidée had put on her gown and had done the necessary absolutions at the toilette that she shared with Renaud—apparently their schedules were so different that she had never had any problems in the few days that she had stayed at the observatory in fighting for the bathroom’s use—it was nine o’clock in the morning. After a peek out the window to confirm her suspicions that the day was going to be filled with gloomy rain, she tucked the circular card into a pocket and thought that it was too bad that everyone else in the observatory was going to be too busy to notice that she was wearing one of her dresses which was now all the rage in Paris—a loose light blue gown with a particularly fresh design of scalloped ribbon at the neckline and the hemline.

The marten was awake as well, and for a wild animal, displayed a startlingly lack of concern that it was not free outside or that it was inside a room. The bad weather could have been the reason for its lack of concern. After all, Haidée wasn’t too keen about keeping any kind of pet, even domesticated ones, but she found herself being far too lax about the entire thing—if the marten wanted to follow her around, so be it.

She finally ventured out of her room and headed down to the dining hall on the first floor. The marten followed her down the stairs and through the halls, tagging along not too far from her skirts.

“You’re finally up, Mademoiselle?”

The dark inquiring voice skittered up her spine and the marten at her hem squeaked in surprised before trying to hide underneath a flounce. Haidée took a step backward from the archway leading out to the hallway to the kitchen and turned her head slightly to see a long shadow slouched at an open doorway with stairs leading down into the depths of the observatory. The weak light from the adjacent room made the rims of his spectacles gleam like old copper.

“Monsieur Renaud.” She was chagrined to discover that her voice had developed a nervous warble over her customary cool reserve. Where was this vulnerability coming from? She was an actress. She was supposed to be able to fake reserve no matter the situation. “A good day to you. What a surprise to see you outside of the depths of your research.”

She noticed that he was holding something in his hands, something rather round and metallic-like. He was rolling it around his palm, idly, and temporarily she was mesmerized by his long fingers that moved and caressed the object as if it were something particularly delicate and fine.

“I have been down in the cellar doing some calibrations,” he hedged. He put the round object into a pocket of his overly large coat. “Since six this morning, in fact. I decided to come up for a small break and perhaps to get something to eat.”

“How fortuitous, Monsieur, since I am going to the kitchen myself to get breakfast.”

Renaud let out a low, sardonic chuckle. “Breakfast? Oh, I forgot. You just got up. Surely, this is too early for you?”

“Are you making fun of my schedule?”

Noticing her stiff tone, he grinned, flashing teeth. This time he appeared more predatory than amused. How strange, Haidée thought. How could an astronomer look predatory? They were supposed to be like bespectacled gnomes hunched over their intellectual treasure trove.

“Ah, my dear Mademoiselle, I would never make fun of you.” She tilted her chin up in an attempt to give him a haughty cold glare, but she had the suspicion that it worked very little. She was sure it didn’t work at all when she brushed by him to get to the kitchen and she heard his footsteps echoing behind her.

“You look like an ice queen when you do that,” he said behind her back. “Intellectually I know that it is a look that you’ve perfected in your profession, but I am tempted to ask you to do it again. It makes a man feel like a peon to her majesty.”

“I wouldn’t dare try to pretend to be a queen,” she replied, not looking back at him. “Look what they did to the last queen, and she was a real one.”

“Hm. Off with her head. Although it would be a shame if you lost yours. Such a pretty one, even if it is full of lines for plays and meaningless fashion trivia.”

“Don’t forget the gossip,” she replied sarcastically. She wasn’t fooled by his backhanded compliment. She hadn’t bothered to put on a wig that morning and everyone knew that men preferred wigs, not real hair. If they did—well, there was no knowing what other strange things such twisted men preferred.

The door to the kitchen was a large wooden one, polished smooth by time and held together with long iron crossbeams. The handle itself was an iron ring. Haidée had no illusion that Renaud would jump to the fore to open the door for her—if she had asked him, he would have told her that she was a spoiled lady too accustomed to nabobs who jumped to do her every whim.

So she opened the door herself by pulling on the ring and almost came face to face with the cook, Madame Boulanger, as she was sweeping the floor. The stout woman stared at her with a sullen expression.

“Mademoiselle,” the cook said curtly. “How miraculous that you are here this morning. I was just about to feed the rest of the breakfast to the pigs and start on the noon meal.”

Haidée did not feel in a particularly accommodating mood. And she did not like it that the cook not so subtly referred to the leftovers as scraps only fit for pigs. But she was hungry and she didn't care what the cook called the food as long as she got the chance to eat it. So she said instead, “You don't have any pigs, Madame. I'll just heat up the porridge myself if you are not inclined to do so.”

The cook made some disapproving sound at the back of her throat, not liking Haidée's assumption that she was too lazy to cook anything. Haidée hoped that she had disgruntled the woman by displaying a willingness to cook the meal herself. No matter what Renaud might be thinking, she wasn't completely spoiled.

“If you do cook some porridge,” Renaud said behind her, “Make sure you make enough for me too.”

Haidée turned her head and was not surprised to see him grinning. She smiled back with a hard edge to her eye. “You prefer your porridge burned?” she said with deadly sweetness.

“Well, now that you put it that way...”

An ear-piercing shriek interrupted Renaud's reply. The cook was bellowing, her face red and furious. And she was brandishing her broom like a fencing pistol as a small brown body streaked out from between Haidée and Renaud and headed toward a table and some chairs near a cabinet full of dishes.

“A rat! A rat!” Madame Boulanger screamed. Then she let out a string of profanity that would have blistered their ears if they hadn't been deafened by her initial shouting.

The marten momentarily twisted its head back to look at the cook and Haidée fancied that the creature had a wicked gleam in its beady black eyes as it darted into the small space that the legs of the cabinet allowed. The cook shrieked in rage and with a triumphant swing, whacked the business end of her broom into the lower drawers of the cabinet.

The piece of furniture shuddered and two porcelain soup tureens wobbled precariously on the top shelf. Intent on getting her rat, the cook hit the cabinet again. Haidée didn't hide her cringe when one of the tureens dropped to the floor and shattered with a sickening crunch. The other tureen landed upside down on Madame Boulanger's head. She bellowed in consternation, but her shrill voice was muffled by the porcelain. She

dropped her broom and used her free hands to yank the crockery off her head.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” the maid, Colette, burst into the room wielding a duster. “Did somebody get murdered?”

“No quite,” Renaud said dryly.

Haidée sighed. “Madame Boulanger thought she saw a rat.”

“And I did!” the cook exclaimed. The marten finally poked its head out from underneath the cabinet to survey the damage and then as swift as lightning, raced back towards Haidée. “There it is! I’m going to kill that rodent. I pride myself on keeping an impeccable kitchen!”

The marten squeaked in alarm as the portly woman advanced on it and grabbed a nearby butcher knife as she stepped forward. The animal tugged on Haidée’s dress, and in pity, she picked the creature up and tucked it into the crook of her arm.

“It’s just a marten,” she told the cook.

“It’s a rat!” Madame Boulanger insisted. “And you are harboring that odious creature.”

“She’s right, Madame,” Colette intervened despite her normally quiet nature. “That is a marten, not a rat. Martens can eat rats, right?”

“I don’t give a damn what it is,” the cook ranted. “I want it out of my kitchen.” She pointed a finger at Haidée. “I want you out of this kitchen as well. You claim to be a lady yet you bring that thing in here!”

“I can’t believe you’re maligning my character,” protested Haidée.

“Out!” the cook shrieked. The knife in her hand gleamed with a dangerous light.

Haidée stepped backward, still somewhat reluctant to follow the woman’s ridiculous command. Annoyed by her hesitation, the cook waved her knife around forcing Haidée to retreat by fleeing out of the kitchen with the marten in her arms. She dared not look back to see the smirking glances of Renaud and Colette. Or even worse, expressions of pity.

Back out in the hallway, Haidée leaned back against the wall and sighed. Her empty stomach let out a protesting growl. She looked down at the marten on her arm. It looked surprisingly unconcerned.

“Ah, the things I do for you,” she murmured. “Now I’m probably going to starve for the rest of this month. And you probably don’t deserve it.”

The marten cocked its head at the sound of her voice and chattered in admonishment.

The lady with the knife was bad, it seemed to say.

“A lot of help that would be,” Haidée replied to her imagined conversation with the marten. “That woman with the knife happened to be in charge of the food. You know what I’m going to do? I’m going back to my room and taking two sips of the tonic to forget that I’m hungry. And to forget that this ever happened.”

But as she turned to head back to her room, the door to the kitchen opened. She flinched, almost certain that the cook had followed her out, but it was Renaud instead. He was balancing a tray with bowls and mugs. She quickly glanced at him and then away. It would be just like him to gloat about getting breakfast himself when she went hungry. She was sure he would say something about the situation that it was just as well that she didn’t get breakfast because ladies had to keep their figures.

“Perhaps, Mademoiselle Avenall, you would rather have your breakfast in the dining hall rather than the kitchen?”

Her gaze suddenly shot to his, surprised at his comment. He seemed oddly sympathetic. She couldn’t quite process it.

“The dining hall,” he repeated. “It might be a little formal, but I’m sure it’s far more comfortable than having an angry woman with a sharp instrument standing over you watching you eat.”

“Oh. Well. I’m sure you’re right.”

She followed him back to the dining room. He didn’t offer to pull out a chair for her, but he did set the table, placing a bowl of porridge, a mug of warm milk, and a plate of sliced apples in front of her. Perhaps he wasn’t a complete ogre, she mentally amended. Although one nice deed didn’t completely amend for one person’s customary behavior, especially strange behavior that she had observed the previous day, it went some ways to redemption of reputation.

The only food that he had gotten for himself was an apple, still whole. He bit into it as he watched her eat, the reflection of the light rendering the glass in his spectacles opaque. She found herself wishing that he would take the spectacles off. She was quite sure that he could still see without them. Besides, she liked being able to see people’s expressions. Spectacles hid them and that annoyed her since she did not much like people who deliberately tried to be mysterious outside of acting in the theatre.

The marten peeked at her meal and then crawled up to the table to steal a slice of the apple.

Noticing that she said nothing about the thievery as she slowly ate her own porridge, Renaud said, “I see you’ve made a new friend.”

Haidée shifted a brief, guilty look at the marten who was sedately nibbling at the fruit.

The animal didn't seem particularly concerned that it was sitting only a few feet away from the man it had chattered at the previous day. Did the marten consider the man's actions suspicious and not the man himself? To Haidée, that did not make sense. To her, man and his actions were inextricably entwined. The marten, however, seemed to forgive and to forget when food was concerned.

"It followed me," she replied finally.

"I would have predicted that you would have reacted the same way as Madame Boulanger back in the kitchen."

"I reserve my hysterics for more important things," she said. "There are far worse things than a single 'rat' running across the floor."

"True. Yet you didn't scream when we found Legard either. I think you may have hidden depths, Mademoiselle, which you rarely show."

"You're wrong. I'm rather apathetic about a lot of things. What do I care if Madame Boulanger's kitchen is overrun by rats?"

"Yet you defended a 'rat'. Do you have a soft spot for animals?"

"I am not going to answer that question."

"Ah." He tilted his head, pensive as he chewed at his apple. "You don't like answering even small questions. That's something to keep in mind."

Haidée frowned. "That sounded, by far, ominous."

"Oh, don't be alarmed. I'm an intellectual, remember? Questions are my stock in trade."

Haidée didn't find his smile very reassuring.

October 20, 1796
Part XVII

Seymour Davenport arrived at the observatory at ten o'clock sharp to drip noisily on the stone floor in the front hall. Haidée was passing by that direction when the observatory librarian arrived. The butler, Villiers, had opened the door for him and did not try to hide an expression of horror when the librarian took off his sopping tri-cornered hat and black coat and handed it to him. Villiers held the wet items with his thumbs and forefingers before saying in a haughty voice that he would see Davenport's things "dried out."

Davenport soon spotted Haidée in the nearby doorway and gave her a casual wave. "Mademoiselle Avenall! How nice to see you again. I trust your day has been going well?"

Haidée thought back to the kitchen incident and then to Renaud's unexpected yet considerate gesture. She had not managed to thank him before he disappeared back down to his research in the cellar. The marten, now belly full of the fruit that it had filched from its new mistress's breakfast—was now draped over her shoulder like a mink wrap, fast asleep. Finally, she replied, "Well enough."

"You are lucky that you have the luxury of staying inside today," said Davenport. "It's dreadful weather out there. No lightning storms, mind you, but wet and miserable nonetheless."

"Yes, I noticed that from the window this morning," Haidée replied. "I hope you did not get here with mishaps."

"No mishaps. Just a lot of wishing that it wasn't so wet."

She nodded before plunging ahead. "Monsieur, since you are familiar with the observatory, I had hoped that you would be able to answer some questions for me."

Davenport rubbed his chin and eyed her with a canny expression. "Hm. I see. Well, perhaps the library would have some answers as well. We could talk in there." And then more lowly, almost so low that she had to strain to hear, he said, "There are fewer ears there."

Haidée would have never tried to explore the observatory herself in search of the library. The place was entirely too Byzantine for her liking and she was quite sure that her own sense of direction was quite poor. So she was glad that Davenport took the lead and headed down the main corridor from the front door and then turned right into a small branching hallway. At the end, there were three steps through a decorative archway covered in red and gold tiles before a rather plain door that the librarian unlocked with a small iron key.

"It is a rather pointless exercise to lock this room," Davenport told her as he jiggled the key into the lock and then pushed the door open. "There really isn't much to steal in here besides old moldering books. And you have got to admit that the market for them on the mainland, never mind Mont Saint Filan, is quite small."

"People could come here and borrow without permission," Haidée pointed out, "And then conveniently forget to return them."

"That's true," Davenport agreed, "But the only people who have any interest in these volumes are the people who work here."

In a sure tread, out of habit, Davenport made a semicircular survey about the room to light the sconces along the wall with the three candle candelabra that he had taken from the front hall. At the end of the room was a small dark fireplace. Davenport set the candelabra on the mantle and took down a plain metal tinderbox to help him light the

hearth. As he got the fire going, he threw in a log from a small pile of wood lying near a brass poker stand.

Haidée had followed and had closed the door behind them. The library itself was probably not much bigger than double the size of her guest room. The walls, if they were not interrupted with curtained windows or a fireplace, were lined with bookcases containing tomes bound in leather—some of them with gold titles etched into their spines. The curtains were as red as the archway leading to the library door. There was a massive oak table in the center of the room with a few books and an unlit candle on top of it. There were chairs here and there—as well as the occasional wooden footrest—as well as a desk near the hearth which had one book, scraps of paper, and a familiar looking cylindrical bottle of ink on its flat surface.

Davenport settled down onto the padded chair on the other side of the desk and groaned. “Ah, my bones aren’t what they used to be. The perils of getting old. Bring up a seat.”

Haidée nodded and pushed a straight-backed chair close to the edge of the desk and sat down. She peered at the few objects on the surface with interest. “There is a bottle of ink just like that on the desk in my room.”

“It’s common enough,” the librarian replied. He took out a handkerchief from a pocket and proceeded to blow his nose loudly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if all the other astronomers used this as well.” His voiced sounded a bit muffled from underneath his handkerchief.

“Hm.” She made a mental note to see if indeed that was also true. That meant riffling through the other astronomers’ desks—assuming she could get access to them. “This library seems tucked out of the way. Wouldn’t the astronomers find this location rather inconvenient?”

“They’ve never said so to me,” Davenport replied. “This library was here before I came here. It was here before even Everard was appointed as the head to run this place. Did you know that the observatory used to be a church?”

She shook her head. “I did see the statues at the front hall of all the saints, but I had believed that they were merely decorations of some sort. But if this place used to be a church, why was this place converted into an observatory? Surely Father DeLorme would have had this place instead of the small chapel near the village.”

“That’s an interesting observation,” mused Davenport. “From what I understand, this observatory used to be a church, perhaps as recently as fifty years ago. I am not quite sure. Everard was here the earliest and he wasn’t the first one. He’s a bit fuzzy on the dates himself—I had the impression that he did not care as long as he was doing his own research. At any rate, this place was a church and it is said that it was built during the Roman times.”

“Is it that old?” Haidée said surprised. “It doesn’t really look like my idea of a Roman building. For one thing, the place is very complicated with its hallways and corridors. I’m afraid I might get lost myself.”

“I don’t think it’s that old either. I believe it was built a little later than that, near the end of the Empire when some of the Eastern influences from Byzantium filtered into here and there were Moors living as far north as here at the time—before they were expelled. If you think about it, Mont Saint Filan is the perfect place to build a church—or rather a monastery. This island is isolated for most of the month and that holds a certain mystery.”

“Monks lived here?” She glanced around the room, suddenly aware that she was invading what used to be a male enclave.

“Yes. The location ensured that this place was isolated. But then for one reason or other, the place was abandoned. One would think that the Church would have retained control of this place for one reason or another, but then it switched to government hands. And you do know what the government thinks about the Church. So then, this place was turned into the observatory you see now.”

“Is this place still owned by the government?”

Davenport gave an odd smile. “Always assume so. They have their fingers in everywhere.”

October 20, 1796
Part XVIII

The observatory librarian finally folded his handkerchief and stuffed it back into his pocket. Haidée slid a glance at the flickering flames in the hearth. She was about to take out the round card in her pocket when there was a loud pounding at the library door. She started up in her seat at the sudden noise and looked back at the door.

“Come in!” said Davenport. He shot Haidée a sympathetic glance. “Interruptions are usually few and far between. Hopefully, whoever it is, he is only looking for a book.”

The door itself was flung inward with such force that it nearly hit the nearby bookshelf. Haidée thought it was a wonder that the door wasn’t wrenched off its hinges.

D’Aubigne strolled inside and went straight to Davenport’s desk, ignoring Haidée. He splayed his hands on the table top and leaned toward the librarian to look him in the eye. D’Aubigne was flushed, and with the combination of his mused blond hair, he looked like the human equivalent of a sluttering flame. He raised one arm and pointed behind him to the man who sauntered in after him.

“He is wrong.” D’Aubigne declared. “And I want you to prove it!”

Davenport didn't seem particularly perturbed by the astronomer's demand. He simply looked behind him to find one of the older astronomers, Edouard Garnier, standing with his hands in his pockets. Davenport raised an inquiring eyebrow. Garnier simply shrugged.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle Avenall," Garnier said.

"Monsieur Garnier." She glance back at D'Aubigne who had now fixed his angry gaze on her. "Monsieur D'Aubigne."

"What are you doing here?" D'Aubigne said rudely. But when she didn't immediately reply, he plowed onward. "Never mind. You wouldn't understand anyway." He turned his head to glare at Garnier. "Everard suggested that I ask the esteemed Garnier on the problems I am currently having on my project. But his advice is complete rubbish, I say. I am trying to determine the precise date and location of the last eclipse. He says that the last eclipse occurred over Africa. That is completely absurd because I distinctly remember receiving a letter from an acquaintance of mine who was visiting the Black Sea a few months ago that he observed a solar eclipse there. And I trust my friend."

"Perhaps your friend only saw a partial eclipse," Garnier replied. "Or someone else gave him some erroneous information."

"I don't believe it. My friend is an intellectual. Of course he knows the difference between a full and partial eclipse."

Davenport sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Are you sure your friend specified what kind of eclipse he saw? He wasn't talking about a lunar one, was he?"

"No," D'Aubigne said vehemently.

"The charts on moon phases and comet observations are along the far wall," the librarian said. "I am sure that the information about eclipses are there as well."

As D'Aubigne strolled toward the indicated shelf and began pulling off books, Garnier crossed his arms and headed toward the hearth to briefly look at the flames. Haidée was quite startled to find that Garnier looked quite short from even from her vantage point from her chair. Standing, the poker by the fireplace hardly reached her own knee. But on Garnier, it reached his hip.

Garnier then turned from the hearth and eyed D'Aubigne with a strange expression in his eyes. Involuntarily, Haidée's fingers clutched at the fabric of her dress near the pocket holding the round card she had found. She suddenly had the disconcerting notion that short men weren't as benign as they usually appeared.

D'Aubigne exclaimed in triumph as he found the relevant passages. Instead of looking crestfallen, Garnier's lip twitched upward. "I suppose you take your victories however you can get them, right D'Aubigne?"

The blond haired astronomer frowned. “What the hell are you talking about, Garnier? You’re getting as senile as Roland.”

“What I mean is, now that Legard is gone, you feel free to pick on everyone else. Such an advantage to you, is it not?”

“I’m glad that blowhard is dead—and you are too. But if you’re trying to imply what I think you’re implying...”

“I’m not implying anything, my friend.” Garnier grinned, showing teeth.

D’Aubigne did not appear amused. “You’re just a bad sport because you were wrong and I was right.” He stuffed the book back on the shelf. “And you’re in a bad mood because Ninon failed to show up to help you calibrate your instruments.”

“Oh ho! Look who’s talking about moods,” Garnier mocked. “Yours are more changeable than that of the sea.”

When the astronomers left, Haidée let out a breath that she didn’t know she was holding in. “Are those two always at each other’s throats?”

Davenport shook his head. “All of them snipe at each other like petty old women all the time. Although I must admit that that display seemed particularly pronounced. Of course, now that there is one less of them, I suppose they feel it is their duty to heap even more scorn upon their fellows.”

The marten on her shoulder finally raised its head and chirped sleepily. Apparently, it had slept through all the human ruckus and was only now active. It slithered off of Haidée’s shoulder and padded about the room, examining the furniture. Haidée left the animal to its own devices. She had more important questions to attend to.

“About Monsieur Legard.” She cleared her throat nervously when Davenport’s eyes sharpened at the name of the recently deceased. “Did he elicit more than his share of ill will here?”

“He was certainly an arrogant bastard, if you pardon my language, Mademoiselle,” the librarian replied. “I didn’t like him very much because he looked down on my profession. The other astronomers had even less cause to like him since they had to work with him. Also he had a tendency to try to get the others to do the work for him and then claim the credit.

“Like Monsieur D’Aubigne,” she murmured.

“Exactly.”

“Do you think D’Aubigne may have more cause to see Legard dead?” she inquired.

“Monsieur Roland seems to think so.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised if D’Aubigne did, if he had the opportunity. He was the most recently wounded by Legard. But there are others who carry older grudges—and if they had still kept them, they would have adequate motive as well.”

“The magistrate says that he is looking into Legard’s death, but so far I haven’t seen him doing anything—even coming for a visit at the observatory to look at the scene of death.”

“Hm.” Davenport laced his fingers over his belly and seemed to contemplate the ceiling. “That is unusual. Galliard takes his job seriously. The only possibility I can think of that’s preventing him from paying us a visit is that Everard told him not to come. He looks up to the head astronomer and takes his word with practically everything.”

“Everard doesn’t want an investigation? I had the impression that the head astronomer was the only one who remotely liked Legard. He called him a scientist in his prime. Surely he would want his death to be looked into.”

“Ah, Everard.” The librarian seemed momentarily amused. “He is a strange one. Sometimes he acts like a complete scatterbrain and at other times he is as sharp as glass. I find him difficult to read—like murky water. He could well be nursing a grudge against Legard that we don’t know about. He’s just better at hiding it, if that were true.”

“That doesn’t give me much confidence,” said Haidée. “That means everyone could be suspected for Legard’s death. Even you.”

He nodded. “Just so. But if everyone who knew him disliked him, why try to find the murderer? It would be a pointless exercise.”

“I don’t believe anyone deserves to be murdered because people hated him or even if he did things people didn’t like,” she replied. “It isn’t just.”

Davenport smiled then. “You sound like my little sister. She was terribly keen on justice during the Revolution. Unfortunately, that kind of mouthiness got her killed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize for anything. You believe what you like. But I caution you to be careful of your words. The next person you may talk to might not be an old harmless librarian.”

This time, Haidée managed to slip the round card from her pocket and put it on his desk. “This is the reason I wanted to talk to you. Do you know what this is?”

Davenport picked it up and peered at it through his spectacles. A slight frown appeared between his brows. “Where did you get this?”

“I found it here and there,” she said vaguely. “Is it dangerous?”

“No, it isn’t dangerous. And I don’t think it was dangerous when it was in use either.”

“In use? What is it used for? It just looks like a card to me. With certain strange symbols.”

“Have you been to the observatory’s star gazing chamber on the third floor?”

She shook her head.

“There are a collection of telescopes there,” he explained. “By themselves, they are very ordinary telescopes. One could use them but you can see only so far—say to the moons of Mars.”

“All right. But what does this have to do with it?”

“To see further, you need to activate this,” the librarian tapped the round card on his desk. “And put it in a special slot in the telescope that will help enhance the lens.”

“Do you mean those scientific instruments are powered by aether? Magic?” said Haidée, part way incredulous. “Scientists always say they prided themselves on being observers of nature without enhancements.”

“That’s what they all say. But to be honest, most intellectuals are also trained, partly, as sorcerers. This is to help work their own tools of the trade, of course. They would never use any of their powers to actually manipulate nature.”

“But they could.”

“Yes, they could.”

Haidée had the sudden urge to escape. If they knew about those certain skills, she was almost positive they would discover her if she was to be careless. And women with powers weren’t welcomed. At the very least, they could throw her out. At the most, they could do to her as what was done to witches several hundred years ago. When people confronted something that they feared, they rarely behaved in a civilized manner.

Finally, she asked, “Who is Nicolas Bisset? The name on the other side of the card?”

“Oh, he used to be an astronomer here,” Davenport said easily. “He had more seniority than Everard, in fact, when he had been alive.”

Her ears pricked up. “Had been alive?”

“Bisset died about a year ago, of old age,” said the librarian. “He was, believe it or not, one hundred and two. Bisset actually came here first before this place was converted

from a monastery to an observatory. He was the one who invented the aether enhanced telescope, you know.”

October 21, 1796
Part XIX

Just as Haidée stepped off the stairs, she saw a flash of brown muslin in the corner of her eye. Quickly, she ducked into a nearby alcove behind a statue of a saint blessing a kneeling penitent. The marten scrambled underneath the hem of her dress and poked its head out to watch what was going on.

The cook, Madame Boulanger, soon stalked into view with a broom in one hand and a dust pan in the other. She was muttering under her breath—something about astronomers and their lack of hygiene. Then she disappeared around another corner toward another section of the observatory that Haidée had not yet had the chance to explore.

Once the hall was clear, Haidée slipped by the statue of the saint and walked quickly to the kitchen. Her goal was to get breakfast before Madame Boulanger returned and decided to use her knives. The marten followed her silently at her heels.

In the kitchen, she found Colette sitting on a footstool near the hearth peeling a pile of carrots and turnips into a bucket. The main looked up and greet her with a smile.

“You are lucky this morning, Mademoiselle,” Colette said as she turned her attention back to her job. “Madame Boulanger will be busy this morning cleaning up Monsieur Roland’s personal laboratory. It usually takes her until almost noon.”

“I thought cleaning the laboratories was one of your responsibilities,” said Haidée as she went to the kitchen table to grab a bread bun and to pour herself some warmed spiced tea. The marten chirped and she sighed, reaching for an apple.

“Not really,” the maid replied. “I clean the halls and the unused rooms. The astronomers usually prefer Claude or Villiers to clean their laboratories. They’re afraid that a woman would somehow inadvertently wreck their precious instruments. For some odd reason, Monsieur Roland prefers Madame Boulanger to clean his things. But that is an exception, I suppose. Monsieur Roland doesn’t keep his instruments in his laboratory.”

“I see.” Haidée had sliced the apple into eight wedges onto a wooden plate. The marten pounced onto the table and proceeded to eat the wedges. “So Madame Boulanger has access to Monsieur Roland’s laboratory?”

“She has a key.” The maid finished peeling the carrot and tossed it in a second tub. She took up another vegetable. “Claude, however, has the keys to the others. But he doesn’t have keys to all the rooms. I’d imagine that Monsieur Everard has that privilege.”

“I would imagine so as well since he is the head astronomer.” Haidée tore a bit of the

bread with her fingers and put it in her mouth. The crust was surprisingly flaky and the bread itself almost melted on her tongue. It was quite different from the rather lumpy dinner rolls that were usually served. “Did Madame Boulanger make these?”

Colette glanced up and noticing that Haidée had the bread in her hand, laughed. “Oh, no. Madame Boulanger’s talent rarely includes breads. That is from the Champney bakery back in the village. The baker’s daughter, Marie Elisabeth braved the storm this morning to make a delivery.”

“Ah. This is almost worth it to go back through the weather to go thank the baker in person.”

“The last time I peeked out the window, the weather was worse,” Colette replied. “It’s almost pitch dark outside with all that rain. And there’s lightning too. I would say it is dangerous to be out. For any reason.”

The door to the kitchen banged open making Haidée jump. The maid gasped and said, “I almost cut myself!”

The old astronomer, Laurent Roland, hobbled in with his thumping cane. His wig seemed a bit unkempt as well as his suit jacket, a wrinkled green. He had the air of a man who had not slept all night. Behind him was Raymond D’Aubigne and Renaud. D’Aubigne appeared sullen as he buttoned up a large black cloak and put on a wide brimmed brown hat, covering up his blond hair.

“Is there a bottle of wine about this place?” exclaimed the old astronomer as he wobbled over to the pantry and began rummaging along the shelves filled with pots of flour and dried fruit.

“It’s too early for wine, old man,” D’Aubigne said grumpily as he grabbed a rucksack hanging on a peg near the extra aprons and dish towels and began stuffing the sack with bread, fruit, and cheese. “Aren’t you already drunk enough?”

“I’m not getting drunk,” Roland protested. “It’s for my rheumatism, damn this rain.”

“I have a bit of medicinal tonic...” Haidée began.

The old astronomer interrupted her with a triumphant cry as he pulled out a bottle out from behind a canister of sugar. “I knew the old bat would hide it here.” He tore the cork off with his fingers and took a swig before wiping his mouth with a sleeve.

D’Aubigne made a face. “Disgusting.”

Renaud had crossed his arms and was leaning against the mantle with a smirk on his face. “It appears, Mademoiselle, that Monsieur Roland has no need of laudanum to ease his rheumatic aches.”

She sighed. "I was just trying to be helpful."

"No one can help him," D'Aubigne said contemptuously. "I'm going out." He opened the kitchen door revealing the wet storm outside.

"Are you sure?" Roland called out between sips. "The weather out there is a monster."

D'Aubigne grabbed a lantern sitting on a bench near the door. "I am not missing a meeting in which I gave my word."

"Oh God," the old astronomer spluttered, before gulping more drink. Haidée wasn't sure if it was just an epithet or if Roland was being sarcastic.

"I'm sure whoever you're meeting would understand if you didn't go today," Renaud suggested.

The blond astronomer shot him a sour look. "Stay out of it Renaud. And I mean it."

After the kitchen door slammed shut, the old astronomer chortled in his drink and thumped back out of the kitchen muttering about silly young upstarts. Renaud straightened himself from his position and went over to the kitchen table to grab an apple.

"Who is Monsieur D'Aubigne meeting in this horrible weather?" Haidée asked.

"How should I know? People hardly tell me those things," Renaud replied before biting into the apple. "Perhaps he has a mistress in the village. I wouldn't blame him. There is a distinct lack of appealing women in this place."

"Are you making a complaint?"

"No, just an observation." He grinned making his insult grate on her nerves. "Were you hoping that he took a notice of you?"

"I'm an actress. I want everyone to notice me." She shook her head just as the marten finished its last apple slice and then squeaked demanding to be held. She held out her hand and the animal crawled up her arm to perch on her shoulder. "Although I must admit, Monsieur D'Aubigne made no effort to hide his antipathy to me yesterday."

"What did you do, try to proposition him?"

"I did no such thing!" She huffed when she belatedly realized that her voice had gotten a pitch higher in her irritation. "If you must know, I was in the library talking to Monsieur Davenport when he stormed in wanting to know something or other. I suppose he was annoyed that I got Monsieur Davenport's attention first."

"Or perhaps he was disgruntled that a woman dared trespass on the traditional turf of

the intellectuals.”

“What a ridiculous reason. I don’t suppose you disapprove of women reading books.”

“I have no problem with women reading,” Renaud replied. “I was simply offering a possible explanation for D’Aubigne’s behavior.”

“Well if we’re speculating on D’Aubigne’s motives, he could have had bad indigestion for all I know.” Haidée finished her spiced tea and dumped her mug into a nearby wash bin. Turning to Colette, she said, “If you do see the baker’s daughter, would you convey my thanks to her?”

The maid nodded.

“Excuse me, Monsieur Renaud,” she told him in a flat voice and turned to exit the kitchen.

“Wait.”

Haidée did not pause. She opened the kitchen door and slipped out. Now what was she to do? She wondered. She wanted to explore the rest of the observatory—the unknown appealed to her, but she was hesitant about getting lost in the place. But then she straightened her shoulders after a moment and purposefully strolled down the hall. She would just have to be extra careful then.

“Wait. Mademoiselle Avenall.” Renaud had the audacity to follow her. “You’re angry with me.”

She stopped and turned to look at him. “And why do you care? Just stay out of my way and I’ll stay out of yours and we’ll get along splendidly.”

“I find that I have a bit of remorse,” he replied. “I didn’t mean to make you angry.”

“I don’t believe you. I think you enjoy getting me riled.” She narrowed her gaze. “And I don’t trust your sudden contrite attitude.”

“If you don’t trust me, then who do you trust?” he sounded genuinely curious.

She found herself giving him a small laugh. “Who said I trusted anybody?”

October 21, 1796
Part XX

The back corridor behind the dining room smelled dank and slightly moldy like an unaired cellar. Haidée had accidentally stumbled on the place after Renaud had left her to go about his own research, and she had ducked into an archway which she had thought would lead her to the library. Apparently, her memory of the observatory layout

even after one day was unreliable.

She would have retreated back into the main part of the observatory if it wasn't from the faint light up ahead. There was still enough light from behind and in front to illuminate the place in shades of gray, reminding her of that strange place between alertness and sleep—when things weren't so clear. She quickly walked forward and the light grew to reveal a small indentation in the wall holding a candlestick with an unlit candle. The light itself came from a wall sconce. Haidée took the candle and lit it before continuing on her way.

The corridor narrowed until it was only the width of one person and then there were a flight of stairs leading upward. Haidée counted twenty steps before it stopped on a small landing. There was a door across the stair, a narrow one made of stained wood. Where there was supposed to be a knob, there was only a hole. She put her candle up near the hole and tried to peer inside. There was only darkness.

“Should I open the door?” she asked, mostly to herself.

The marten on her shoulder gave a soft chirp which she interpreted as a “yes.” Of course, it could have been her own wishful thinking. She was more curious than apprehensive. She hooked a finger through the hole in the door and pulled. It came away easily and soundlessly. The door must have seen regular use.

Holding up the candle, the flickering flame illuminated a small, cramped space that was empty except for a rough wooden ladder leading up into the ceiling. She was reminded of those trap doors on the stage in the theatre. There were quite a few times that she had to make use of them when a particular play called on for sudden disappearances or reappearances. She didn't like using that part of the theatre very much—the holes underneath the stage were usually as narrow and dark as the space she had found herself in now.

There was no way in which she could have climbed the ladder and held on to the candle at the same time so she left her light source on the floor and started up the rung, hiking up her skirts so she wouldn't trip over them.

The marten chattered and dug its paws into her shoulder.

“I know, I know,” she winced. “This isn't one of my brighter ideas but what else do you want me to do, mope around the place like a spoiled lady? There's only so much acting I'm willing to put up with in real life.”

At the top of the ladder, Haidée discovered that the ceiling wasn't solid at all but there was a faint outline in the beams indicating a door. Bracing herself with her left arm on the topmost rung, she reached up with her right hand and pushed.

The overhead door groaned as it gave way and a fine shower of dust rained down on her making her cough. The marten sneezed. Cold, damp air wafted over her face as she

leveraged herself up into the darkness. She could hear rain. There was lightning that briefly illuminated the small attic room and then ear-pounding thunder.

It took her eyes a few moments to adjust to the gloom, but she could make out the dark shapes of various pieces of furniture and the maw of an empty fireplace. There were windows on either side of the room. None of them had curtains which allowed the dark gray day to filter in. One of the windows was open, the pane swinging eerily with the motion of the wind.

The first thing that Haidée did was to go over to the open window to close it. The storm outside was in a fine temper as it spat rain in her face as she tried to slam the pane closed. Before succeeding, she noticed a long dark mark on the window ledge as if someone had scuffed something upon the stones. She looked past it and saw nothing but the ground.

She shook her head, feeling somewhat puzzled, and then turned back to the rest of the room. She found a battered tinderbox and a stubby candle on the mantle of the empty fireplace. After a moment, a small pool of light bathed the area. She left the candle on the mantle and looked around for any fuel for the hearth, but there was none. She rubbed her arms and proceeded to explore the rest of the place.

The floor held a thick coating of dust, undisturbed except for her own footprints and that of someone else with larger feet—someone else had visited this room recently. On the far side of the room was a long work table covered in star charts and calculations. There was a dull copper compass and a couple of other astronomical instruments that she vaguely knew about—a t-shaped quadrant, an intricately decorated astrolabe, and a wrought iron armillary sphere. There was also a lacquered box about the size of her hand. When she flipped the latch and opened the lid, she found two round pieces of glass, one thicker than the other. She took out the thinner of the two and held the edges with her thumb and forefinger and looked through it—everything in the room seemed larger and muted. She put it away and continued her examination of the table.

There was a bottle of ink on this table as well, but its shape was that of a vial with a long thin neck. It was closed with a stopper that was topped with a round glob of clear glass. Next to the vial lay a pen and an abandoned piece of foolscap with a couple of symbols hastily drawn. But even with the small sample, she could immediately tell that whoever had written on the foolscap had a different hand than the person who had written the astronomical calculations. She could also deduce that the foolscap was more recent—it didn't have the dull film of dust that coated the rest of the papers on the table.

Next to the table was an odd contraption that looked like a stand stacked with a large glass globe filled with water connected to a spout stoppered with cork, a rotating wheel like one would find on a mill next to the river in the country, and an empty bucket. On the inside of the bucket were numbered marks. It was a rudimentary water clock, she realized. She had seen more grand versions of it in the homes of wealthy theatre patrons. She wondered if this one worked—although she had no inclination to pull out the stopper and test it herself.

A telescope screwed onto an iron stand stood next to the window that had already been closed. Haidée could tell that it was a fine instrument. The barrel was made of ebony wood and lined with gleaming brass. She looked through it and saw only the dark rain outside and another tower on another part of the observatory. The window of that tower was alight and she thought she could see a shadow moving within. Perhaps it was one of the other astronomers working in his laboratory.

She remembered Davenport telling her that the telescopes had a slot in which a round card, like the one she had found in her room, would be placed. She examined the telescope's barrel and found a thin slot at the center of the instrument where a small bit of white was sticking out of it. She pulled out the card—which she judged to be about the same size as the one in her possession—and noted the similar marks on it. They were in the same style as the other one but there were some different symbols—to calibrate the telescope, she guessed. On the other side of the card, there was the name Nicolas Bisset again. She reached out with her senses to the card and felt nothing. Like the other, if it had been activated, it would have been a long time ago.

Haidée tucked the card into her pocket when the marten jumped off her shoulder to the table and skittered across the star charts. One of the charts slid off the table with a loud rustle.

“Now look what you've done!” Haidée exclaimed. She bent to the floor to pick up the chart when she noticed that the fallen chart had been hiding something underneath it. A thin book. After putting back the chart, she picked up the volume, noting the leather cover that was unmarred by titles. She opened it, revealing pages upon pages of symbols and their meanings. A reference book. She tucked it underneath her arm. “Come on,” she called softly to the marten. “There isn't much here. I'm leaving.”

A moment later, the animal crawled back out from underneath a corner and shook itself of the dust coating its fur. Once the marten had perched back on her arm, she noticed that there was something in its mouth that looked like a golden key. It dropped the object into her palm and squeaked, pleased with itself.

In the dim light, the object did look golden although it could have been brass. It was shaped vaguely like a key but then again it wasn't. The end was a semi-circle. From the flat part, a short rod extended outward and ended, blunted. There were no teeth on this supposed key. Frowning, she put it in her pocket along with the telescope card that she had found.

“I suppose it was just a shiny object that caught your eye?” she asked the marten. “I have no idea what it is. Do you?”

The animal responded by draping itself over her shoulder and yawning. Its breath smelled of apples.

“You're a lot of help,” she remarked. She walked over to the fireplace to blow the candle

out. Immediately, the gloom descended onto the room, heavy and almost stifling. Carefully, she made her way back to the trap door. Wanting both hands free, she stuffed the slim book into her bodice and grabbed her skirts so she could make her way down the rungs.

Just as she took hold of the door, she heard a fierce rapping upon the panes of one of the attic windows. She paused as a nervous shiver took her. Did someone know that she was in the room? The rapping continued and bit by bit, she made her muscles relax. It was nothing, she told herself. Perhaps the sky had started spitting out hail instead of rain. But just before she wedged the overhead door closed, she heard a crash of thunder and the splintering of glass.

The marten let out a frightened squeak.

She made her way down as quickly as she could and grabbed the candle that she had left on the floor of the small alcove. Once she reached the top landing of the stairs, she closed the door and half walked, half ran down the stairs back to the corridor behind the dining room.

Once back into familiar territory, she stopped and breathed hard. She could have been imagining things, she thought. Perhaps she was over dramatizing things. Her fingers felt cramped and she looked down, and realized that she had a white knuckled grip on the candlestick.

Then she heard footsteps coming down the main corridor. She froze.

The cook, Madame Boulanger came around the corner with her broom and dust pan. The woman came around the corner and catching sight of Haidée, she paused for a moment to give her a mean tempered stare.

“Out of my way, Mademoiselle.” Madame Boulanger drawled out “Mademoiselle” as if it were something distasteful. Then she turned sharply away to go back into the kitchen.

Haidée let out a sudden nervous laugh. It was just the cook with a grudge. She could handle that.

October 21, 1796
Part XXI

Haidée decided not to head to the library after all—she was afraid that she would stumble upon another shady part of the observatory that she might not be able to get out of.

Eventually, she made her way back to the bedroom corridor and headed back to her room. For good measure, she locked her bedroom door from the inside and put a chair at the door so that the back of the chair stopped the doorknob from turning. The marten hopped off her shoulder and made its way to the desk at the end of the room. Haidée

followed the animal and dumped the things that she had found onto the desktop. She sat down and began looking through the book for the symbols on the round telescope cards.

The marten seemed momentarily distracted by the shiny pseudo-key that it had found in the observatory attic. It batted the object around making it clink along the surface in an irregular patter, clashing with the sound of the persistent rain outside.

Haidée finally slammed the book down and glared at the marten. “Stop that. It’s annoying.”

The marten looked up with a faux innocent expression, blinking its bright black eyes. It batted at the pseudo-key once more, making one particularly loud thunk.

She gave an exasperated sigh and stood up. “That did not help.”

It was then that the marten scampered off of the desk and raced across the floor, drawing her eye toward her trunks near the wardrobe. She frowned. On the surface, the scene looked perfectly fine, but something was off. Was one of the trunks moved? Did she move one this morning and forget that she moved it?

She walked over to the trunks just as the marten raced back to her feet, chattering and hoping that its mistress would be up for some play. But Haidée brushed the creature off as she bent down to open one of the trunks. On the top were her clothes, neatly packed. Her shoes and slippers were still paired. Underneath the first layer were several bottles of her tonic and a few volumes of poetry. She narrowed her gaze as she took stock of her belongings. The bottles were unopened, but the volumes of poetry did not appear to be in the order that she had packed them.

Hurriedly, she opened her other trunk to check the order of her belongings. Everything was there but they seemed to be in a subtly different order. She felt a mental chill as she realized that someone had gone through her things. In a frenzy, she began tearing around the room to see if anything else was out of place. The marten squeaked in surprise at her sudden manic behavior and dove underneath the bed to escape her trampling feet.

Finally, she stood in the middle of the room, feeling breathless and angry. “Damn it. Who could have had the audacity?” Her eye fell upon the narrow door to the bathroom. “Damn him. Bastard!”

She stormed across the room and wrenched the bathroom door open. The small green and blue tiled room greeted her silently. Nothing there seemed out of place—because there was hardly thing there except towels, soaps, and lotions. She glared at the opposite door which led to Renaud’s bedroom. She was furious with the implications. The only person who could have searched her room with ease would be Renaud since their keys to the shared bathroom was the same.

Haidée went back into her room to grab her bathroom key and went back to his door.

Momentarily, she pressed her ear to the door to listen for any movement on the other side. There was nothing. She hoped that he had gone back to his research in the cellar of the observatory as she pushed her key into his lock and turned. She pushed the door open and the faint light from the bathroom spilled over into the interior of the astronomer's bedroom.

Like any other fastidious intellectual, Renaud's bed was perfectly made. His own trunks were pushed to the side of the room, away from the windows which were locked. His guest room was similar to hers, in that there was a wardrobe and a desk. But the desk in this room was smaller with fewer drawers. The rest of the room was taken up by two bookshelves stuffed full with books and rolled up charts. Various astronomical instruments were scattered on the top shelf.

Haidée looked on the desk which was completely cleared. She went through the drawers finding nothing but the usual writing materials. She slammed the last drawer shut, feeling frustrated. If Renaud had searched her room, he was probably well aware that someone else could search his room. If he had anything of importance, he would never hide it in the obvious places.

She glanced at the bookshelf and grimaced at all the volumes. She started on the shelf at hand level and took out the first book which looked like a text on the constellations. She flipped through the pages and found nothing. Haidée shoved the volume back onto the shelf and reached for the next one.

The main door to Renaud's bedroom suddenly slammed open. Renaud himself strolled into the room. Haidée straightened up in shock and stared at him. He stared back, surprised.

Lightning from outside pulsed through the window to illuminate the fact that Renaud was soaking wet. His navy blue coat was dripping water onto the floor. His wet breeches molded to his thighs like a second skin. His long dark hair was loose and wet, running down his neck to his shoulders like a slick river. His golden rimmed spectacles slipped an inch down his aristocratic nose.

"What," he said, his voice dark and cold, "are you doing in my room?"

At the sound of his voice, she gasped and sprang into action, leaping toward the narrow door to the bathroom.

But he was quicker, striking out like a snake snagging prey. Before her hand could reach the door, she felt his fingers curl into her elbow to jerk her back. She nearly tripped on her own feet when he twisted her around to face him.

"Let me go, brute." She tried to slip her arm away from his grasp but he only tightened his fingers and grabbed her other arm.

"Why are you in my room?" Past his rain slicked spectacles his dark gaze bored through

her. He was truly angry, she realized. His previous behavior was nothing compared to this. This controlled violence forced a shudder through her that she could not hide.

“Why?” he repeated.

She flinched, but she surprised herself by holding his gaze. “You searched my room.”

“What?”

Feeling a bit more on solid ground and channeling righteous indignation, she said louder, “You searched my room. You invaded my privacy. That only gives me right to be here. You could have stolen something of mine.”

His lips flattened. “Why the hell would I want to look through your things? I have no interest in the latest Parisian fashions.”

“You’re lying.”

He was silent for a moment. Then abruptly, he pushed her against the back of the bathroom door. His wet hair dripped onto the skin at the hollow of her throat. His breath fanned warmly on her cheek. He was so close that she could see the pupils of his eyes, large against a background of brown streaked with gold.

“So what if I went through the books of poetry on the bottom of your trunks. So what if I counted your bottles of laudanum and fingered through your chemises. That gives you no right to go through my things.”

Her pulse pounded in her ears as she listened to his soft, dark voice. She swallowed and the ridiculous thought that he wanted to kiss her flitted through her mind.

“Don’t you dare try to pin the blame on me,” she managed to reply. “If you were so bold to break into my room, don’t be so naïve to expect that no one would invade your privacy.”

The muscle in his jaw tightened. “My God.” He stepped away from her. “Save me from your excuses.”

“I was being logical.”

“Logical?” He tore his coat off and flung it onto the chair next to the desk. “Do you think logic will excuse you?” His waistcoat joined his jacket.

She felt her cheeks heat. Renaud had indeed been hiding underneath his ill-fitting coats. His shoulders were broad, his torso perfectly proportioned, tapering into a slim waist. Other men with a similar physique would have flaunted it as much as possible. “Tell me why you searched my room. What were you hoping to find?”

He began unbuttoning his shirt. She caught the gleam of muscle. “Indication that you were more than what you said you were.”

“You should know that actresses always pretend to be more than what they really are.” She managed a strangled sound at the back of her throat when his shirt came off. “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking off my wet clothes,” he replied, his voice slightly mocking. “I don’t want to walk around in a damp shirt and catch a cold.” He took off his spectacles and placed them on the desk. Then his fingers headed towards the tops of his breeches.

She managed to wrench her gaze off him. “I can’t believe you’re undressing now. I’m leaving.”

His fingers caught her wrist just as she turned. She looked down at his fingers which were long and dark against her skin.

“I’m surprised.” His whisper tickled the edge of her ear. “Why would an experienced actress like you shy away from me?”

She whipped her head around suddenly angry. “Just because I’m an actress doesn’t mean that I’m...”

His mouth came down over hers, silencing her next words. She stood still and frozen as his lips moved, coaxing her mouth open. She whimpered and sensing her growing weakness, his tongue slipped between her lips to taste her.

Involuntarily, her free hand came up to rest on his shoulder. Renaud changed the angle of his kiss and her fingers slipped, sliding against his skin. She barely registered the position of her hand—at that moment, the center of her universe was his hot, ardent mouth which now nipped at her bottom lip and moved to her throat.

She reached up to grab a fistful of his wet hair. “Jacot.”

“Hmm.”

“We can’t be doing this.”

“Why not?” She felt his hands trail up her back to finger the lacing in her bodice. “It seems somewhat unfair that you are far more dressed than I am.”

She wanted him to pull the laces, but she said instead, “I’m not easy.”

“Haidée.” Her name on his tongue made her harden her grip on his arm. He raised his head and looked down at her, giving her a sly smile. “I know you’re not easy.”

His mouth hovered above her, making her breathe hard in anticipation.

A harsh pounding at Renaud's door forced him to pause. Haidée stood with her back to the bathroom door feeling suddenly tense. Renaud loomed over her, his head tilted slightly to listen to the noise.

"Monsieur Renaud!" came a muffled voice from the other side of the door. It sounded like Claude. "It's Monsieur D'Aubigne. Something quite terrible has happened."

Almost immediately, Haidée was released. She watched Renaud stroll to the other side of the room.

"I'll be out in a moment," he called out. He went to the wardrobe to pull out a dry shirt. "Mademoiselle Avenall, I think it would be best if you go back to your room."

At the sound of her formal address, she stiffened. "Monsieur Renaud, if you think to send me to my room to spare me the trauma of whatever may have happened to Monsieur D'Aubigne, you're sadly mistaken."

"Haidée..."

She whirled back through the connecting bathroom before he could try to explain.

October 21, 1796

Part XXII

Her mouth still tingled from his kisses as she hurried down the flight of stairs to the front hall. The marten raced after her, chattering what she imagined as admonitions to her impulsive behavior with Renaud.

Actresses were allowed to be free with their favors. Some people even expected them to be free with their favors. Back in Paris, Haidée was careful to cultivate such a persona although in reality, she rarely took lovers. If one were to differ from the stereotype...

She shook her head from the thoughts and concentrated on her own direction. People were already gathered in the front hall, murmuring in shocked, soft voices. Then she saw the dark shape on the floor.

Flaxen hair spilled out from beneath a long black cloak. Bare arms and legs peeked out—pale and faintly blue. Her throat suddenly felt dry when she realized that this was D'Aubigne's body.

She wet her lips, feeling cold. "Is it..."

"Mademoiselle!" Everard's stout figure suddenly blocked her way. "This is a terrible scene for your delicate sensibilities. Please allow us men to take care of this..."

The cackle of the old astronomer Laurent Roland cut off Everard. "You're hardly fit

yourself, Everard. You're babbling."

"Am not!" The head astronomer responded petulantly.

"Gentlemen," Edouard Garnier drawled. "Now is the worst time to be arguing about sensibilities."

Haidée managed to sidestep Everard and concentrated her gaze on the new visitor standing beside Villiers and Claude and discussing whether or not they should inform the magistrate immediately or wait until the storm abated. From their conversation, Haidée deduced that the new figure in a dripping hat and coat was the local farmer, Laroche.

"What happened?" she asked, infusing her voice with an imperious tone she reserved for aristocratic characters that she played on the stage.

The men slid her a glance. Villiers tilted his head arrogantly. "Mademoiselle..."

Laroche gave a cough just as Villiers was about to continue. "I found him."

Steps sounded on the floor behind her. She straightened as a familiar shadow stood next to her. Renaud had finally changed into dry clothes, including an overly large coat. Only his hair remained loose and damp, still slightly mused from when she ran her fingers through it. She felt herself flush, but she kept her gaze ahead. She heard the snick of metal as Renaud put his spectacles on.

"Where did you find him?" Renaud asked.

"On the edge of my property," the farmer replied. "I was out trying to get a horse that had escaped from the stables. I found him lying face down on the edge of the wall as naked as the day he was born. I also noticed some black markings on his back, but they were being washed off by the rain." The farmer paused, and then added, "I didn't find a pulse or a heartbeat."

With those words, Haidée found her eyes drawn to the water leaking onto the floor. Was it just the trick of the light that the water was tinged gray-black as it formed a puddle around the stones?

With chilling fascination, Haidée wondered if the marks were still on D'Aubigne's body and if those marks were still recognizable as such. She had the suspicion that the marks were also made by the same kind of ink that had marked Legard. The two deaths were too similar to ignore. Whoever, and Haidée had no doubt that someone was involved, had killed Legard was most certainly the same one who killed D'Aubigne and left his body on the wall that bordered Laroche's farm and the observatory.

But Everard ignored that fact with ease when he directed Villiers and Claude to move the body to the cellar for the duration. "Monsieur Laroche, could I impose on you to

inform the magistrate and the doctor when you go back to the village?”

The farmer made a show of tipping his hat. “I can certainly do that, Monsieur Everard. Anything to help in this time of tragedy.”

“A certain tragedy it is.” The head astronomer took on a grave air. “Ah, youth, struck down by the merest accident!”

“Accident, eh?” she heard the short astronomer, Garnier mutter sarcastically under his breath. “Oh, it was obviously an accident.”

Roland who was standing next to Garnier as the observatory servants hauled up the body, chuckled softly. “Indeed. What sort of accident does Everard think has befallen the young pup?”

Haidée saw Renaud shrug in response to his remark. “Who knows,” said Renaud. “Did you see anything else of interest, Monsieur Laroche? Did it look like he broke his neck climbing the wall?”

On his way out, the farmer shook his head. “No, Monsieur.”

“Well, that solves that little problem,” Garnier drawled with a sneer. “I wonder if the doctor would care to enlighten us with his diagnosis when he arrives.”

“I have no doubt that he was struck by lightning while taking a walk,” Everard announced. “It is dreadful weather outside today.”

“But naked in this weather?” Roland said dubiously.

Garnier sighed. “Don’t forget that D’Aubigne was rather uninhibited, if you know what I mean.”

Renaud crossed his arms and said in a rather bored voice, “I can’t work if a dead body is cluttering up my work space.”

The last comment caused her to turn her head from her examination of the inky water puddles on the floor to the men who were standing around speculating on an “accident” that she was sure never occurred. “I can’t believe all of you are standing around here chatting as if nothing worse had happened other than perhaps someone accidentally falling off the roof trying to repair a leak.”

The marten at her feet squeaked in what suspiciously sounded like agreement.

The astronomers stared at her. Renaud had a speculative gleam in his eye as he regarded her, but it was Everard who spoke first.

“Mademoiselle, you are overwrought.”

“I am not overwrought,” she replied in a calm, even tone. “I’m trying to point out the obvious to you thick skulls. Monsieur D’Aubigne did not accidentally die. Someone killed him.”

Everard shook his head in denial. “You’re being overdramatic.”

“I don’t think so.” She held up a hand with an index finger raised. “For one, Monsieur D’Aubigne and Monsieur Legard were found in the same manner. I don’t believe that was coincidence. Nor is the fact that they died few days apart mere chance. And what about the previous suicide? Three deaths so close together strike me as suspicious, don’t you think?”

Garnier gave her a thin lipped smile. “Those are all good points, Mademoiselle, but I doubt that Danton Neville’s suicide had anything to do with this. We know he committed suicide. He even left a note.”

Notes could be forged, Haidée thought darkly, but instead of pointing that out, she said, “Then there’s the matter of the markings on the backs of the deceased. There would be no way for them to put that on themselves. Someone else must have done it.”

“But who?” asked Roland. “I admit, I’ve been harboring the thought that D’Aubigne had done Legard in because of his animosity against him, but now D’Aubigne is dead. I can’t imagine someone bearing a grudge against both of them. They are both quite different.”

“Well, someone does,” Haidée replied. “And it had not escaped my notice either that all the recent deaths have been those of astronomers.”

Everard paled. “Mademoiselle, this is not some sort of trick you’re trying to pull on us? Are you implying that there is a killer after one of us next?”

“What an intriguing notion,” mused Renaud. “I wonder if there is a pattern or if these crimes were committed simply because the killer had the opportunity. Who was D’Aubigne trying to meet up with in this weather when he went out earlier?”

“I have no idea,” proclaimed Roland. Haidée thought the old man proclaimed a little too loudly. “Perhaps he was meeting up with the killer. Too bad he’s dead or he would have been able to tell us who it is.”

Garnier shook his head. “This is useless speculation, I’d say. Let the magistrate handle the investigations. I’m sure he has more experience in this kind of thing.”

“But Monsieur Galliard resides all the way back in the village,” Renaud pointed out. “I haven’t seen him here lately—he probably has less idea than we do about what is going on. And what about the possibility that the murderer is under this same roof now?”

Haidée was struck by the idea. “Indeed, what if that were true?” A shiver snaked over

her shoulders. “On that note, Monsieur Renaud, what were you doing earlier? I noticed that you came in soaking to the bone.”

His spectacles winked in the light. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying?” he said softly. Everyone’s eyes were riveted to him, waiting for the answer.

“Well, it is somewhat puzzling to me that you were outside while Monsieur D’Aubigne was being murdered,” she said. “I was inside while that was happening.”

He gave her a cold smile. “That doesn’t mean that you didn’t change out of wet clothes before you met me. Why, I think it would make much sense if you were the one responsible. You could have easily coerced them to strip naked—a woman such as yourself would be incentive enough. And then you could have fed them some sort of poison that left no trace.”

She gaped at his deductions. “How dare you imply that I had anything to do with this? I didn’t even know any of these people before I came to this island. I don’t even have a motive.”

“Who says murderers need motive?” said Renaud. “Certain crazed people could kill just for the fun of it.”

“You’re turning this back on me because you refuse to admit to where you were!”

Evarard coughed. “Actually, he was with me and Claude. Madame Boulanger had noticed that one of the experimental outdoor measuring devices in the garden had been knocked over during the storm when she was out getting water from the well. She told me and since Renaud was available, we three went to fetch the contraption inside so it wouldn’t be further damaged by the winds.”

“Oh, what a convincing excuse,” said Garnier.

“And where were you?” Roland turned to the shorter astronomer with rheumy yet sharp eyes. “I think you have perhaps more motive than the rest of us.”

“It is true that D’Aubigne and Legard were not my favorite people in the world,” Garnier retorted. “And neither were they yours. But that does not mean that I would be so depraved as to kill someone simply because I didn’t like them. Besides, I think this is a waste of time pointing fingers at each other. I’m going back to work.”

With that, Garnier turned his back on them and strolled away.

October 22, 1796
Part XXIII

The previous day’s storm left the world looking wetly vibrant, as if a painter had just slapped paint onto the canvas. The world seemed acutely sharp and alive. But Haidée

was in no mood to appreciate it.

She stood just outside the village of Mont Saint Filan breathing in the salty air from the surrounding sea. Her head ached with the natural stimuli, as if her nerves had been rubbed raw. That morning, she had taken double the dose of the tonic to wake herself up from some particularly bad nightmares. She remembered little of those subconscious sojourns, preferring instead the lividness and side effects of a drug that she hoarded almost religiously.

But at the moment, she questioned the wisdom of it. Everything around her seemed louder and brighter when all she wanted was some quiet and undisturbed sleep.

After a covert breakfast, barely avoiding the easily agitated Madame Boulanger, she had gone outside for a walk. The ground had been still slightly wet, but then, she had not cared about the mud sticking to the heel of her shoes. When she had reached the edge of the observatory's land, she had looked out toward the small church and the bit of cemetery beside it. There had been men out already, digging a grave in preparation for D'Aubigne's funeral which Everard and Father DeLorme had planned for the next day. The magistrate had raised no objection—Galliard hadn't even suggested that the funeral be postponed so that he could figure out what was going on.

Beyond the cemetery had been Laroche's farm. Even from her vantage point, she could see the wall that separated the farm from the observatory land just beyond a copse of red leaf trees. She had wondered exactly where on the wall the farmer had found D'Aubigne. She also wondered if the blond haired astronomer had simply been killed elsewhere and had been dumped at the wall deliberately for someone else to find. And if that was true, what would be the purpose in that?

Those thoughts had been in her head when the marten, who had faithfully followed her, got distracted by something and had run off into the trees. She had consoled herself with the loss of her companion with the reasoning that it was a wild animal with a mind of its own. Then she had entered the village. A quick walk through the main street revealed that it was still too early for any of the shops to be open. The Green Café where she had had her first conversation with the observatory librarian Seymour Davenport had a closed look even though she could see light in the interior. She had not bothered to knock to see if it was really closed.

The Cormorant, however, was open. The innkeeper, Fasset, had given her a baleful look, but said nothing when she had ordered a cup of tea. She had taken a seat in the mostly empty dining room. Apparently the inn's visitors got up even later than she did. She had sat there wrapped up with her own thoughts when she had been surprised by the scrape of moving chairs nearby.

The magistrate, Galliard, and two other men who she had recognized as Ducos and his friend, had taken a table not far from hers. A tired looking maid had walked by with a tray to serve them breakfast. The men had been talking in low tones, ignoring her. On the surface, it had looked like any other conversation, but something about the tones of

their voices—even though she could not make out any distinct words—had seemed wrong.

She had been almost finished with her tea. There had been one last cold sip left at the bottom of the cup, a pale brown-green liquid with bits of browned leaves curled in suspension. She had glanced around her, looking to see if anyone was watching her. Once satisfied that she was unobserved, she had dipped a finger in the bit of leftover tea and began drawing a symbol on her table, a triangle with a slash through it and an odd yet distinct curling mark at the point of the triangle pointing to the trio of men. Then, she had said a word, soundlessly.

Her ears had gotten momentarily cold and then the murmur of the men's voices had sharpened until she could pick up phrases and sentences.

“Are you sure that dead astronomer was just an accident?” That had been Ducos. He had sounded worried.

“It can't be anything else,” Galliard had replied. “Only a fool would have gone out in that weather yesterday to dally about. He probably courted the wrath of God by doing that and ended up getting struck by lightning for his pains.”

“The doctor's opinion was that he was struck by lightning?” Ducos's friend had asked.

“Yes. He was quite positive about that fact,” the magistrate had replied.

Ducos had made a disbelieving grunt at the back of his throat. “I don't like this. Two deaths in a matter of days? Either this is an omen or someone is trying to warn us.”

“Well, I think it's a coincidence. However...”

The magistrate's voice had trailed off and Haidée had scowled as she had noticed that the mark she had made on the table had dried out. She had decided not to renew the mark—she had heard enough to gather that the men knew nothing even though there was some odd reason why they were taking a particular interest in D'Aubigne's death. Besides, a headache had started to creep up on her. So she had signaled for a maid that she was done and had left the inn.

“Mademoiselle Avenall, what a surprise to see you out here of all days.”

The voice broker her out of her reverie. She was aware again that she was standing on the path leading to the observatory just outside the village. The ground beneath her feet was somewhat spongy, not completely dried out yet. A few feet away was the island's holy man, Father DeLorme. He was walking about hatless, his silver hair scattered with the wind. Around his shoulders was a flapping black cloak. His blue eyes were sharp, missing nothing.

“Good day, Father,” she said neutrally. “I wanted to take a walk this morning to clear my

head.”

“I completely understand. The recent sudden tragedy is hard to take.”

She nodded. “It was certainly sudden. And disturbing.”

“I’m here if you want to talk about it, child.” His voice was soft and soothing. Compassionate and almost hypnotic. “I know these things can be hard to deal with by yourself.”

Haidée put her gloved hands into her coat pockets, considering. “Father, what is your opinion on the deaths of Messieurs Legard and D’Aubigne?”

“I’ve been told by Monsieur Everard that they were unfortunate accidents.”

“I think the two men were murdered,” she said bluntly. “No one seems to entertain that idea. I don’t think the magistrate will investigate.”

“Murdered?” The priest was taken aback. “Mademoiselle, what on earth would lead you to that conclusion? Surely it is not an overactive imagination?”

“I was not imagination things when I saw certain markings on the men’s backs. Or rather Monsieur Legard’s back. I was only told about those on Monsieur D’Aubigne. Those markers were meant to kill.”

“Markings?” Father DeLorme now seemed quizzical. “Don’t you mean tattoos? Many men have tattoos on their backs. That doesn’t mean anything?”

“They weren’t tattoos. They were marks made by ink. The kind of marks certain sorcerers would use. Certain unethical and homicidal sorcerers.”

DeLorme’s eyes narrowed. “I have no idea what you are talking about Mademoiselle. But if you are talking about what certain learned men call the magical arts, that could not be possible. The only kind of magic that exists is the power of God or the trickery of the devil.”

“Then what would you do if something demonic was killing people?” she countered.

He paused. “I suppose I would perform an exorcism.”

“Exactly! But of course, this kind of thing isn’t demonic. We’ll need something else to expose the killer.” Her voice sounded unnaturally loud to her ears. The air seemed to cackle with sudden coldness as if she had inadvertently muttered a spell at the same time.

The priest, however, did not seem to notice the abrupt drop in temperature. He simply gave her an expression of pity. “If you think the observatory has come under the grips of

a demonic entity, I suppose I can come by this afternoon to cleanse the place with a few blessings. Meanwhile, I suggest you go back and lie down for a bit. You are probably not feeling quite yourself at the moment.”

Haidée involuntarily winced as her temples suddenly throbbed. The offer of an exorcism was kind, but from her education with Madame Zephyrine, she knew that such things were useless against anything that was the result of a human perpetrator. “Perhaps you are right, Father. Maybe I overexerted myself with the walk this morning.”

“Good girl,” said the priest approvingly. He patted her shoulder in a comforting manner. “The horror of the recent tragedy has probably caught up with you. You need some time to assimilate all that has happened.”

“Yes.”

“When your head is a bit clearer, you’ll realize that the deaths of Messieurs D’Aubigne and Legard probably are accidents. The prospect of death frightens us all, Mademoiselle, and we must all somehow try to cope with it. Each person has their own way with dealing with these mortal delimitas. But just remember that no matter the outcome, death isn’t the end. If we all ask for forgiveness, we will all be reunited in heaven with the Lord.”

Her head still pounded but she held her tongue from snapping out at the priest for his lecture. She didn’t need to be preached to about the afterlife when she was currently worried about life itself now. She wasn’t quite sure that anything, really, happened after death, but she didn’t feel like arguing with the Father on that point. Instead, she said her goodbyes and headed back to the observatory.

October 22, 1796
Part XXIV

When Haidée reached the intersection between the road to the village and the path to the edge of the island and the wall separating the observatory property with Laroche’s farm, the marten made its appearance by dashing across her path and nodding its head back and forth, urging her to follow it.

“This is ridiculous!” she exclaimed. “What is so interesting about that place? If you’re going to end up climbing another tree, I’m going back without you. I’m just tolerating you because I find you amusing.”

The marten squeaked in indignation and raced down the path. Haidée sighed and followed, feeling grumpy because she still had a headache. The natural energy of the flora around her seemed a little too bright, making her squint as she made her way down the path. She desperately wanted to sit down and gain back her equilibrium.

Her animal companion finally halted beside a rock next to a tree. Haidée recognized the place where the marten had first invaded her picnic basket.

“Why on earth are we here?” she asked puzzled.

The marten responded with a soft, yet urgent chirp.

She looked about her surroundings and saw the trees, and beyond that, the edge of the island and the sea. She turned her gaze towards the interior and then her breath hitched in her throat as she stared in surprise and increasing unease.

A figure stood next to the wall bordering the farmland. It was a figure with his ill-fitting coat that she knew so well. Renaud was at the scene of the crime, apparently scrutinizing everything. Possibilities ran through her mind, none of them good. She could only deduce that Renaud was perhaps D’Aubigne’s killer and that he had come back to check if he had left anything incriminating behind.

While she was thinking this, he turned his head towards her direction and then his whole posture froze. Haidée’s breath left her. There was no doubt about it—he had seen her.

Hiding was out of the question since he already knew of her existence. Running away was also impossible. She had on a dress and boots made for walking, not running. And even assuming that she wouldn’t trip on her own skirts, she had no doubt that he could catch up with her.

So she stepped out from the tree to confront him. This was probably also a foolish thing to do, but she wasn’t one to cower. She walked until they were perhaps only a few yards apart. The sun reflected off his spectacles which caused a glare that hid his expression.

“Mademoiselle Avenall, what are you doing here?” his voice sounded neutral, almost bored.

Haidée’s skin prickled. There was nothing lackadaisical about Jacot Renaud. If he was the murderer, she was in grave danger indeed. And if he wasn’t, she was still wary, wary enough to dig her heels into the dirt and grass to trace a defensive mark.

“I was simply taking a stroll,” she replied. “What are you doing?” She paused for a moment for effect, “Are you trying to eliminate any evidence for your crime?”

“I have done nothing. Perhaps it is you who is guilty and you want to shift the blame to me.”

“I was never here yesterday.”

“Oh?” He took a menacing step forward.

Haidée panicked and said one sharp word. Her headache intensified, but her concentration was fixed on her current adversary. A cold wind blew up, taking with it

fallen leaves and broken twigs. Renaud held up an arm to block the windy onslaught and she watched in amazement as the debris went over and around him.

It was then that she noticed the slip of paper between his forefinger and middle finger. Most people would have dismissed it. Haidée didn't—and it had only registered in her mind at the last second when he threw open his arms and launched the paper at her.

She ducked just in time as the white slip whizzed through the air like a deadly dagger, over her head, and struck the tree behind her. She glanced back seeing the bark start to smoke.

“I can't believe you did that! Are you trying to kill me?”

Renaud didn't reply. He was already reaching into his pocket for another deadly slip of paper.

Haidée threw herself sideways onto the ground. She dug into the dirt to draw a square within a square, not caring if her gloves were getting ruined by her digging. Just as she finished, she said two breathless words and looked up as she heard a sound like pebbles upon glass.

A square piece of paper with an inked symbol had bounded off her shield and landed into the nearby grass where it began to burn a significantly sized circle on the ground.

She then focused her gaze on Renaud who was standing over her, his right hand in his coat pocket, his expression unreadable. There was blinding pain behind her eyes and her arms felt weak. If he decided to attack again, there would be no way she could hold out.

“Jacot, please.” Her voice sounded disgustingly weak to her ears. “Please don't.”

He stared at her for a moment and then took his hand out of his pocket. His hand was empty. “I didn't kill anyone, Haidée. But I am trying to find out who did. Do you believe me?”

“You could be lying.”

His lips tightened. “Then perform a truth spell on me, witch.”

“I can't do that and maintain my shield at the same time.”

“Then drop your shield.”

The vulnerability that it implied frightened her. But it only took her a moment to decide. Truth over safety won out. She deactivated her protection with a one-syllable word and struggled to stand up. Dizziness overcame her and she swayed on her feet.

He caught her elbow to study her. “Perform the truth spell.”

“Hold out your hand.”

He turned his hand, palm up. Her gloves were still caked with dirt so she began drawing on his skin, a ragged symbol. Her own hands shook as she finished it and activated it with a word. She hated performing spells on people. But she had to know.

“Ask your question?” he said.

“Did you kill anyone on this island?”

“No.” His voice was firm. She glanced from his unyielding face to his palm. The symbol glowed faintly. A breeze sprang up and whisked the dirt from his skin.

She let out a shaky sigh. “Jacot.” Her head hurt. Her legs felt weak. She expended too much of herself too early in the day. The marten raced to her feet after the fight and squeaked, worried.

His arm came around her waist to support her. “Shh.”

“But you don’t know if I killed anyone. Aren’t you going to perform a truth spell on me?” she asked.

“I don’t need a truth spell to know you didn’t kill anyone. As you’ve said, you don’t have a motive. And you would not have had the opportunity.”

“Why not? I was on this island when D’Aubigne and Legard were murdered.”

“Yes, but you weren’t here when someone killed Danton Neville.”

October 22, 1796
Part XXV

“You don’t look well,” he said.

Haidée found herself agreeing with him as he steered her toward the stone wall. “I have this awful headache. I should go back and take some tonic. I’ll feel better then.”

She felt his fingers tighten on her arm. “Did you take any of your tonic this morning?”

“Why yes. I wasn’t feeling too well then either so I took two doses...”

“That’s what’s wrong with you.”

At the wall, she leaned against it and put an arm on the edge to steady herself. “What?”

“I think these tonics of yours are causing you headaches. Exerting yourself and taking drugs is a dangerous combination.”

“I don’t know...”

“Yes it is. You should stop drinking that stuff whenever you feel bad. There’s no need to handicap yourself unnecessarily.”

She turned to look at the scenery—everywhere but him. “Maybe I want to handicap myself.”

“Haidée, you can’t deny your powers. I saw you defend yourself. You made those spells yourself. I had to have mine made for me. Not many women can do that.”

“You called me a witch.”

The word hung between them, shimmering and dangerous. Society said that there were no such things, only charlatans. No one would be so barbaric these days to burn someone at the stake. But who could say if someone made up some charges like treason or conspiracy against the government—and whether it was true or not, use it as a reason to send the condemned to the kiss of the guillotine?

“If you aren’t,” he replied mildly, “Then what are you?”

He stood close to her, giving no indication that he was going away any time soon. He didn’t look disgusted with her, simply curious as if he had asked an innocuous question instead—as if he had asked her if she liked sugar and milk in her tea.

She felt herself deflate. “I’m a person, that’s all. An ordinary person who just has these... abilities.”

He looked at her, not saying anything. This unnerved her.

“You don’t believe me.”

“I had an inkling of what you might have been capable of back when the carriage taking us to this island was stuck on the causeway,” Renaud finally said. “You mentioned that something was strange with the mud. Ducos and I managed to get the wheels unstuck, but I wondered if we didn’t have a little help. It seemed a little too easy after we had put in so much effort.”

“Big, strong men don’t need help,” she sneered.

“I usually don’t turn away help if it is offered at a critical juncture.” He raised a hand to brush a lock of her hair, which had escaped from underneath her bonnet, behind her ear. The warm skin of his fingers barely touched the curve of her cheek. “You could have said how you could have helped.”

“Some people don’t accept such things,” Haidée replied, thinking back on her conversation with Father DeLorme. “Some think it is merely hallucination.”

“I don’t.” He straightened up and suddenly there was this space between them as if they were both now merely distant acquaintances. But the barest indication of a smile on his lips hinted that something had changed between them. Haidée hesitated to speculate on what that might be.

Instead, she strove for a light impersonal tone as if they had been merely taking a walk outside instead of battling each other with certain powers. “So you say that someone killed the astronomer who everyone says is a suicide. Why do you say that?”

“Danton Neville corresponded with a patron of his who is a member of the Five Hundred.”

“The Directoire?” The Five Hundred was the Lower House of the French government. Haidée was confused. “What do they have anything to do with this? I thought you were the one who had the correspondence with Monsieur Neville.”

“I work for Neville’s patron.”

She stared at him stunned as the implications of his statement struck her. “You’re an agent, not an astronomer. How did you convince Monsieur Everard you were one? Wait, you’re not actually Jacot Renaud, are you? It’s just an assumed name. You’re an actor!”

He seemed amused by her outburst. “My real name is Jacot Renaud. I did not lie about that. I am not an expert, but I know enough of astronomy that I have helped my superiors interpret the results from the observatory. Everard only knows what my superiors have told him—that I am an astronomer working in Paris.”

“And so you are here because Monsieur Neville’s patron wanted to know what was going on here?” she deduced.

“Neville’s last letter disturbed him to say the least. Some of his letter talked about the death of another astronomer several months prior. He seemed to be convinced that he did not die of natural causes.”

“Do you mean Nicolas Bisset?”

“Yes. How did you hear about him?”

“I found something in my room with his name on it. I asked Monsieur Davenport about it and he told me that he had been an elderly astronomer who had died of old age. I think my guest room used to be his room.”

“And my room used to be Neville’s room,” said Renaud. “How strange.”

“It can’t be a coincidence.” She paused for a moment, thinking about how much she should tell him. “I saw you in this area a couple of days ago. You were examining that place where Monsieur Neville supposedly jumped to his death.”

“Oh? You were spying on me?” His voice had gotten soft. “Were you following me?”

She shook her head. “It was an accident, I swear. But I am curious. What did you find?”

Renaud shrugged. “I didn’t really find anything. Originally, I had the suspicion that perhaps Neville had found out too much and someone had simply tossed him over the cliffs for retaliation. I didn’t think anything else was involved until Legard turned up dead. That was when I had the bright idea of taking some samples of the place. I know an alchemist just outside of Paris who has ways of determining if certain powers have been used in a particular location even after the spell had been cast quite a while ago.”

“I’ve heard of such alchemists,” Haidée admitted. “They are quite specialized. I can only tell if a spell is being used at the time. Occasionally, I can also tell if it has just been cast. But not days afterward.”

October 23, 1796
Part XXVI

The marten tickled her nose with its tail. Haidée sneezed and groaned before rolling over in bed and pulling up a pillow to cover her head. The creature squeaked and ran up and down the bed. The trampling paws along her body felt like she had bumped into an open silverware drawer and that all the spoons were falling on her. Her head ached like the very devil.

“I’m trying to sleep!” Her voice came out muffled. It sounded more like she was making frustrated noises behind a closed mouth.

The marten pounced again.

The previous night, after a dull and solemn dinner in which the astronomers avoided the topic of the recent death and discussed their research projects instead, Haidée had escaped back into her room to douse herself in tonic. She had had enough of “astrolabe calibrations”, “telescope adjustments”, and speculations on the weather and clear skies for the night. The tonic had given her an extra boost of mental awareness and she had stayed up working on translating the symbols on the telescope cards. She had mostly translated the first one that she had found before she had glanced up at the clock on the shelf and noticed that it was four in the morning.

She had also felt restless. And in more than one instance, she had found her gaze moving towards the small door that led to the shared bathroom.

“Fine, I’m up,” she mumbled. Haidée rolled ungraciously out of bed and rubbed her eyes

while trying to peer at the clock on the bookshelf. It was seven in the morning. She uttered a colorful epithet before saying to the marten, “This is a ridiculous time to be up. I’ve only had about three hours of sleep.”

Once seeing that she was on her feet, the animal scrambled across the room and began scratching at the main door.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, if you’re hungry, you’re just going to have to wait. I’m not going down there in my nightgown.”

The marten whined.

“Fine. You go down there on your own. But don’t come crying to me when Madame Boulanger whacks off your tail.” She made her way toward the door and opened it a crack. The animal scurried out without even a backward glance. “Ungrateful minx.” She slammed the door shut and leaned on it, feeling a little woozy.

Eventually, she turned back to the rest of her room. With the marten out of the way, she could go back to sleep. And if she did, she was sure she would sleep until the middle of the afternoon. But something tugged at the back of her brain. There was something that she had to do this morning even though she couldn’t quite remember what. So sleeping would be out of the question.

She went to her trunk and pulled out a fresh bottle of tonic. She uncorked it and poured a little into a glass goblet sitting on the stand next to her bed. Once she set the bottle back down, she took the glass and downed the liquid without any fanfare. It tasted slightly sweet and sticky and she wanted to vomit. But she made herself walk to the bathroom and unlock the door.

Her brain was suddenly jolted awake by the figure standing next to the bathroom table facing a mirror. The figure turned and she had to fight the urge to giggle.

“Why is it that whenever we have an encounter, I have to ask what you are doing?” Renaud had on a pair of breeches but otherwise his feet and chest were bare. His long dark hair was slightly mused—a particularly errant lock was sticking out in a strange angle. His face was lathered with soap. In one hand, he held a razor. In the other, a towel.

“I wanted to perform my morning toilette, obviously,” she responded. “But since you’re here, I’ll wait.”

“I’m almost done anyway,” he replied as she was about to turn back. “There’s plenty of room to share.”

She paused. “It doesn’t seem quite right to me. This is a mistake. Only lovers would take the liberty of sharing the morning ritual.”

“But we are going to become lovers, aren’t we?”

She narrowed her gaze as he turned his back to her to resume shaving. She wanted to ask him why he didn’t visit her last night. But she refrained from saying so aloud. Instead, she retorted, “I think you’re assuming a little too much.”

There was only a slight pause in his motions when he heard her words. “Maybe so. What do you think?”

“I think this shared room is a bad idea. No one is completely safe in their own rooms if another has the key to it.”

“That’s true. But one should be relatively safe if you trust the other person with whom one is sharing the bathroom.”

“Maybe.” A thought lurched into her consciousness only to slide away again. She tried to make a grab for it and managed to catch a fragment of it. “The fireplace?” she said mostly to herself, puzzled.

“Hm?” He looked at her from the mirror. “Are you cold?”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “No.” She approached the other end of the table from where he was shaving. She took hold of a pitcher and poured water into a porcelain bowl. “I was thinking that the obvious doors may not be the only entrances into a room. There could be trap doors.” She thought of the attic room that she had explored earlier. “Just like trap doors on a theatre stage.”

“That’s possible.”

She cupped her hands in the water and began washing her face. When she finally reached for one of the towels piled beside the bottles of lotions, she noticed that he had finished shaving. He was watching her. She responded by averting her gaze and drying her face. She spoke into the towel. “Yes, I know I look terrible in the morning.”

“Your hair is a mess and you do have circles under your eyes,” he replied. “But I think I prefer it to the wig and the white powder you usually paint onto your face.”

She lowered her towel. “You are really strange.”

“Actually, no. Perhaps all the men you knew before were strange ones. Perhaps they preferred the actress rather than the woman.”

She felt a flush creep up her face, but she managed to ignore his remark in her response. “I want to examine Legard’s room.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“There’s something not right about what I saw that night. You don’t suppose I could prevail upon you to ask Monsieur Everard for the key?”

“He would be suspicious if I asked,” Renaud replied. “Right now, he has managed to hush up the two deaths quite well. There will be the funeral of D’Aubigne in a few hours and the magistrate doesn’t seem to have any problem with it.”

October 23, 1796
Part XXVII

Was there a more dull and numb day? It was the second funeral in less than a week and Haidée felt already jaded. The locals from the village attended D’Aubigne’s wake solemnly—as was appropriate—but she saw no one shed a tear. From what she had gathered, most people had thought of Raymond D’Aubigne more as just another arrogant “young pup” as Laurent Roland had described him. She had the impression that the astronomers were indifferent to the personality of the recently deceased, although she was quite sure that the manner of his passing disturbed them. She had an idle thought—if someone dropped dead now in the middle of the funeral, she would not be surprised. Whoever had killed D’Aubigne and Legard—and possibly Neville and Bisset as Renaud had pointed out during breakfast, out of the hearing of the servants and other astronomers—was getting more brazen as the murders progressed.

The sky was heavy with clouds. An ice cold rain drop fell on her cheek and she was glad that she had decided to forgo the face makeup. Even before the ceremony, Father DeLorme had decided to change the order of the funeral around due to the unpredictability of the weather. D’Aubigne would be buried first and then everyone would retreat back to the church for the Sunday sermon and the elegy.

Haidée stood just behind Edouard Garnier, near the front of the grave. Beside her was Renaud, who had his head bowed as if in prayer. But she wasn’t fooled—his eyes were slitted but still open, focused on the ceremony. Four men operating ropes and pulleys lowered the coffin into the ground as the priest stood at the head intoning blessings.

“I thought Monsieur D’Aubigne was an atheist,” murmured Haidée underneath her breath.

Renaud tilted his head so slightly that a casual observer would have missed his switch in attention. “I thought so as well. Curious, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. All the other men were astronomers. Were they atheists as well?”

“You’re thinking that they were dispatched because they were not religious.”

Garnier turned around and glared at them. “Shh! Have some respect for the dead, will you?”

Haidée gave him a cold look down her nose. The short astronomer just huffed and

turned back around.

Once the coffin was at the bottom of the hole, the four men put away the ropes and pulleys before picking up their shovels to fill the hole in with dirt. Everyone looked onward silently. Even Father DeLorme had finished his blessings and he stood watching the proceedings with a tight lipped and pensive air.

The ice cold rain drop became many water drops. The wind picked up forcing the rain to become a spray. Haidée adjusted her shawl over her head and the marten that had been hiding underneath the folds of her scarf chirped nervously. The sky flickered and a low rumble from a distance permeated the air.

The grave filled quickly and then Father DeLorme motioned for everyone to head inside. It was only a short walk from the cemetery to the church, but Haidée felt as if she was walking through a passage of ice as the wind grew stronger, thrashing about the feet of the funeral attendees like a sadistic mistress with a whip. The inside of the church wasn't much better. The floor of the place felt cold and hard through the soles of her boots. The only warmth that radiated was from the few white candles lit at the altar. Two boys in white robes were also lighting the squat candles on bronze stands lining the aisles, but they only gave off the illusion of light.

The church was dark and gloomy making Haidée wish that she was anywhere but there.

Haidée found herself seated on the second pew beside Renaud and the old astronomer Roland. The old man was watching the priest as he headed toward the podium. She noted the intense gaze with interest.

“Is something wrong, Monsieur Roland?”

He seemed visibly startled by her voice. “Excuse me, Mademoiselle?”

“You were looking quite intently at Father DeLorme,” she replied. “Is something wrong?”

“Of course something is wrong,” the old man whispered furiously. “D'Aubigne was an atheist. This whole funeral and church thing is a farce to the young pup's beliefs. Everard should have let Fasset bury him.”

“Fasset? The innkeeper?”

“Well, anybody but the church.”

“Monsieur D'Aubigne is dead,” she pointed out. “I doubt at this juncture if he really cares what kind of funeral his colleagues are putting on for him. Or if there is any funeral at all.”

“What kind of lame reasoning is that?”

“Well, it is also Sunday. People go to church on Sunday.”

“Huh. Silly chit. You have idea what you’re talking about.”

Haidée had the impression that all of Roland’s bluster was on for show. She speculated that the old man was trying to hide his true feelings. She didn’t blame him. At his age, having to worry about dying from unnatural as well as natural causes would be enough to make any sane person jittery.

Father DeLorme began the services with a prayer before a handful of choirboys sang in Latin.

The services in Paris were more elaborate than this, of course, but if she had to be honest with herself, she rarely attended any of the services except for ones on the holidays. No one cared if actresses went to mass—most religious zealots viewed actresses the same way they viewed fallen women and made no real effort to “save” them. Not that Haidée needed any saving. She usually spent the time most people used in saying useless prayers to memorize lines for the next rehearsal.

When she had been younger, Madame Zephyrine had taken her to the cathedral every Sunday. Sometimes it was more than once a week. Haidée had said nothing about her guardian’s religious habits and nor had Zephyrine ever explained herself. But eventually, she figured out that it was probably out of a sense of guilt—of using her powers which were the hallmark of what one would consider to be the domain of witches.

Haidée had no doubt that this guilt had also transferred to her. Except rather than making a habit of attending religious services, she mostly stopped using her abilities. Until the previous day.

The priest was lecturing about earthly sins and how they were abominations in the sight of God. It was as if he were reading from an inexhaustible list ranging from telling lies to sins of the flesh. She mentally snorted. *Speak for yourself, Father. You’re celibate.* Then he moved on to the topic of disrupting the natural order of things. He didn’t come right out and say it, but she knew that he meant magic. Perhaps her conversation with him the previous day about exorcisms had inspired him.

Sermons made her sleepy, but she caught herself from nodding off when she noticed that Laurent Roland was already asleep. The old man’s head was lolled over to her side and he was drooling. Haidée discretely poked him in the shoulder. Roland softly snuffled and shifted and his head turned to the other side.

“Is it your habit to bother old men in church?” The whisper came at her ear, but she knew who it was.

She turned her head slightly and murmured under her breath, “Oh no, I usually don’t

bother anyone. Not in a church at any rate. Besides, he was spitting on my gown.”

There was hint of a smile on Renaud’s mouth even though his attention appeared to be absorbed with the sermon.

Finally, the service ended with the elegy to D’Aubigne, praising the dead astronomer for his scientific work and then a prayer and a hymn. When everyone got up from their seats to leave, Haidée got to her feet with an ill-disguised sigh of relief. She had found herself feeling like an impatient child, wishing that she could wriggle around on the hard seat, eager to escape. It had also brought back childhood questions as well. Irreverent and perhaps blasphemous questions that she knew she should keep quiet about. No need to question the authority of the church when there were more important things to attend to.

“I’m famished,” she announced as she moved down the aisle and towards the back door of the church with Renaud. “I could probably eat a whole cow.” Although it was a rather outrageous statement, it wasn’t completely out of place. She was an actress, after all, and actresses were supposed to be flamboyant and outrageous. And before she had come to the funeral, all she had for breakfast was some cold tea and a croissant.

“I doubt Madame Boulanger would have anything warmed up when we get back,” Renaud remarked. “Remember that she is here at the funeral as well and would probably get back to the observatory at the same time that we do. We could go to the Cormorant.”

She looked around, noting that there were as many vacationers as villagers to D’Aubigne’s funeral. On an island, every little thing was an event. “No. The Cormorant will be crowded, I think. Let’s go to the Green Café.”

“Where’s that?”

“In the village, of course. I don’t think visitors to Mont Saint Filan go there very much.”

They were at the door and Edouard Garnier was just in front of them, thanking Father DeLorme for presiding over D’Aubigne’s funeral. They shook hands and then the priest was looking at them. Haidée thought she detected a speculative and disapproving sparkle in his eye. She decided to ignore it.

“That was a lovely sermon, Father,” she told him. She had no compunction about telling white lies as long as she didn’t admit to it. “I’m sure Monsieur D’Aubigne would have loved it.”

DeLorme gave her a strange smile. “I’m sure he deserved it.” But before she could question him about what he meant, he went on to say, “You have an unusual choice of fashion on this day, Mademoiselle Avenall. It makes you stand out.”

Haidée was not oblivious to his tone of censure in his voice. She didn’t have the

appropriate black gown—as she had packed for vacations not funerals—and she didn't want to wear the dark maroon dress she had worn for Legard's funeral. So she had chosen a dark green gown in hopes that the dark color would help her blend in. But apparently not.

Before Haidée could make her apologies, Renaud stepped in, saying smoothly, "You have not heard about the latest Parisian fashion?"

The priest looked momentarily confused. "Fashion?"

"It went out the way it went with the deposed aristocracy." Renaud continued, seemingly ignorant to Haidée's surprise. "Everyone in the city now wears colors at the ceremonies for those who have passed. Why mourn the dead when one should celebrate the fact that they are now happy in heaven?"

Father DeLorme appeared pole axed by this reasoning. "Indeed, Monsieur Renaud."

"But I must concur with Mademoiselle Avenall. It was an excellent sermon." He shook the priest's hand in a perfunctory manner while DeLorme was still debating on what sort of response Renaud's comments were entitled to before taking Haidée's elbow and steering her outside into the cold rain with an exaggerated sense of gentlemanly politeness.

"You're making fun of me. What was that all about?" she demanded once they were away from the crowd and headed toward the main street of the village. She ignored the disgruntled squeaks from the marten as it awakened when its hidden perch, her shawl, was getting wet. "I can't believe you were talking about fashion in a funeral. Father DeLorme must have thought that you've suddenly become deranged."

He didn't look back at her. "Well, he was implying that what you were wearing is inappropriate for a funeral. He doesn't realize that you did not come here prepared for a funeral, so that in that regard, your wardrobe was sadly lacking."

"Jacot, that's an idiotic piece of nonsense. Men don't care what color gown women wear. Hell, they hardly care about their own clothes. You aren't an exception. So what's the real reason you spewed that hot air back there?"

He halted and looked at her over the rim of his spectacles. What she saw both frightened and excited her.

"DeLorme had no reason to remark upon your appearance either, according to your reasoning," he replied. "So I could only come up with another reason he should do so. I don't think he quite approves of you, my dear, and he was probably trying to find a way to make an example of you—to prove the point of his sermon, if you had been listening. More than half of the island was there, hanging to his every word."

She blinked. "You were trying to save me from a public humiliation."

He didn't reply to her comment. Instead, he continued walking.

Haidée kept up with him. "Why did you do it? I'm just a silly actress."

"You may be an actress, but you aren't silly."

"But...oof!" she ran into him when he suddenly stopped. "What is it this time?" she asked irritably.

"Shh." He dragged her into the shadow between two buildings.

She was about to protest until she noticed several figures bumbling past them, speaking in familiar voices.

October 23, 1796
Part XXVIII

"Oh, what I would give for a bit of warm brandy," mumbled one of the men walking past them. Haidée recognized the voice of Maurice Ducos. She had glimpsed him at the funeral, but he had held back with his cronies. "And maybe a willing wench in my bed."

One of Ducos's friends gave a leering laugh. "Willing, my old man? Haven't you looked in a mirror lately? You're as ugly as a pug and bigger than a house."

"Oh, with enough gold, even the most beautiful woman would be there for the taking," boasted Ducos. "Why, that little actress..."

Haidée gave an outraged gasp and was about to storm out of her hiding place to give the odious fat man a taste of her fist when Renaud pulled her back, whispering a warning. She forced herself to tamp down on her anger, although inside, she stilled boiled with it.

By the time the men had passed, heading in the opposite direction of the inn, Renaud finally let her go. And with annoyance, she stamped her foot, not caring if the puddle she stepped in splattered on her clothes.

"Oh, the brute," she huffed. "I can't be bought and paid for!"

To her consternation, Renaud seemed amused by her temper tantrum. "You, of all people, should be aware that men fantasize about such things all the time."

"What an insufferable thing to say. You wouldn't be so blasé about it if you were thought to have easy virtue and were treated like a glorified bed warmer."

"Actually, that sort of intrigues me. No one has ever compared me to a bed warmer."

"You're impossible. I give up." She began walking down the street, looking for the café.

Renaud caught up with her. “Maybe I’m impossible, but you can’t give up. Because then where would we be?”

“We would be nowhere, that’s where we would be. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s bad.” The rather run down building of the Green Café loomed before them. In the rain, it looked even more derelict. She didn’t miss Renaud’s dubious expression as she shoved the door to the café open. “Trust me. This place will be less crowded than the Cormorant.”

“That’s not it. I just can’t wrap my mind about the fact that you’re here. With your taste for the finer and more frivolous things in life, I wouldn’t think that you would frequent this kind of establishment.”

“You said that I wasn’t silly.”

“You’re not silly. But, oh never mind. Apparently, I don’t quite understand you at all.”

She gave him a triumphant smile and then stepped inside.

The café enveloped them in a blanket of warmth once they crossed the threshold. The place was brighter than what she had remembered from her last visit. There were also a lot more people. But from their mode of dress, Haidée decided that all the people present were the locals. She was aware that eyes were on her as she stepped toward an empty table at the edge of the room.

Renaud held out the chair for her. As she sat down, he said in her ear, “Try to smile. You look far too remote. The locals are going to gossip.”

She gave him a frown when he took his own chair. “I am not going to smile. It would be completely inappropriate. We just came from a funeral. Besides, the locals should be gossiping about their own lives, not ours. We’re just visitors from the mainland, remember? Locals always view outsiders as a little odd. The only reason they would gossip about you or me would be if we directly interacted with them.”

“I did hear something about you insulting a shop keeper. And that you were trying to pursue Monsieur Galliard. I didn’t pay much attention to it, of course.”

His grin made her sit up straighter. “The shop keeper asked for it. And I wouldn’t go to tea with the magistrate even if he begged me.”

“And what if I asked you to have tea with me?”

“I’m having tea with you right now, aren’t I?”

“Technically, I think it would be lunch.”

The serving girl eventually made it to their table and inquired if they wanted anything. Haidée requested hot tea—definitely not the terrible tasting cider that Davenport had recommended the last time—as well as some more filling items like soup, fish, and bread. Her companion requested the same. The maid nodded and once she left, Haidée looked around, finally noticing the giant hearth at one end of the café filling the place with the light that she had puzzled over.

“Can you open a lock?” Renaud asked suddenly.

She turned back to look at him. “Excuse me?”

“Can you open a lock,” Renaud repeated. “Without a key?”

Haidée considered his question, catching the words that he didn’t say. What he was really asking was if she could open a locked door with her abilities. “No,” she replied. “I can’t see into a lock so I would have no idea how it would work and adapt my...work accordingly. However, if I saw the key to the lock, I could probably fashion something similar.”

“I see. I have to admit that I don’t really understand people with your ability. I still don’t quite grasp what your kind of people can work or can’t. I only go to someone like you to obtain certain defenses so I won’t be completely helpless if I find myself in certain situations.”

She found herself smiling. “I find that men do not like to admit to anything that they don’t know.”

“It depends on who I’m talking to.”

The maid came back with their meal. For a couple moments, they sipped their tea first to fill their bellies with something warm. The marten jumped from her shoulder to the table to grab one of the bread rolls. The little animal grasped the sides of the piece of food as if it were lifting a huge boulder and began to gnaw on it with its sharp teeth.

As Haidée picked up her spoon to dip into the steaming soup, she said, “Do you know how to pick locks, Monsieur Renaud?”

“I’ve had some experience with all sorts of locks.”

The look in his eye made her spoon pause halfway to her mouth. “You’re not just talking about door locks, are you?”

“Oh ho! Look what we have here! Monsieur Renaud and Mademoiselle Avenall. Mind if I join you?”

Haidée’s spoon slipped out of her fingers in surprise. Renaud scowled at the interruption. A man was standing by their table, his wet coat dripping onto the floor.

She recognized the tri-cornered hat and the ruddy face.

“Monsieur Davenport,” said Haidée. “What a surprise.”

Renaud just nodded.

Taking that as an invitation, the observatory librarian pulled up a chair and blatantly signaled for the serving maid to bring him hot cider and a filet mignon. As the woman rushed to get his order, he gave a great sigh and took off his hat to hang it at the end of his chair.

“Bad weather out, isn’t it?” the man said.

“Quite,” said Renaud. “Do you come to this café often?”

“Of course. It’s a lot more low key than the dining room at the Cormorant. There are too many vacationers there, if you catch my drift. In fact, it was just the other day that I took Mademoiselle Avenall here to get acquainted.”

Renaud shot her a look.

She faintly shrugged. “I had some questions about ink.”

“Oh really?” Renaud turned back to Davenport, his gaze now more alert. The observatory librarian did not miss the fact that he was now under scrutiny. “So what do you know about ink, Monsieur Davenport?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. Although it is quite the legitimate question since poor Legard and D’Aubigne were written on when they were discovered. I wouldn’t take so much stock on what they were written with so much as to what was written and why.”

Haidée took another discrete look around the room. None of the tables near them held any café patrons and none of the patrons that were in the room appeared duly interested in them besides a few obvious stares. She sipped her soup and then said, “Since Messieurs Legard and D’Aubigne are now deep underground, I can say with some confidence that we will probably not know what was written. However, the question of why is the intriguing one.”

Renaud agreed. “And perhaps the first step in trying to find out why is to find out who.”

“As in who killed the two men.” Davenport looked thoughtful. “That is an interesting problem. Although Legard and D’Aubigne were alike in many ways, they were also both rivals. Who would stand to gain if both of them were out of the way?”

October 23, 1796
Part XXIX

At the Green Café, their conversation had been interrupted by a large influx of patrons to the noon time meal. They had been a mix of locals and vacationers turned away from the Cormorant because of lack of room. So Renaud, Haidée, and Davenport had turned their attention to their own meals and turned their own talk to more inconsequential things—like the weather and life on the island.

By the time they had finished, the rain had let up a bit. There was a brief break in the clouds allowing for a bit of weak sunlight to shine through, but not enough to dry out the land. Davenport had suggested that they talk in the library at the observatory where there was less chance of interruption by strangers. The walk back was brisk and quiet. Haidée noted that when they passed the church and the cemetery, the place looked completely abandoned. If she tried hard enough, she could see the new tombstone for D'Aubigne.

Once they were at the observatory, Davenport made his way to the kitchen to inform Madame Boulanger that some hot tea and coffee was to be served at the library. When that small errand was done, they proceeded to the room. The rest of the astronomers were absent—she guessed that they had either all gone back to their research or had gone to the Cormorant to forget the morning's morbid festivities.

As Renaud lit the fireplace in the library, Haidée made herself comfortable in one of the chairs nearby. She unwrapped her shawl and laid it on the back of her chair. The marten chattered a protest before it scurried off to take a temporary nap on a cushioned footstool. Davenport sat at his customary post behind his desk and seemed to contemplate the ceiling as Renaud stoked the fire until it was blazing hungrily in large leafs of gold and red. He took another chair and dragged it close enough so that he was sitting across from both Davenport and Haidée. Once seated, he stretched his legs out and crossed his ankles.

“Who had cause to dislike both Monsieur Legard and Monsieur D'Aubigne?” Haidée asked.

The observatory librarian finally drew his gaze from the ceiling to the two visitors to the island. “Legard and D'Aubigne both kept to their own research. From what I know, all of the astronomers kept out of each others way unless something or someone threatened them collectively.”

“And whatever is killing them is targeting them collectively,” surmised Renaud. “Perhaps a more accurate question would be, who hates all the astronomers?”

Davenport shrugged. “The men who have lived at the observatory have always kept aloof from the rest of the island populace. The astronomers consider themselves scientists and intellectuals—far above the ordinary man, if you know what I mean. They don't often patronize the village shops or even the tavern inn at the Cormorant. They don't often socialize with the locals. They don't go to church.” A cynical smile stretched the librarian's mouth. “They say they are atheists.”

“And what of the locals?” she inquired. “How do they feel about the astronomers?”

“The villagers themselves don’t interact much with me or Paul Ninon, the other astronomer who lives with in the village. They are mostly indifferent, truth be told. They could care less if the astronomers only order their supplies from the mainland. As long as they don’t bother the locals or try to run their lives, they are content to just let them be. Of course, that doesn’t mean that they don’t get annoyed once in a while, but I don’t believe that that’s sufficient justification for any of the locals to kill.”

“From what I’ve gathered of the other astronomers,” Renaud said, “I don’t think they harbor any particular ill will for their other colleagues. Everard strikes me as a lot like that of other men in his position—more concerned about his ties to other people of importance and how much work he can get out of his subordinates. Roland is a doddering old man. I doubt he has the strength to take on anyone younger, especially men in their prime and health like Legard and D’Aubigne. Garnier has a superiority complex, but I don’t think he’d stoop so low as to murder his colleagues.”

There was a knock at the door. Davenport called out for whoever it was to come in. Colette soon arrived with a tray containing two pots of blue porcelain with matching cups and placed the tray on the librarian’s desk. She asked if they needed the tea and coffee to be poured, but Davenport waved her away saying that he would handle it.

When the door clicked shut, the observatory librarian asked them what they wanted. Renaud took the coffee and Haidée took the tea, although she wished for her tonic.

With his own cup of coffee in hand, Davenport sipped meditatively and seemed to gaze beyond his guests. “Your impressions of the others sound correct, Renaud,” he said. “And if they are not the ones killing their colleagues, then who is?”

“What about the servants?” asked Haidée.

Davenport frowned. “What about them?”

She set her cup down on a small table between her and Renaud. “You can’t forget the servants. What if one of them is nursing a grudge? What if they feel as if the astronomers are mistreating them?”

“I could see that,” Renaud replied. “That Madame Boulanger seems to have a temper on her. She was chasing Mademoiselle Avenall around in the kitchen with a knife on a previous morning.”

She sent him a repressive glare. “She was not chasing me. She was about to gut my poor marten.”

He ignored her expression. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, she picked up a knife without second thought when she got angry. It stands to reason that if she got angry enough at the astronomers, she could as well have killed them. Maybe with her

cooking.”

Davenport was stroking his chin. “You know, that has merit. She could have poisoned Legard and D’Aubigne, hence the appearance that the two men did not suffer any trauma.”

Haidée shook her head. “Somehow, that doesn’t sound quite right to me. You know, it could be one of the other servants as well. We don’t know their whereabouts when the men died. They could claim that they were cleaning out some rooms in the observatory or running some other errand and no one could prove or disprove it.”

“We could try searching for poison in the kitchen,” Davenport suggested. He suddenly looked down at his coffee and then put it back on his desk. “You know, if that’s a possibility, Madame Boulanger could have poisoned us.”

She almost laughed at his abrupt paranoia. “Monsieur Davenport, I think you’re letting your imagination run away with you. No, I don’t think it is poison although most people would immediately jump to that conclusion. I don’t think Legard and D’Aubigne were murdered by poison. There are the ink markings to consider. Even though we don’t know what those markings were, their very presence suggests that something much more complicated is going on than a mere poisoning.”

Renaud still held his coffee cup. He was looking over its rim to her. “You think that some sort of spell was being worked. Necromancy.”

At the word, Haidée shivered. “That’s what I suspect. But we don’t have any proof.”

The observatory librarian was wide eyed. “Death magic? Who on this island would want to work such dangerous powers? Wasn’t that outlawed by those schools of sorcery on the mainland?”

Renaud smiled grimly. “People can outlaw as many things as they want, but that doesn’t prevent people from practicing them.”

October 24, 1796
Part XXX

“Are you quite sure you don’t need any help, Mademoiselle?” asked the maid Colette as she watched Haidée pile her tray with a precarious number of items. There were apples and pastries and rolls as well as cups of hot cider made by Madame Boulanger—definitely superior in quality to that of the Green Café although its creature had a surly personality.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“Let me help you with the door.” Colette slipped passed her just as she lifted the tray into her arms. She opened the kitchen door and nearly swatted the marten aside as it

waited in the hall, dashing back and forth excitedly.

“Thank you,” said Haidée as she walked out. The tray seemed heavier than she had guessed. Her knees wobbled a bit—she refused to blame her shakiness on her tonic—and hoped that she would not trip on her skirt.

The maid opened the cellar door for her as well. The marten bounded down the stairs before her. Carefully, she made her way down the dimly lit stairwell, concentrating on putting her feet evenly so as not to fall headlong into the depths of the observatory.

Midway down, she wondered if she had been a little too ambitious with stacking the tray. So far, her arms remained steady so as not to spill any of the cider, but her muscles were growing tired. And if she did foolishly spill the contents of the tray, she hoped that the entire thing would miss her dress. She had picked a particularly flattering gown that morning—a rather deep green one that would contrast rather nicely with her brown-red hair. The neckline scooped down just low enough to tease the eye.

She tried not to think too much about the reasons on why she chose that particular gown.

The flight of stairs ended just as light spilled outward from a rather dank, windowless room. Wooden crates filled with assorted parts for various instruments were shoved against the wall. The light came from several oil lamps sitting on some overturned crates. The smell from the oil lamps was a thick, pungent odor that made Haidée wrinkle her nose. In a corner, there was a telescope on a stand aimed at the ceiling. On the wall beside it was a pair of iron double doors.

A scarred work table scattered with charts, tools, and a clock stood at the center of the room. Renaud was bent over the table looking at an astrolabe and jotting down figures. She noticed that he wasn't wearing his spectacles. The wire-rimmed glasses were sitting on top of a closed book near the edge of the table instead. His coat was draped over a chair. He looked up, and seeing Haidée, went around the other side of the table to clear a corner of it off.

“Why are you down here?”

She put the tray down on the table and sighed as the weight came off her arms. “You usually come up to the kitchen for a brief respite in the late morning. I thought I'd bring something to you instead.”

“You should have asked someone to help you carry this thing.”

“I managed well enough.”

A loud clatter interrupted Renaud before he could reply. The marten had investigated the room with great interest and had decided to take a closer look at one of the crates. While perched at the edge of the box, it had lost its balance and had fallen head first into

a pile of wrenches, screws, and discarded wooden parts carved into strange shapes. After a moment, the marten poked its head out from the edge of the crate to give a confused chirp before diving back into the mess.

“Your pet needs some manners,” Renaud said.

“It’s not my pet. It just follows me around.”

He shrugged. “If you say so.” He went back around to the table to continue writing, but he didn’t pick up his pen. “Thank you for bringing down the tray.”

“You’re welcome.” She cleared her throat delicately as he continued to watch her. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay down here a little while to see you work.”

“This cellar is a mess. Are you sure you want to stay down here instead of taking a walk outside?”

“The weather hasn’t been very cooperative, if you’ve noticed.”

“No, I haven’t noticed. I’ve been down here since six this morning.” He gave her a self-deprecating grin. “I have to keep up the pretense that I’m a serious astronomer.” He grabbed an apple from the tray and finally sat down in his chair before taking a bite. “The way I see it, it’s a bit like acting. Except this is easier because all I have to do is to hide myself away doing ‘research.’”

Haidée took a step closer to the table to examine its contents. He had been writing down numbers from the astrolabe—if those numbers made any sense, she had no idea. The charts had pictures of constellations or had some sort of odd table with rows of numbers. She recognized the times for sunset and sunrise and puzzled over the columns headed by the names of the planets.

“This looks more like mathematics to me than astronomy,” she finally said. She looked up from the charts.

His gaze slowly moved up her décolletage to her face. He gave her a lazy smile. “Oh, don’t move on my account. I was just enjoying the view.”

Haidée straightened. “Are you?” She found the edge of her mouth twitching upward. She was enjoying her own view as well. Renaud sat slouched back in his chair, his thighs spread, and a leg propped up on an overturned crate. He cradled his half-eaten apple in his palm like an indolent libertine. She picked up his spectacles and twirled the earpiece around her finger. “I didn’t know that astronomy required mathematics.”

“Oh, it does,” he replied. “The two are actually rather intimately intertwined. Many mathematicians dabble in studying the cosmos. And more than a few astronomers indulge in numbers besides observations.”

She looked through his spectacles and could see the room as clearly as if she had been peering through window glass. “You don’t need these at all, do you?”

“Another part of my disguise, I’m afraid.”

When she put the spectacles back down on the table, she noticed a familiar looking card sticking out from beneath a book. She pulled it out. It was a round telescope card. The previous evening, she had finished deciphering the second card that she had found in the attic observatory room. She carefully went over the symbols on this third card, noting the differences. “Did you make this yourself?”

Renaud shook his head. “No. It came with that telescope.” He jerked up his chin to indicate the instrument sitting in the corner of the room. “I found it while investigating this place. It isn’t anything interesting, just something used to help focus the lens of the instrument when observing celestial objects. Real astronomers know how to use that thing.”

“Real astronomers are a bit like sorcerers,” she replied.

“Do you know how to work those symbols?”

She put the card down. “Maybe.” She was hesitant to tell him about the reference book she had back in her room.

Finally finished with the apple, he stood up to put the core back on the tray. “Speaking of symbols, you owe me.”

Surprised, she repeated, “Owe you?”

“Back near that wall bordering the farm,” he clarified. “I wasted two spells on you before I realized that you weren’t going to kill me.”

“Me, owe you spells?” She frowned. “I didn’t make you use those spells. You were the one who tried to attack me.”

“Nonetheless, you owe me.”

“That’s ridiculous. How will I know that you won’t use those spells against me again?”

“I won’t.” At her skeptical look, he said, “Perform one of your truth spells on me again.”

“No. I don’t like using my abilities on people.” She turned to pace the room, thinking. Momentarily, she was distracted by the marten that had popped up from another crate with a golden colored object in its mouth. It jumped down onto the floor and scurried off to another corner. “What if we do a trade?” she said finally.

“Trade?” He sounded wary. “What sort of trade?”

“I’ll give you two defensive ones rather than something that could harm someone else.”

His expression smoothed. “If that’s what you want to do, all right. But a defense is not quite the same as a weapon. I want something else as well. Perhaps...a kiss.”

She suddenly laughed. “What did you think I came down here for?” She stepped toward him and grabbed the front of his shirt to lower his head. His eyes widened, but he made no move to resist.

“Ack! You damn rodent! Get off me!”

They both pulled away from each other. Renaud hastily grabbed his spectacles and shoved them back onto his face. Haidée steadied herself by grabbing onto the edge of the table, her mind still fixed on the way his excited breath feathered over her cheek.

The marten ran down the stairs with something else in its mouth and headed straight towards her. It tugged on the hem of her dress with its paws and with a sigh, she lowered her arm so that the animal could climb up to her shoulder. But instead doing so, it dropped the object into her palm and dove back into one of the crates of junk. Haidée looked down at her hand. A dull pewter key. She pocketed the object just as a man stumbled down the stairs.

October 24, 1796

Part XXXI

Edouard Garnier trampled into the cellar workshop muttering, “Rats! Damn rats!” as if tiny demons were at his heels. Or rather one particular tiny demon. But the marten had wisely chosen to stay hidden in one of the crates at the side of the room. But the short astronomer appeared to have had a round with a skilled boxer rather than a small animal. His gray hair was sticking up in messy tufts and his waistcoat was sadly wrinkled. Even in the dimmer light of the oil lamps, his eyes appeared red. Haidée concluded that the man was either drunk or sleep deprived.

The later possibility was confirmed when Garnier walked up to Renaud waving another round telescope card carefully lettered with symbols drawn in black ink. “I must have your opinion,” the short astronomer declared. “I’ve been up all night trying to figure this out.”

Renaud’s gaze missed nothing of Garnier’s appearance. “Oh?”

Haidée reached over to get a cup of cider. “You look like you’ve been working very hard, Monsieur Garnier.”

Startled by her voice, the short astronomer looked over at her. “Mademoiselle Avenall. I didn’t see you here. What are you doing down here? Shouldn’t you be out visiting the village or something?”

“There’s only so much of the village one can see,” she replied. “I was just curious and wanted to see what Monsieur Renaud was doing. He’s been very kind to show me how everything worked.”

“Ha!” barked Garnier. “Women doing astronomy. That would be the day!”

Renaud gave him a bored smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t be so dismissive of that. Now what is it that you wanted me to see?”

Garnier shoved the card into his hands. “I’ve been trying to work out a new card to put in my telescope to get a better image. I’ve been looking at the moons of Jupiter, you know, and lately I’ve been displeased with the somewhat fuzzy view I’ve been getting. I’m pretty sure that this particular spell will do the trick, but it hasn’t been working for me. I’ve asked Everard and Roland to look over my work, but you know how those two blowhards are. They tell me to redo it. Redo it! As if I was an errant schoolboy who has made a mess of his assignments. You tell me what you see.”

Renaud looked at the card as if deep in thought. Haidée glanced over, scrutinizing the symbols. “They look all right to me,” he bluffed. “But I’ve just done a casual glance. If the card isn’t working, then perhaps you should redo it again. Maybe it’s not your spell that’s wrong, but a flaw in the materials.”

The short astronomer made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded like he was having an apoplexy. He swore. “All that work, wasted!” Furiously, he tore the card to bits and tossed the scraps behind him.

“You look overworked,” Renaud said soothingly. “I’m sure if you took a nap, you’ll be refreshed afterwards to continue on your work.”

“Can’t sleep,” Garnier muttered.

“But Monsieur Garnier!” exclaimed Haidée. “That will ruin your health. You must get some sleep.”

“Talk about sleep all you want,” Garnier replied, turning his red rimmed gaze on her. “You don’t have to worry about things watching you all the time.”

She frowned. “That sounds as if you’re having hallucinations from lack of sleep.”

The short astronomer gave a weary chuckle. “Oh no, Mademoiselle. No hallucinations. They couldn’t be. Something’s watching us. All of us. I saw it climbing the wall, just underneath what used to be Bisset’s laboratory. It crawled, worse than a rat or a fanged spider. And it was dark and large. And it was watching.” Garnier laughed again, sounding on the edge of hysteria. “Good God, I can’t believe Legard could even sleep with it watching or that D’Aubigne could just blithely go out without knowing. I’m going back to my laboratory to work on that card again.”

As he stomped back up the stairs, Renaud and Haidée glanced at each other.

“The poor man sounds like he’s cracked under the stress,” she said.

Renaud looked thoughtful. “I don’t know. I think there is some truth to what he is saying. I think Garnier must have seen something to scare him. I’m not sure if it’s related to Legard’s and D’Aubigne’s deaths let alone those of Bisset and Neville.”

“But dark things worse than rats and spiders watching him? It sounds like he’s had a nightmare and that he’s afraid to go back to sleep because of it. Or maybe he’s overcome by guilt—if he had killed the other men.”

“So you don’t think there’s anything to Garnier’s ranting?”

Haidée pulled out the key that she hid in her pocket. “Well, he does have this. It looks like a bedroom key. We could go search his room.”

“Where did you get that?”

The marten reappeared from one of the crates and climbed up the table to survey the tray of food. Haidée shook her head. “I think the marten stole it from Garnier.”

Renaud was amused. “What a wily creature. Do you think anyone who is afraid of getting murdered might have something in his room? Or if he is the murderer that he would be so foolish as to leave any evidence in his own room?”

“If he’s confident that he won’t get caught, there is a possibility that he left something in his room. And even if there isn’t anything that might point towards what’s happening, we could at least determine where not to look.”

“Well, Garnier is going to be in his laboratory for the remainder of the day,” he mused. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to take a look at his room now. I’ll go search his room while he’s away.”

Haidée looked at his outstretched hand. “Oh no you don’t. I have the key. I’m going with you. Besides, having two people search a room would go faster.”

“Is that your logic again?” he replied, his voice cool. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“You sound like a petulant child who is accustomed to doing things by himself,” Haidée remarked. She headed towards the stairs. “I thought you said before that you wouldn’t turn down help.”

“But in this case, I didn’t even ask for help.” He grabbed his coat and shrugged it on before following her. “You’re just being nosy.”

“Well, I’m not going to stand around doing

Realizing that Renaud and Haidée were getting out of the cellar, the marten made a split second decision and grabbed one of the smaller pasteries on the tray with its mouth. It jumped down the table and raced after them.

Back on the second floor, the marten stopped in front of Legard’s bedroom door to rest from its labors. Stealing food was hard work. It sat on its haunches and squeaked, drawing Haidée’s attention to it. She just shook her head.

“Not now. We’re busy.”

It squeaked again, but seeing that there was no way it could persuade the humans that they were heading toward the wrong door, it settled down to eat its second breakfast for the day. The apple slices that Haidée had given it earlier could only go so far.

Since Haidée had the key, she had the honors of opening the door to Garnier’s bedroom. But although the key slid smoothly into the lock, it refused to turn. She tried to jiggle the knob, but that didn’t work either. Admitting defeat, she stepped aside to let Renaud open the door. It didn’t work for him either.

“Maybe it’s a key for another door,” he said. “Perhaps it’s to his bathroom.”

“Well, it’s not going to work since we’re out here and not in there.” Haidée was feeling grouchy. Not only did Garnier interrupt her and Renaud’s “conversation” in the cellar, but his key didn’t work too.

Renaud took the key out of the lock and examined it. “You know, it does look a lot like all the other bedroom keys but it’s a bit larger than the bathroom key. Maybe it isn’t to the bathroom. Maybe it’s to another bedroom.”

“That really doesn’t sound very likely,” she commented. “Why on earth would he have the key to someone else’s bedroom? Monsieur Everard would be a more likely candidate. He is the head astronomer and I would think he would have keys to everything in this place.”

“But it wouldn’t hurt to try.” He walked to the next door down which happened to be Laurent Roland’s door. It didn’t fit that lock. Neither did it fit D’Aubigne’s door.

The marten, seeing Renaud and Haidée head it’s way, abandoned its half chewed pastry and began chattering excitedly.

“I think your pet knows more than its letting on,” he remarked.

Haidée tilted her head, watching the animal’s antics. “Sometimes I think it’s actually trying to say something but I always dismiss it as my overactive imagination.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he replied, although a tinge of doubt laced his words. He tried the key in Legard’s door. The lock clicked and the door swung open. “Well, that’s interesting.”

“Of course it is. It does look rather incriminating. Why would Garnier have a key to Legard’s door unless he wanted to get into this room for some reason or another?”

October 24, 1796
Part XXXII

Despite the presence of furniture, Legard’s room appeared rather empty and sterile.

The bed was positioned parallel to the single window that overlooked the wet land of the observatory’s estate. The window was closed and latched. The bed itself was bare. The linens and blankets had been stripped. The curtains that used to enclose the bed into its own world had been removed. There was nothing except the mattress. There was a faint antiseptic smell that indicated that the place had been scoured of everything not long after Legard’s murder.

While Renaud was brooding over the bookshelf on the opposite end of the room which was stuffed with texts and astronomical knick knacks, Haidée went over to the desk which was near the fireplace. Someone had thrown out the ink bottle and the papers. Only a vague oily stain marred the surface of the desk as a reminder of what she had seen on her first night at the island. She searched the desk and found nothing of interest.

The marten had dragged its half-eaten pastry into the room and was crouched in the doorway nibbling when it heard voices coming down the hallway. Recognizing the tones, it chirped a warning.

Renaud turned from his examination of Legard’s books and strolled toward the door. The voices were that of Everard and Roland bickering over certain calculations that Roland had done a month previously. The old astronomer cackled loudly and said that he had proof that he was right and that he would show it to Everard as soon as he found it under the stacks of papers in his room. Renaud shut the door and met Haidée’s curious gaze.

“Just Everard and Roland,” he said in response. “They seem to be preoccupied with their own research.”

She nodded. “Good. I hope they don’t realize that we’re in here.”

“I think most people would assume that this room is locked.”

“And common sense would dictate that no one could get through a locked room without a key.” She looked back at the desk. “It would have been so much more useful if no one had cleaned this place out.”

“Everard probably ordered the servants to scrub the place,” he replied. “The magistrate hasn’t come back to this room, obviously, to check for clues. He’s either an inept magistrate, someone who follows Everard blindly, or he has a reason for not looking at this place too closely.”

“Monsieur Galliard does seem to be quite the follower of Monsieur Everard. I seem to remember that someone told me that he looks up to the head astronomer since he is a bit of an amateur himself.”

“An amateur, hm? I wonder if he’s skilled enough to work those spells for operating a telescope.”

Haidée was struck by that thought. “What if he is? But since he is an amateur, why would he want to kill the other astronomers? In a way, they are Everard’s subordinates and I can’t see how eliminating the others would make his mentor very happy.”

“But that is if you’re thinking like a rational person. Most murders aren’t committed in a rational frame of mind.”

“Well, I think it could be very rational—if you realize that killers have vastly different priorities than the usual person.” She turned her attention to the fireplace and the floor next to it.

She sighed to herself. Whoever had cleaned up the bed had also swept up the ashes next to the fireplace. There were no strange patterns of ash on the floor, just the floor itself.

“You look frustrated.”

“I am.” She looked back up at him. “There are no clues to this place. I have this hunch that there’s something about the fireplace, but I can’t think what it was that made me suspect that there’s more to this room than first impressions. Did you find anything interesting on the bookshelf?”

“Legard had the usual texts and instruments. Unless, of course, he hid something in one of those books. But that would take a while to find.”

Haidée gave him a sly look. “You don’t suppose you hid something in one of the books in your room, did you?”

His expression was hard. “You are not searching my room. There’s nothing in there.”

“Oh, I don’t know—you being an agent for the Five Hundred and all. I might find some coded messages. Although it would be quite the feat to get them back to mainland since it would be a couple of weeks before the tide goes back out thus allowing a way for us to get off this island...oh!”

Renaud had backed her up against the wall beside the fireplace. He was looking down at her, his gaze dark behind his spectacles. "Haidée, it would be a very bad idea for you to bring up what I really am."

"I'm a discrete person, really. I would never spill your secrets in front of everyone." She reached behind her and grasped a piece of the fireplace molding. "Unless, of course, you spill my secrets in front of everyone first."

He took a step back and smiled ruefully. "Of course, I wouldn't."

She let out a breath she didn't know that she had been holding and her shoulders slumped. "Right." She still didn't quite trust Renaud yet. She forced herself to loosen her fingers from the piece of molding and step away from the wall. "Then I suppose we..."

Part of the fireplace suddenly swung inward and she momentarily lost her balance. He reached out grabbed her arm before she could tumble into the square bit of darkness that the fireplace had revealed.

Seeing a new hole explore, the marten tucked the last bit of pastry into its cheeks and bounded into the depths of the hidden passage.

"Wait! Come back here, you little..."

Renaud restrained her. "It's just an animal, remember? I think we should be a little less impulsive about this kind of thing. For one thing, we should try to get some light first."

She looked at the secret passage. She could hardly make out anything in the darkness although she could hear the marten squeaking some distance away. "All right. Be practical."

He lit a candelabrum that had been sitting on the edge of the fireplace mantle that had swung inward. The small trinity of candles threw small pools of light into the passage. Haidée had expected it to be filled with dust or cobwebs, but the stone walls were remarkably clear. The floor was dusty with the scuff marks of feet. Someone had gone through the passage recently. Legard's murderer, perhaps?

She followed him into the passage, feeling a little claustrophobic. On one hand, she was quite curious as to what this hidden passageway led to. On the other hand, she hated the strange, creepy feeling she was getting from the place. She thought back to Garnier's almost hysterical ranting. Could it be possible that there were other passages like this leading to various rooms in the rest of the observatory? Could somebody be using them to spy on the observatory's inhabitants?

"Watch your step."

Startled by Renaud's voice, she looked at her feet and found that the floor of the passageway had ended in a flight of stairs. She heard the marten's chirping again, this

time it sounded lower, as if the creature was at the bottom of the stairs. She gave her companion a skeptical glance. He simply gave her a grin, daring her to follow him.

“I thought you wanted me to stay behind.”

“Well, since you’re this far, you might as well go all the way.” She picked up her skirts and followed behind him as he turned to head down the stairs. “If we get in trouble, it will be your fault.”

“Isn’t it always?”

Haidée concentrated on not tripping by counting the steps. There were forty before it stopped at a short landing and a door. Renaud tried the knob which turned easily in his hand. Once the door was open, the marten, who had been waiting for them, scurried inside.

The room they found themselves in was a small study with a hearth, a table, and a chair stacked with books. There was even a small slit of a window on the opposite side of the room. Haidée went over to it and looked out. Even with the rain, she could see that the room was on the first level of the observatory, somewhere in the vicinity of the back of the building overlooking the observatory’s vegetable garden. She wondered if anyone had puzzled over the extra window from the hidden room. Probably not. The observatory itself had so many windows that it would have seemed a waste of time to count any of them.

“These ashes look recent.”

She turned to see Renaud standing over the fireplace, stirring up the burned waste with a poker. “Somebody knows about this place.”

“Yes. But that somebody could be dead. This could have been Legard’s private study. If I recall, the window to Legard’s bedroom was open. His murderer could have escaped through that route. There’s only one entrance to this place.”

She looked out the window again. The size of it was too small for a child let alone a grown man. “I suppose I agree with you. Unless that fireplace is actually an entrance in itself.”

“That’s a thought.” He placed the poker back against the wall and began examining the mantle and molding of the fireplace by probing and pushing at it.

Meanwhile, Haidée looked through the rest of the study. The table contained a stack of blank paper and a vial of ink—similar to the one that she had seen on Legard’s desk on the night of his murder. The walls of the room were plastered with wallpaper of a rather ugly blue and green floral design. Otherwise it was bare and the only other piece of furniture, the chair, was shoved against the wall, just under the window, and piled high with books. She went through the books, flipping the pages as she went, half-hoping that

she might find a message tucked within some of the pages. The texts were nothing but astronomy references, a bible, and an herbal with hand drawn illustrations.

“Find anything?” Renaud was standing behind her, looking down at the herbal in her hands.

“Just books. I take it that the fireplace isn’t hiding another passageway?”

He shook his head. “I think it would be just too much to ask if that were true.”

The marten was sniffing the wallpaper, particularly at one corner of the room where a bit of it had peeled away.

Finally deciding that there was nothing else to find, Haidée spoke to the marten even though intellectually, she knew the animal wasn’t going to pay any attention to her. “Come on, we’re leaving. You wouldn’t want to be cooped up in this place and miss lunch, would you?”

Renaud chuckled. “And you say that you could care less about the fur ball.”

“I don’t. But I’m not evil.”

The marten suddenly took hold of the wallpaper with its teeth and started pulling. Part of the paper came away with a rip.

Renaud was startled. “What on earth...”

The animal tore a sheet as long as an arm off the wall, revealing a crevasse filled with something that had Haidée shaking and praying that what she saw was just a nightmare, something cooked up by a little too much tonic. Without the wallpaper holding it in, a severed foot still wearing a boot fell from the wall.

October 25, 1796
Part XXXIII

The dawn light filtered in, making the bedroom appear a gauzy gray. Haidée was already up but still dressed in a night gown, sitting at the desk with ink and paper. A thick candle sat on a small bronze plate, gutted. The paper itself had been carefully folded and torn into squares a couple inches across. She was carefully lettering peculiar symbols on one side of each piece and setting it aside to let the ink dry.

One of the desk drawers was open. The marten had crawled inside a few hours before and had curled up into a tight knot with its nose tucked under its tail and fallen asleep.

Haidée yawned. She put her free hand to her mouth and glimpsed at her bed. She would sleep later.

The previous day had been somewhat hectic and frightening. She had seen dead bodies, of course, but the man plastered on the wall underneath the wallpaper of the secret room had sent every alarm in her head screaming. Renaud had managed to remove the rest of the wallpaper, but the body itself was immovable. She did not need to touch it to know that the force holding the body in place was something that Madame Zephyrine had termed unnatural powers.

At least the body itself was facing the wall. She did not know if she could have born it if she had to see the victim's face.

The victim's body appeared fresh as if he had been killed just moments before. His foot had been detached, but there was no sign of blood. The back of the man's shirt had also been ripped open revealing dark signs etched into his skin. Nausea had overcome her when she saw the markings, forcing her to escape from the room.

They had closed the fireplace in Legard's room, sealing the secret passageway and the unfortunate victim back into the depths of the observatory. After that, Haidée had hurried back into her room to vomit into the chamber pot that she had kept underneath her bed. The rest of the day, she had pled a headache and ignored all the door knocking. Instead, she just drank and slept.

It was only until the middle of the night that she awoke and started working.

A knock sounded at the bathroom door. Slowly, she finished the sign that she was working on and put down her pen. She made her way to the door and opened it. Renaud stood on the other side, looking down at her over his spectacles.

"You didn't answer your door yesterday," he said. "You missed the noon and evening meals."

"I know." She felt tired and heavy. "What did you tell them about the body?"

He watched her for a moment and then said, "I didn't tell anybody about the body. We don't know who it is—although I have some speculations to the identity of the victim—and what the consequences would be if this was revealed. Whoever murdered him would realize that we found the body. And due to that body's location, it wouldn't be too hard to deduce that we are trying to find out who killed Legard and D'Aubigne."

"That would mean the murderer might turn his attention to us, right?" She rubbed her temples, feeling both surprisingly alert and exhausted at the same time. She had wasted an entire bottle of tonic trying to stay awake during the night. "I have something for you," she finally said.

"What..."

She turned away from him and gathered up the bits of paper that she had been working on before he had knocked. There were ten slips etched with symbols, none of them

resembling the one that she had used as a defensive shield against Renaud in what seemed to be eons ago. She shoved them into his hands. “They’re to repay you. I decided not to do the defensive signs—those would be completely ineffective against whoever it is out there...” She did not finish her sentence. She rubbed her eyes, thinking of the murderer and his powers.

“Haidée, this is more than what I had asked. What’s wrong?” He paused for a moment, thinking. “Those signs you saw on the victim. What did you see?”

She tried to stifle a yawn. “Bad signs. And the very placement of the body—I think whoever is doing this is more powerful than I first thought.”

“Is he more powerful than you?”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “Maybe.”

He frowned, but he reached out to cup her chin. “You’re tired. Go to bed.”

“But.”

“Go to bed,” he repeated. “I’ll wake you at noon.”

She thought about protesting, but her mind was beginning to shut down. “Very well,” she finally replied. She climbed back into bed and laid her head on the pillow. Before her eyes drifted closed, she heard the bathroom door close with a click.

October 25, 1796
Part XXXIV

“I’m going to see Father DeLorme today,” announced Everard.

Everyone, except for Roland who was still stuck in his laboratory doing work, was sitting around the dining table for lunch. Haidée continued to sip her soup after the head astronomer’s announcement. She had awakened hungry, but she was still wary of the state of her stomach so she ate slowly. She concentrated on her food, mostly. But she slanted a glance at the others to gauge their reaction.

The only other people at the table were Renaud and Garnier. The place seemed eerily empty as she realized that the lack of people at the table was due to the fact that some of them were dead. Renaud only flicked a rather disinterested expression in Everard’s direction. Garnier looked distinctly nervous.

“It’s bad weather out today,” said Garnier.

“Bad weather hasn’t stopped me from visiting Father DeLorme before,” the head astronomer replied as he began cutting his portion of fish into small bite sized pieces. “It

is just a walk down from here to the church. I will only get wet.”

“Wet!” Garnier sneered. “That’s what they all say.”

“Well, it is sort of impossible not to get wet in the rain,” Renaud pointed out.

“These days, one doesn’t merely get wet in the storm,” Garnier muttered darkly. “Just look at what D’Aubigne did only a few days ago. He went out for a meeting with somebody that we don’t even know and he never came back. Well, his body came back—but he wasn’t alive.”

“Perhaps D’Aubigne met with the murderer,” speculated Everard. “But I am not. I am meeting with a priest. You couldn’t get much safer than that.”

“That’s what you say.” The short astronomer sounded petulant as he whined between bites of food. “You sleep well at night because you are completely ignorant about the world around you.”

At the mention of sleep, Haidée was startled. But she tried to cover up her movement with a cough. The marten, that for some reason was sleeping in her lap rather than snatching up food, stirred briefly at her movement and opened one shiny black eye. It chirped in question—or at least she thought it was a question.

“Go back to sleep,” she muttered.

The marten stretched and yawned, showing its sharp teeth and pink tongue. Then it flopped across her gown like a limp dishrag and fell back asleep.

Haidée sighed and reached for the wine glass just as Everard spoke up.

“Garnier, you are way out of line. You are letting your paranoia about the situation affect you. You should go see the doctor and see if he can prescribe you something for your insomnia.”

The short astronomer scoffed and eyed Everard with bloodshot eyes. “I don’t need anything from the doctor. As soon as the tide is out, I’m getting the hell away from this island. And if you’re as smart as you say you are, you’d be too.”

“You are spinning things out of nothing,” the head astronomer declared. “D’Aubigne died of an accident. Legard died of an accident.”

“So close together and in such unusual circumstances? I don’t think so. And if you ask me, Danton Neville’s suicide is a little bit suspicious in light of all this happening. And what about Nicolas Bisset? Or the old man before him?”

Everard slammed a fist against the table. Haidée shot Renard a nervous glance. He slightly shook his head. “Neville was already mentally unhinged,” Everard said firmly,

on the edge of temper. “And the others died of old age, as to be expected. Why are you bringing all of this up?”

With the evidence of the head astronomer’s anger, Garnier seemed to calm down. He gave a sarcastic smile. “Why, you’ll be going out all alone to see Father DeLorme. Who knows what might happen to you between here and there if there is indeed a murderer about? You might think twice going alone. You might want someone with you while you’re out there in the storm.” Garnier sipped his soup loudly.

Everard’s fork clattered on his plate. His eyes were narrowed. “You’re afraid that I’m going to end up like the others and you’d be alone fending for yourself. Fine. I will bring someone with me. I will take Villiers with me to see DeLorme. He will not be happy to be escorting me out into the rain, but I will tell him that he has you to blame for his discomfort.”

“You need not bother Villiers about it if he doesn’t want to go out,” spoke up Renard. “I can accompany you to the church.”

“No, no,” the head astronomer waved him off. “It is Villiers’s job. He will not complain. I was just trying to make a point with...”

A frightening shriek abruptly pierced the air, echoing through the stone walls of the observatory. It was a high pitched shriek, a woman’s scream. Haidée had the urge to cover her ears, but she winced instead, feeling the sound pierce her ear and rattle in her head. Her senses were alert and magnified by the sip of tonic she had before coming down for lunch and as a result, the shriek probably sounded louder than it should have been.

But the noise had awakened the marten. It swiveled its head to and fro, trying to determine the source of the sound. The men at the table had gotten out of their seats in reaction to the noise.

“Someone’s in trouble!” Everard exclaimed the obvious.

Haidée felt her appetite flee as footsteps pattered toward the dining hall. Her intuition told her that something bad had happened. The pale look on Garnier’s face strengthened that feeling. The appearance of a disheveled Colette all but confirmed it.

“Monsieur Everard!” The usually quiet maid was stammering, on the verge of hysteria. “Please, come quickly. It is Monsieur Roland. I think he’s...he’s...”

Everard threw down his napkin on top of his lunch. “Where is he?”

“In his laboratory. Madame Boulanger went in to see if he wanted to eat lunch while he was working and she screamed. I was nearby cleaning the floors...”

The head astronomer didn’t wait for the maid to finish, he rushed off, out of the dining

hall. Despite his pallor, Garnier wasn't too far behind.

The marten leaped out of Haidée's lap. Finally she stood up and exchanged a glance with Renard. "Do you think...?"

"If you're not up to this, you should probably go back to your room," he suggested.

She shook her head. "If what has happened is what I think has happened, I don't feel easy being about this place alone."

"Considering the victims," said Renaud, "I don't think it is likely that you will be targeted."

When he moved out of the dining hall, she followed him. They were walking quickly, not too far behind from Garnier and Everard. "Well, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"You're another astronomer here. What if you are next?"

"I don't think so," he replied. "I am a visitor here just as you are. And if I come face to face with whoever is behind this, he will be very surprised. I have some unexpected tricks, thanks to you."

"Don't be so confident," she retorted. "What if he surprises you? He would have the advantage and you'd be dead before you know it. You have nothing except second hand spells."

His expression tightened. "Then what do you suggest I do?"

"To be honest, I don't know."

They stopped at an open door down the main hallway of the observatory. Past the door was a flight of stairs up one of the observatory towers. They climbed until they reached a landing and another open door. The room inside appeared to be one of the laboratories. Garnier and Everard was already inside. Madame Boulanger was sobbing and wailing as Colette attempted to steer her away from the scene and out of the room. Renard and Haidée moved aside as the two servants exited.

The laboratory itself had a cluttered look—papers and books were scattered on chairs and a long work table. Several astronomical instruments were piled carelessly in a corner. A window on the far side of the room was open, letting in rain from the storm outside. Haidée took a step closer toward the middle of the room and spotted what had caused the hysteria. Roland was slumped over his desk, face down. He was still clothed and his hand was on the desk. A pen had fallen from his fingers. The old astronomer appeared to be in the midst of working when he keeled over, dead.

Everard attempted to take a pulse by feeling for it in Roland's limp wrist. After a moment, the head astronomer just shook his head. "Roland's dead."

"Good God," said Garnier. "Another one. Now do you believe me, Everard?"

The head astronomer looked tired at his argument. "You've been too stressed, Garnier. All these deaths are taking a toll on you. Roland was a very old man. His time has come. Perhaps the stress of the other deaths had also taken a toll on him and stopped his already weakened heart. These are very ordinary although sad circumstances."

"You're just making up excuses," Garnier ranted as Everard put his hands on the shorter astronomer's shoulders and pointed him towards the door. "There's nothing normal about this! It's downright strange! Chilling! Evil! This island is going to kill us all!"

As the astronomers went past the threshold, Renaud went over to the body and looked down at it. Haidée didn't dare walk close to the old man's corpse. Her intuition that something bizarre had happened was stronger than ever. Instead of trying to take a pulse himself, Renaud pulled the back of Roland's shirt away from his body a little bit and looked underneath. The slant of light from a nearby flickering candle caused a glare on his spectacles, hiding his expression from her.

After a moment, he drew his hand away and nodded to her to precede him from the room. As they walked down the stairs, he said, "There were marks on the old man. They looked very similar to the other ones."

Haidée felt cold. "Whoever he is, he's becoming more clever."

The marten had followed everyone up to Monsieur Roland's laboratory. It stayed for a moment after all the people had left, ignoring the dead corpse in favor of rooting through the pile of unorganized papers. But in the midst of tossing aside another sheet of foolscap, its ears pricked up at a noise coming from the open window. It was a strange noise that was utterly different than the rain or the thunder. Frightened, the marten bolted out of the room and raced down the stairs towards its mistress.

October 26, 1796
Part XXXV

The air was chilly despite the clear sky and the bright sun. Haidée felt as cold as the air. She did not think that anything could warm her back up—not the sun, not a meal, not even a barrel of poppy wine. The only good that gave her was a strangely clear head and bad visions she dismissed as nightmares.

She was out, walking down the path towards the village. She wanted to be out. She wanted to move out, but that was impossible. The Cormorant was filled with vacationers—there was no room for any more, even for one who was desperate for getting out of the stifling, death-like atmosphere of the observatory.

If it weren't so cold at night, she mused, she would move outside and sleep under the stars.

The marten had followed her out after breakfast, but the little creature took its own, mysterious path, occasionally disappearing into a bush or up a tree before coming back to Haidée to watch her brood.

She remembered the first time that she had a sip of poppy wine. It had been three months ago at the end of a run of one of Signe's more successful plays and before they had started rehearsals for the play that would become more than a flop—the play that would be reviled by the public because of its closeness to certain recent events.

Haidée had been tired, more exhausted than usual. The glass of red wine had not helped. The flowers that had been heaped into her dressing room by adoring admirers—or rather men hoping to get lucky—had been getting on her nerves. A fellow actor had knocked on her dressing room door offering a bottle of “the latest fashionable vintage” to celebrate the end of the run.

She had wanted to slam the door on the man's face. She wanted to be left alone to ponder what was becoming of her life—would she always be in this fast paced whirl, keeping up the hectic long hours of the theatre and still be able to keep up appearances? But instead, she had been polite and had accepted a glass of new wine to appear sociable.

It had gone down far more sweetly than she had expected. But the effect of the drug was almost instantaneous. The world had sharpened and her abilities, which she had tried to suppress through most of her adulthood, simmered just underneath her skin. Despite the effects, this put her in a jovial mood and she had found herself saying yes to going to the post-play party.

But afterwards, the poppy wine took its toll. There were the nightmares and the morning of nausea. Later, she had taken the drug only sparingly—until recently.

Soon enough, her walk took her past the church and the cemetery. At this point, the marten abandoned her, climbing over the stone wall that separated the dead from the living. That thought made Haidée shudder and she turned her gaze away and concentrated instead on the dull roofs of the village buildings.

Just before the main street, she saw two men leaning on the side of one of the houses, talking. One of the men wore a tri-cornered hat. The other wore an ill-fitting coat.

Renaud spotted her first. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. When she came within hearing range, he said, “I thought you were still sleeping. Or at least resting from what happened yesterday.”

“I didn't want to stay inside today,” she replied. “Besides, the sun is out. That gives me the illusion that there is some good in the world.”

“There is always good in the world,” said Davenport with a sad smile. “You just have to look very hard to find it. Unfortunately, it can be buried under the dreck and morass the rest of the world produces.”

Haidée was pensive. “Some consider the theatre nonsense. They think actors and actresses are part of the dregs of society, parasites because they earn their living by entertaining.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” said Renaud as he took her arm in his. “People in your profession do an essential job—to entertain. Without entertainment, the world would be a very dull place indeed.”

“I agree,” said Davenport. “I, for one, would go mad if I couldn’t escape from what the real world had to offer without theatres, games, novels, and the like.”

Haidée made no move to extricate herself from Renaud. His arms seemed solid and warm, bringing her out of her morose mood. “I suppose so,” she finally said. “Although that argument generally falls upon deaf ears with those who want to close any sort of entertainment down.”

“Oh, I doubt those people would be able to shut everything down,” Renaud commented. “The public wants entertainment. A few objectors can’t stand against that.”

The three of them headed down the main street, ambling at a fairly slow pace. There were few clouds out and the air smelled clean. Haidée wished that the previous days she had spent on Mont Saint Filan had been just as idyllic. But then, if that were so, she would have been strolling on the street alone while Davenport and Renaud were back at the observatory.

“Father DeLorme took Roland’s body in preparation for the funeral, didn’t he?” asked Davenport. “I stayed home yesterday because of the weather. And I didn’t think that anyone would need me at the library then.”

“The doctor was summoned first,” said Renaud. “By the amount of time he spent examining Roland, I don’t think he checked for anything aside for the pulse. Everard was going to meet with DeLorme anyway so he and Villiers went out to fetch him.”

“Father DeLorme came by with several helpers,” added Haidée. She shivered. “He said that the coffin they had with them was their last spare one. He said something about making more. Does he think that more people are going to die?”

Renaud was grim. “Perhaps, if we don’t find out who’s responsible soon.”

Davenport tilted back his tri-cornered hat and looked up at the sky. He sounded vague when he said, “If the one responsible made Roland look like he passed from natural causes, he might become bolder because he fooled everybody.”

“He didn’t fool us,” Haidée cut in. “There were markings on his back, just like the others. No one noticed it because they didn’t bother to look under his shirt. Why, Father DeLorme and his men just put Roland’s body into the coffin without a second glance.”

The observatory librarian just shook his head. “They wouldn’t have done anything else, otherwise. Laurent Roland didn’t have any relatives. He didn’t have anybody who would care how his death would be treated—only the other astronomers. And you must admit, they aren’t the most friendly of people.”

“We still don’t know why whoever is responsible is doing this,” said Renaud. “Why the astronomers? What’s so special about them?”

Haidée pondered that question as they walked past a house with flower boxes at the window sill. There were no flowers in those boxes—just dirt and dead leaves.

“There are usually only a few reasons why someone would want to perform death magic,” she finally said.

Renaud looked at her in interest. “Only a few?”

“If you wanted something, using one of the more benign powers is easier,” she replied. “Necromancers deal with the dead because they either want the life force of another person to maintain youth, the powers of another sorcerer to augment their abilities, or to raise the dead.”

Davenport furrowed his brows, puzzled. “But why would anyone want any of those things on this island? None of that would confer any particular advantage whatsoever. People here live simple lives.”

Haidée sighed at his naïve view. “Well, some people don’t want simple.”

October 26, 1796
Part XXXVI

Davenport soon took leave of them when they approached the front of Mont Saint Filan’s sole inn, The Cormorant. The observatory librarian excused himself on the grounds that he had some things to do at the library that required his attention.

As Haidée stood outside of the inn watching Davenport retreat down the street, she wondered aloud, “How much of the observatory does he really know?”

Renaud stood beside her, his head bent down as if he were examining his shoes, the brim of his hat obscuring his expression. His hands were in his coat pockets. He seemed not to hear her question but after a moment, replied, “It is quite possible Davenport knows more about the observatory than he is letting on. He has been on this island about as long as the other astronomers. He has no one to supervise his comings and

goings.”

“I don’t want to suspect him,” she said. “I like him. For one, he’s far more friendly than the others.”

“Oh, he appears that way,” Renaud remarked, “But I’ve met many men who had quite personable facades yet hid a monster underneath.”

“You are a cynic.”

“One would have to be, in my position.”

The breezes outside were cool and stiff. She felt her eyes water and her face felt cold and somewhat numb. “It’s a bit chilly out here, isn’t it?”

“Do you wish to go inside?”

She nodded. “Let’s get out of this wind. It isn’t noon yet, but I can’t see why we can’t have any tea or hot chocolate to warm ourselves up.”

Renaud flashed a quick, wicked grin. “Oh, I can think of something else that could possibly do the trick.”

Haidée thought about sitting in front of a hearth, wrapped up in blankets. “Well, a fire would be appetizing too.”

“I wasn’t talking about a fire.”

“Oh?”

He took a hand out of his pocket and looped an arm around her waist to pull her closer. Before her mind could register what was happening, he was kissing her. The brim of his hat momentarily shielded her from the outside. Her imagination replaced those blankets with him.

With a finally press of his lips to the corner of her mouth, he reluctantly pulled away. “Warm now?”

“I would be warmer if we were inside,” she responded tartly.

He laughed and as they moved toward the entrance to the inn, the door swung open revealing a woman dressed in a bright yellow gown trimmed with an excessive amount of lace and ribbon. Over the gown, she wore a coat of an equally eye-searing shade of orange.

In comparison, Haidée was positively drab in her own dark blue coat and dress, but she didn’t mind. The other woman’s poor choice in color amused her greatly.

A sudden wind picked up, nearly taking with it this woman's feathered hat and wig curled with white, powdered locks. She turned and spotted Renaud with his arm around Haidée and she scowled. Haidée immediately recognized her as the shop keeper, Georgette Beauchamp. Apparently she had still not realized yet that her fashion sense was beyond laughable.

Georgette sneered even when Haidée murmured a polite "Good morning." The woman gave a toss of her head, probably trying to snub her, but only succeeded in looking like the size of her wig had caught her off balance.

Once they were inside the warmth of the Cormorant's main room, Renaud took off his hat. "Do you know her?" he asked. "She didn't look very pleased to see you."

Haidée untied the ribbons to her bonnet and then tucked her headwear under her arm. "That was the shop keeper. She owns a store just down the street. I met her once before. She seems to have the impression that I am after the magistrate even though I specifically told her I wasn't. She wants him herself."

"Ah, I understand now. A jealous woman. I try to stay away from such persons—very dangerous creatures."

"Speaking from experience?"

"Speaking from observation," he replied. "In some ways, women can be more cruel than men."

"That's a very astute observation, Jacot."

"Observing people is part of how I earn my living."

The tavern at the inn was only half full of people. Most of them had shoved the tables together and had gathered for what looked like a meeting. The innkeeper, Fasset, was not present. Instead, a plump and bored looking matron sat at the counter, filling orders for wine and bread as two serving girls circulated the room. Haidée guessed the matron was either a cook or maid filling in for Fasset—or even, perhaps, his wife.

"Monsieur Renaud! Mademoiselle Avenall! What a delight to see you here." A thick figure rose from the table and beckoned for them to join him. It was Maurice Ducos.

Haidée frowned, wanting to retaliate against the fat man for his previous lecherous comments. But Renaud shook his head, indicating that they might as well go with the flow.

The people at the table soon shifted around and made room for them to sit near Ducos. Haidée found herself between Renaud and Galliard. The magistrate grinned at her and pronounced her enchanting as he pressed her gloved hand to his mouth. She pasted a

flirtatious smile on her face and not so gently extracted her hand from his grasp.

“Why Mademoiselle, it seems that you have an admirer,” Renaud said in a bored tone. But over his spectacles, his eyes glimmered.

“Why, so I do,” Haidée replied. “Do you have a problem with that, Monsieur Renaud?”

“Oh, no problem at all. I was just making an observation.” He gave her a toothy smile. “Although I must say I’d prefer a more prickly kind of companion. I like arguments. What can I say, I’m a bit of a masochist.”

As Ducos received a bottle of wine from one of the maids and began pouring out glasses while calling the meeting to order, Haidée lowered her voice so that only Renaud could hear her.

“Fortunately for you, I can be a bit of a sadist.”

She had the pleasure of receiving a hot, molten look.

Maurice Ducos tapped a spoon to the stem of his glass, bringing everyone to attention. As Haidée looked around the table, she saw that those present were a mix of vacationers and locals. Most were men although there were a few other women who appeared to be with their husbands.

“Well, as you all know, the Republic has at least done us one good,” the stout man began. “They eliminated the monarchy and scattered the aristocracy. But the current Directoire is a corruption of itself!”

Ducos thumped the table with a fist for emphasis and the rest of the people gave a small cheer, making her jump in nervousness. She saw Renaud’s gaze narrow intently as if he were soaking up every word. Haidée knew better than to disturb him in his observations so turned to Galliard for answers.

“What sort of meeting is this?” she asked as Ducos began to outline the atrocities of the current government and getting his followers riled up.

The magistrate looked at her in surprise. “Why, Ducos is part of the movement to bring down the corruption of the Directoire.”

“Oh, I see.” She relaxed in her chair.

The government in France had been in quite the turmoil for the past decade or so. It wasn’t surprising that everyone had their own ideas on reform although most of the time people had to keep quiet in their complaints or the current regime would fall on them. Ducos sounded a bit like a harmless zealot—there was little a village on an island could do to affect the powers that be in Paris.

“What France needs is a new leader to quash all these corruptions,” Ducos continued. “The movement has been starting in the mainland. People are tired of the internal battles. Everyone is tired of war. There is only one man who can stop all of this.”

Haidée waited for Ducos to nominate himself.

“Napoleon Bonaparte is the man for France’s future,” Ducos declared. “He’s proved himself in countless battles on the Italian peninsula such as the Battle of Lodi. He has the political savvy to pull the country together to make us a world power again. And under him as a leader, everyone will have his say unlike the repressive old regime ruled by the tyrannical Louises who called themselves kings!”

There was a loud cheer, but Haidée just felt somewhat bewildered. She knew that Napoleon Bonaparte was a military general, but she found it hard to believe that might on a battle field could easily translate to governing a country. Unfortunately, she was pretty sure that Ducos wasn’t the only one misled by Bonaparte’s recent overseas victories. She could easily see the public supporting someone just because he was popular, not because he was the right one for the position.

“And we need all the help we can get to make this happen,” said Ducos ardently. “The more supporters, the better.”

“Some say that Bonaparte isn’t the most likable of men,” Galliard broke in. “Some say he needs supernatural help.”

“Oh, Bonaparte won’t turn away something just because it is something some people consider unnatural,” said Ducos blithely.

The magistrate gave everyone an odd smile. “I see.”

Haidée found herself edging over so slightly away from Galliard.

“What of you, Renaud, what do you say?”

His expression was unreadable when he told the stout man, “Oh, I agree with you about eliminating corruption.”

October 27, 1796
Part XXXVII

As Haidée finished lacing up her bodice, she heard a tapping on the window. Quickly, she tied a bow and went over to open the pane. The marten chirped and dashed inside and headed toward the door to wait for her.

The previous day, meeting at the Cormorant’s tavern had taken up the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon. She and Renaud had ended up eating lunch there while Maurice Ducos and his friends expounded on ways to help Napoleon Bonaparte

gain control of the country's governing body once his campaign in Italy was over.

"Do you really think that Monsieur Ducos and the others are actually serious?" Haidée had asked him when the meeting had adjourned and they were on their way back to the observatory. The sun was already dipping into the horizon and it made her glad that she was walking with someone in the graying darkness. "I know that there are always some people dissatisfied how things are being run, but why would they come all the way out here to make such plans?"

"They're serious as far as I can tell," Renaud had replied. "There were some of the locals at the gathering, but I think they came because they were more curious than actual supporters. No, the ones you have to pay attention to are the visitors to the island. The major players are Maurice Ducos and his friends."

"Why do you say that?"

"Maurice Ducos is the brother of Roger Ducos," he had said as if that explained everything.

Haidée had frowned and had tried to hunch a little over in her coat to get warm. The temperature as well as the light had been dropping. Sensing her discomfort, Renaud had put his arm around her shoulder. "Who's Roger Ducos?"

"You're not up on politics, are you?"

"I can quote plays, yes. But I don't follow much on politics unless it affects my livelihood. I think politicians focus too much on the petty power struggles."

"You may be right." He paused for a moment as they had walked past the cemetery. The marten had not reappeared by then and Haidée had assumed that the creature had finally decided to go back into the wild. Finally, Renaud continued, "Roger Ducos, or Pierre-Roger Ducos as he is known more formally, is a member of the council of the Five Hundred. Unlike many of the other four hundred and ninety-nine members, he wields considerable influence over the rest of the Five Hundred and the members of the Directoire."

"So Maurice Ducos is intimately connected to the government. Did you come here following him?"

"No. My initial directives was to follow up on Danton Neville's odd communication with my superiors. Having Maurice Ducos traveling to Mount Saint Filan with us on the same day was coincidence. But it appears it won't be a completely useless bit of coincidence. It's no secret that Roger Ducos's sympathies lie with Napoleon Bonaparte. My superiors will be interested that his brother was here trying to gather support."

"Is Bonaparte really that much of a threat?"

“Maybe. I met him once. He was a short, energetic man. And extremely ambitious.”

They had fallen into silence for most of the walk as Haidée had tried to turn over this new information. It was interesting, surely, but at the moment, she didn't think it would apply much to the current situation unless she also took in the other comments she had heard during that meeting. “What do you think of Monsieur Galliard?” she said suddenly.

“The magistrate, Merle Galliard?” His tone had sounded mild. “What about him? He seemed a bit like a fop to me. He was probably just going along with Ducos because it seemed fashionable. Or perhaps he's a bit more ambitious than he first appears—perhaps he wants to ingrate himself with Ducos to gain contacts with certain powerful politicians.”

“There is that,” she had replied. “But he kept making all these comments about the uses of supernatural powers. And I don't think he was talking about God and divine interventions. Do you think he actually knows about such things?”

“Everard once told me that Galliard went to the Sorbonne and had done a little study with astronomy—that is why he is such an enthusiastic amateur,” Renaud had said. “But to be a good astronomer, you also have to be a bit of a sorcerer as well. It's not inconceivable that Galliard learned some of the basics of sorcery while he was there.”

“If that's possible, I don't see why it wouldn't be possible for him to learn death magic. It is somewhat suspicious that he is talking about it yet he isn't even coming to the observatory to even make a pretense of investigating what happened to Legard, D'Aubigne, and now even Roland. Maybe Everard didn't even ask him to stay away. Maybe he's staying away because he himself had something to do with it.”

“Hm.”

“You think I'm just talking without proof.”

“Frankly, yes. I've never seen Galliard actually do anything astronomical—not even look at charts or telescopes or even doing calculations. He just talks about his interests and praises Everard whenever the two are together. He hangs on to people, just as he tries to hang on to you.”

“The way you say it, he sounds like a disgusting sycophant.”

“He is a sycophant.”

Haidée grabbed her coat from her clothing trunk just as the marten mewled in impatience. She scowled at the little creature. “You expect me to do everything for you, even after you disappeared yesterday doing whatever it was you were doing? Be grateful that you were running around outside as free as bird while I was stuck inside listening to political ranting!”

The marten didn't give a fig about her arguments. It wanted out.

She opened the door and it ran out before her. Haidée went down to the kitchen where the marten, again, was waiting at the door.

“Oh no, you're not going in there. Stay. Out here.”

She edged toward the edge of the door and stuck her foot out to bar the way. The marten just cocked its head and looked at her as if it thought she was being abnormally silly. Haidée opened the door a crack and prepared to dash in without letting the marten through. She opened the door another inch.

The marten saw its chance and with a mischievous chitter, it ran over her boot, through the crack in the door, and into the kitchen.

“No!”

But it was too late.

October 27, 1796
Part XXXVIII

Haidée winced as a clatter and a horrific scream topped even the most ferocious thunderstorm. There were shouts, exclamations, shrieks. She was afraid to open the door any further to see what she would find. But she didn't have to.

The marten raced back out of the door crack. In its mouth was a croissant bigger than its head. A second later, the kitchen door slammed open, sending Haidée sprawling across the wall. The cook, Madame Boulanger was breathing hard as she stood at the threshold. She did not even notice Haidée standing nearby. She was too busy breathing hard as her glinting eyes tracked the small animal racing down the hall. In her upraised right fist was a cleaver.

Madame Boulanger let out a scream that could rival any maniacal marauding Scotsman and charged after the marten, her skirts flying.

Haidée grasped the edge of the doorway and pulled herself into the kitchen. The place did not particularly look damaged. There were a couple of pots on the floor near the stove, but the maid, Colette, was picking them up. A tray of croissants, minus one, was on the table beside an immaculately polished tea set of white porcelain.

“I'm sorry,” said Haidée. “I'm probably too lax about the marten. I should have discouraged it from following me the very first day I encountered it.”

Colette straightened and giggled, but then sobered as she placed the pots back to where they belonged. “No, Mademoiselle. It isn't your fault. Besides, Madame Boulanger needs

a distraction. She hasn't been quite herself ever since she discovered Monsieur Roland in his laboratory. But he did die of natural circumstances, no?"

Haidée did not try to dissuade her thinking. Three deaths were enough to put a strain on anyone—even someone like herself who didn't know the dead men very well in the first place. Roland's funeral had been earlier that morning. It had been a quick, quiet affair in which little was spoken other than Father DeLorme's blessings and elegies as Roland's coffin was lowered into the ground. Afterwards, everyone had gone back to the observatory. Haidée had changed from one of her darker dresses to a peach-colored walking dress. She had planned on getting a picnic lunch and going outside to clear her head.

"Monsieur Roland was an old man," she simply stated as she unhooked a basket hanging near several garlands of dried herbs and onions. "I'm sure he lived a full life."

"Astronomers living a full life?" said Colette in surprise. "Astronomers hole themselves up in their laboratories and observatories, thinking about numbers all the time. They never really see the world or interact with anyone." The maid moved toward the pantry, intent on finding something. "They only live in their heads."

Intrigued by her insight, Haidée said, "Perhaps they prefer it that way. Not everyone feels comfortable being out in the open in strange places or interacting with other people who might not completely understand them." She placed a cloth in the basket and began putting food inside—some croissants and fruit. She took a bottle of wine sitting in a rack near a cutting board and snagged two drinking glasses.

"Perhaps." Colette emerged from the pantry holding a package wrapped in brown paper and two small jars—one of cherry preserves, the other of olives. She placed the jars into the basket for her and then nodded her head toward the package before putting that in on top of everything else. "These are some smoked sardines."

"Thank you." Before Haidée tucked the cloth cover onto the basket, she slipped in a bottle of the tonic she had been hiding underneath her coat while the maid was preoccupied with gathering ingredients for preparing the next meal. Then she asked, "How about you, Colette? Don't you feel a bit stifled working here with these eccentric old men?"

The maid shrugged. "This is a job. Claude and I are trying to save enough money so we can marry and build a house in the village. It is just a matter of time." She looked over her shoulder and gave Haidée a wink. "Are you going to ask Monsieur Renaud to take a walk with you this afternoon?"

Haidée gave her a light laugh. "But of course! The poor man does nothing but lurk in the cellar. He needs some sunlight." With that thought, she momentarily abandoned the picnic basket in favor of looking for Renaud.

She found him in the cellar writing furiously in a small notebook. When he noticed her

arrival, he put his pen down and closed the small volume before pocketing it in his jacket. "Haidée. Didn't you say you were going out for a walk because of the pleasant weather?"

"I wanted to invite you to come with me." She glanced in askance towards his coat pocket. "If you don't mind my asking, what were you writing?"

"I'll tell you later." He stood up from his chair and followed her back up the stairs. "I suppose a walk would be good. The cellar isn't particularly an idea place to think. Being underground sort of feels like one is buried alive, isn't it?"

"You're feeling depressed because you haven't been seeing enough sunlight," she replied. They entered the kitchen and she picked up the basket. She grinned at him. "The cellar is a lonely place. Perhaps you were craving some human companionship?"

"It depends," he said, his voice hiding laughter. "What sort of companionship did you have in mind?"

There was a knock at the kitchen door, interrupting their conversation. Colette hurried to the door and pulled it open, revealing the straight figure of Father DeLorme. The priest's black cloak contrasted starkly with the bright light from outside.

"Father!" said Colette, surprised. "Did you have an appointment today with Monsieur Everard? I'll go get him right away."

"No need, child," the priest replied as he stepped into the kitchen and took off his hat. Negligently, he held out the hat which the maid automatically took to put up on a coat hook near the door. "I know my way to Monsieur Everard's study and laboratory. He is expecting me."

"Oh, good afternoon, Father," said Haidée.

Renaud gave a quick nod of his head. "Father."

DeLorme flashed a quick, bright smile. "Mademoiselle Avenall. Monsieur Renaud. A pleasure to see you again. It looks like you are going out?"

"Yes. It is a pleasant day other than this morning," she replied hesitantly.

"Ah yes." They were all silent for a moment, thinking of Roland's funeral. But then the priest spoke up again. "It would be such a shame to waste such a nice day anyway. Who knows, it might rain again tomorrow."

"It is the rainy season, is it not?" said Renaud.

"Indeed. The first frost hasn't come yet, although it is quite near." Father DeLorme shook his head as if an amusing thought had popped into his mind. "Oh, and I do

remember your request, Mademoiselle Avenall.”

“My request?”

“About the exorcisms? I will do one after my meeting with Monsieur Everard. I do want to make sure that everyone here at the observatory sleeps well at night.”

“Oh.” Haidée didn’t know exactly how to reply to that.

“At any rate, I hope you have a nice day. I’ll be on my way.” With that, DeLorme headed out of the kitchen and into the hallway towards the interior of the observatory.

Renaud gave her a puzzled look as they headed outside. “Exorcism?”

“It was just something I had said when I was talking to Father DeLorme in a prior conversation,” she murmured. “Apparently, he took me literally.”

October 27, 1796
Part XXXIX

The edge of the island was a sheer drop in the sea. The only way up, when the causeway was revealed at the end of each lunar cycle, was a zigzagging road climbing up the southern side of the island.

Haidée sat on a small outcrop overlooking this shore. Behind her was the village. In front, was the sea and the white shore of the mainland in the distance. That shore seemed very close yet also very far. On the slate blue estuary, there was a small fisherman’s boat rigged with a white sail. A solitary figure stood in the vessel, pulling up netting and fish.

“I feel like I’m almost at the end of the world,” she murmured.

Renaud was sitting not far away. The picnic basket was the only thing that separated them. “Oh, this is far from the end of the world. Perhaps, if one were in America, one could say so.”

She wrapped her arms about her knees. “I have heard the New World is overrun by savages. I would only go to the end if it were still a bit civilized.”

“You don’t sound very adventuresome.”

“Maybe I’m not.”

She turned her cheek to look at him. Renaud was leaning back on his elbows and looking out towards the sea, watching the fisherman do his task. He had taken off his spectacles and put them in one of his coat pockets. His dark hair was tied back with a thick white ribbon, but the wind kept tugging the strands out of the queue.

“The theatre director forced me into this vacation,” she suddenly said.

“Oh? Did he have a hard time getting you out of Paris?”

“Not really.” She leaned forward to pull a bit of yellowing grass out of the earth. “The director said that I was stressed from all the work at the theatre. At the time he told me, I dismissed it, but now, I think he may be right.”

“This vacation of yours is turning out to be anything but stress free.”

“I know.” She managed to pull out a blade of grass with its roots intact. She flicked it away. “I think I’m beginning to tire of acting. Maybe I should get out while my career is at its height and start over elsewhere.”

“Like where?”

She was silent for a moment as a sleek, black feathered bird swooped down from the sky towards the sea. Its red eye winked at them like a faceted ruby catching the light. It was a cormorant, out to catch fish like its human counterpart on the small boat.

“Where are you going after you make your report to your superiors about this island?” she asked instead.

“I’m not sure. I have heard, though, that they want to send some people out to Austria. To Vienna, to be exact. If that happens, I’d probably go as an astronomer again—some of the Austrian intellectuals are far more connected to their government than it is here in France.”

“Vienna is very far away,” she said softly.

He turned to look at her. “Vienna is a civilized place. It has theatres and operas. I’m sure you could go there and fit in quite easily.”

“Do you think so? There’s the matter of a different language. And I’ve heard rumors that the Viennese have strange habits.”

“You don’t look like a woman who would be easily put off by strange habits.”

“Hm.” She reached for the basket. “I’m starving.”

Renaud was quicker. He flicked open the cloth covering the interior of the picnic basket and looked inside. “What is this?” He retrieved a bottle. Haidée’s bottle of tonic—the poppy wine.

“Give me that.” She snatched the bottle from his grasp. But he didn’t just let her take it. He grabbed her waist and pulled her over the basket towards him. She landed on top of

him, her arms outstretched to protect her precious tonic from smashing into the ground. “No! Let go of me.”

“There are strange habits and then there are bad habits.” He grunted when she tried to punch him in the stomach. He rolled with her until he ended up on top. He wrenched the bottle out of her fingers and flung it over the cliff. “You really have to control yourself.”

She gave a cry as she watched the bottle go over. She turned her gaze back on him and her fingers dug harshly into his arm. “How could you do that?”

“Every time you take a drink, you make yourself worse. Don’t you know laudanum is addicting?”

She stared at him, thinking. It was just one bottle. In her trunks, there was more. “All right,” she said. “You win this time.”

“Good.” He leaned down to kiss her. When he finally pulled away, they were both breathing hard. She wished that he hadn’t stopped. “Lunch,” he said abruptly, although his voice sounded a bit hoarse. “We can’t forget about lunch.”

“No.” She grabbed the lapels of his coat and dragged him back on top of her.

“Haidée...”

She pushed with her legs and they were rolling again until they suddenly stopped on a small grassy place a little below the rocks they had been sitting on. The view of the village was obscured by the rocks. But there was still the view of the sea and the bright sky. Renaud was sprawled on his back blinking up at her. She straddled him, feeling the sun behind her.

“Oh, you can’t,” he whispered. “Anyone can come by and see us.”

She gave him an impertinent smile. “Don’t act shy now. That’s half the fun.” She lowered her mouth to the edge of his jaw and felt his facial muscles twitch under her lips. She breathed in the scent of his skin. “Don’t you want me, Jacot?”

“Good God, Haidée.” One of his hands cradled the back of her neck. The other trailed down her body, momentarily lingering at the curve of her belly, before it began pulling fistfuls of her dress up her waist. His mouth found her throat. “I want you too much. This is mad.”

“Sometimes insanity is good.” She gasped when his warm fingers found her thigh. In retaliation, she reached down to undo some crucial buttons. Her palm found him ready.

“Wait, Haidée...”

She gently bit his ear and he groaned. “Oh no, we’re not waiting for anything.”

* * *

The marten finally reached the southern end of the island, panting. Evading the cook with the giant cleaver was hard work. It had eventually gotten out of the observatory via an open window and had rested briefly to devour its hard won croissant before tracking down its mistress and her male companion with the large coat.

It spotted the picnic basket. Food! But where was everyone else?

The marten padded over to the outcrop of rocks where the basket sat and looked at the grassy turf below. It saw its mistress happily sprawled over the man. He wasn’t looking too vexed either. It turned back to eye the basket. It wouldn’t hurt to take a nibble of something, the marten reasoned. They didn’t look like they were going to miss lunch anyway.

October 28, 1796

Part XL

After Renaud had told her about the information he was collecting in his small book, Haidée had insisted on going back out the next morning to examine the wall bordering the observatory’s land and the neighboring farm.

“We didn’t find anything here last time,” he said as they stood about a yard away from the stone wall. Both of them were staring at it, but Haidée was scrutinizing it more closely. The marten had returned and was draped over her right shoulder, its pelt gleaming in the pale morning sunlight. It was sleeping. “If anything was here, the rain from the previous days would have washed it away.”

“Maybe it did wash it away,” she replied as she stepped closer to the stones. “But I just have this feeling that there’s something here.” After a decidedly nasty headache she had the previous night, she had seen a brief vision. Perhaps it had just been her imagination conjuring up a picture of what D’Aubigne must have looked like, dead on the wall when the farmer had found his body. But there was just something about it that jogged an idea in her head. She rarely ignored her intuition even if she didn’t want it.

“Well, if you think there’s something here, what do you think it might be?”

“I’m not sure.”

Haidée tugged off her left glove and put her hand on top of the wall. The stone felt a bit grainy and cold, but otherwise, there was nothing. “Where exactly did the farmer find D’Aubigne?”

“He didn’t say. But I do recall that he mentioned that he had spotted the body when he was trying to get a horse back into his stable.”

“Where’s the stable? Maybe if we look at the wall from that angle, there might be some obvious place where one could have spotted a body.”

Renaud looked skeptical at his idea, but he didn’t dismiss it. “We could give that angle a try. There’s a building up ahead.”

She looked past the wall and saw the building he was indicating, a squat structure beyond the apple trees. She remembered when she had first spotted Renaud investigating near the area and thought that he was doing something extremely suspicious. She had stolen one of the apples and eaten it for lunch. She shook her head. “I took a closer look at it before. It’s just an abandoned shed. Let’s walk further along this wall. Maybe there’s another building elsewhere.”

They followed the wall, heading in direction of the north edge of the island, overlooking part of the Atlantic Ocean and the channel that separated the continent from the northern island country, England. The day was as clear as before and the air was almost balmy. Breezes brought in the scent of the ocean—salty and slightly fishy.

The wall ended just as the farm property was cut off by the island edge. Haidée looked down the cliffs and watched the surf crashing into the sheer rock. For a moment, she felt a moment of vertigo and she reached out to the wall to steady herself.

When her fingers touched rock, a shock bolted up through her arm and she nearly fell to her knees.

“Haidée? What’s wrong?”

Her skin felt cold and clammy. Renaud held her shoulders, steadying her. She released her hold from the wall and grabbed his waist instead and tried to take a deep breath to clear her head. “It’s the wall,” she said.

He turned to look at the stone. “I don’t see anything.”

Haidée stepped back away from him to take a closer look at the wall. She kept her hands to herself. At first glance the gray stone itself did not look any different than the stone in the other parts of the wall. But she could almost feel, almost smell that there was something slightly off. She edged a bit closer and then the scratches on the stone became evident.

“There’s a sign here,” she finally said. “You can hardly see it. It’s as if someone had scratched the symbol onto the rock with a coin so that it’s there but hardly visible to the casual observer.”

“What sort of sign is it?”

She could make out the angles, the shapes, and the curves. It was at once beautiful and horrible. She wrapped her arms around herself yet she could hardly tear her eyes away

from it. “It’s a modification of a very simple kind of sign,” she replied. “In itself, one wouldn’t suspect anything from the simple sign. But with the addition, it becomes more complicated.”

“You’re beginning to sound like an astronomer completely fixated by his numbers.”

A faint smile curved her lip. “Do I? Well, I suppose we all are experts on something. To be honest, I can’t really say exactly what the sign is for since I’ve never studied its like before, but I can say that it has very bad implications. The sign means give and take. It’s for sacrifices.”

“It’s death magic then.”

“Quite possibly. I think D’Aubigne’s body was found at this spot. However, this doesn’t prove that he was killed here.”

Renaud kept looking at the spot on the wall, pensive. “D’Aubigne did say that he was going out that day to meet with somebody. He didn’t say who he was meeting. It could have been any number of people. I suppose we could eliminate the people who stayed in the observatory during that time. Even though we didn’t know exactly where they were.”

“Monsieur Everard said that you were out with him trying to bring back some contraption to the observatory.”

“Yes, that’s right. We were out for only a moment though. And we didn’t see anything—the storm was too dark to see much beyond our faces, actually. So that would leave anyone else who wasn’t at the observatory.”

Haidée turned to look out at the sea. “Monsieur Davenport was supposedly at home since he did not come to the observatory to work at the library that day. There are also all the other villagers. Like the magistrate. And then there are the other vacationers.”

“Perhaps Davenport holds a grudge against the other astronomers that we don’t know about,” said Renaud. “He is, after all, just a librarian.”

“He told me once that he was treated nothing other than a glorified clerk,” Haidée replied. “But he didn’t sound bitter about it. To me, he sounded content about his occupation.”

“Some people are very good at hiding their discontent,” Renaud pointed out.

“They are very good actors, you mean,” she said coolly. “I know, I know. It is a very obvious observation that I should have already caught on by now. But I have this weakness for taking most people who are not actors at face value.”

“At least you are aware of your weaknesses.”

She looked over at the wall as it stretched back towards the interior of the island. A little ways away, she spotted an odd grayish speck on the other side of the wall that looked somewhat out of place. “What is that?”

“What is what?”

She briskly walked back a few paces and then hiked up her skirts to climb over the wall.

“Haidée...”

She was already on the ground and next to an abnormally large pile of gold and red leaves at the foot of a skinny elm tree when Renaud vaulted over the wall and came to stand beside her. She crouched down to brush the leaves away to reveal gray hair.

As more leaves came away, it became clear that the speck was a person.

Edouard Garnier lay partially on his side, his mouth open in a silent scream, his eyes glazed over in terrified death. The short astronomer’s body was nude except for the inked symbols written from the nape to the base of the spine.

October 28, 1796

Part XLI

Haidée leaned against the bedpost in her room, holding a new bottle of tonic to her lips. Its sickly sweet smell permeated the air around her, but she was used to it. She gulped it down, but only a trickle coated her tongue. She upended it. Nothing came out.

“Huh. I must have drunk more than I had thought.”

She stepped slowly towards the desk in the guest room and clutched the top once she got near it. The marten danced at her feet, chirping angrily at her self abuse. She carefully placed the bottle onto the top of the desk and then crumpled into the chair before placing her head in her arms. Oh, the headaches.

After she and Renaud had discovered Garnier’s body, they had rushed to the village to inform the magistrate and Father DeLorme before going back to the observatory to break the news to Everard. When Galliard had heard of Garnier’s death, a strange look had crept up on his face and then in an almost detached manner, began gathering some of his trusted men to look at the body and the scene. That look had Haidée shivering. Even Renaud had voiced his suspicions when they were heading back to the observatory.

Father DeLorme had appeared appropriately shocked. He had made the sign of the cross across his chest before he uttered a heartfelt prayer. Everard had taken the news even harder. If he had not been sitting at his desk in his study, he surely would have fallen on the floor in apoplexy. Instead, he had fainted where he had been sitting and the servants, Villiers and Claude had to haul the head astronomer’s body back to his bedroom. Colette periodically checked in on the man while he slept having nightmares

and calling out, “My pupils! My pupils! Gone! Gone!”

Renaud had gone back out to see to Garnier’s body. Another reason he had gone out was to observe Galliard’s behavior. That left Haidée alone while everyone else was attending to something else.

She could not seem to erase Garnier’s horrified expression out of her mind. So she drank until the pain in her head overwhelmed any of her thoughts.

There was a knock at her bedroom door. The sound echoed through her head like drums and she moaned. The marten took hold the hem of her dress with its mouth and pulled, urging her to answer the door. She ignored the animal’s pleas.

“Mademoiselle Avenall?” It was Colette. “Mademoiselle, it’s the noon meal. It’s ready. Please come down. We’re all waiting for you.”

“Go away,” she called out. She winced. Her own voice hurt her ears. “I’m not hungry.”

“Mademoiselle...”

“No!”

She heard footsteps retreating. She sighed and pressed her cheek to the cool surface of the desk. The room used to belong to an astronomer named Nicolas Bisset who was said to have died under natural causes. She wondered if he had been the first victim and that no one had noticed.

Astronomers had some power. And whoever was killing them was probably taking that power through the use of black magic. But what sort of black magic was it? She had seen only a few instances of it in her late childhood with Madame Zephyrine. On that first job that she had been allowed to accompany her guardian, the wealthy man on death’s door had been smothered with dark symbols—in his room, on his bed, in his clothes, on his body.

Those symbols had been eating him alive.

But somebody had to have been close to that victim to have made all those symbols. Madame Zephyrine had deduced soon enough who had been the cause—the one man who had the most intimate acquaintance to that wealthy master, his valet. Madame Zephyrine had called Haidée her assistant back then, but on that first case, she had been merely an observer as her guardian tracked the necromancer down and had broken him before being able to save the victim.

But here, on this island, on Mont Saint Filan, it wasn’t so easy. The necromancers that Madame Zephyrine had tracked down were sloppy and arrogant, never bothering to hide their trail. Here, there was nothing except the count of dead bodies and the script on their backs—almost like the killer’s encrypted colophon.

The ability to produce symbols and to infuse power into them was intricately connected to the person's life. Whoever killed the astronomers killed them by leeching out their powers. But what did they want with the extra power? They had to do something with it. And with the recent death of Edouard Garnier, she didn't think that the killer was done. He would look for another one possessed with power. Like Everard. Or if the killer even suspected, even Haidée herself.

All these thoughts made her head pound. She didn't want to think any more. She shut her eyes, trying to will all the questions away, and fell into a troubled and drugged sleep.

October 28, 1796
Part XLII

"Haidée."

The sound of her name trickled into her bad dreams like a leaking faucet. She strained her ears, trying to determine who was saying it. The voice sounded familiar. Those dreams tried to hang onto her head, but the voice was sweeping them away. Her ears rang and she slowly became aware that she was lying face down on a desk. Her arm felt numb. Her face ached. She sat up and momentarily felt dizzy.

"Haidée. I've been trying to wake you for a full ten minutes."

She rubbed her eyes and saw Renaud leaning against the wall across from her. His arms were crossed and his spectacles had slipped down his nose. He was glaring at her.

"I was tired."

"No you weren't. You were drinking. When I came back, Colette told me you had holed yourself in your room and refused lunch."

"I wasn't hungry."

"You can't run away whenever something bad happens and try to forget it by medicating yourself into a stupor. What if you've overdosed on your damn tonics? You could be as dead as all the others out there because of your own idiocy."

"Don't judge me on my personal decisions." She pushed back in her chair. It scrapped along the floor, but she ignored the loud, irritating sound. "I know exactly how far I can go." She stood up and stalked towards her trunks.

"Oh no you don't."

When his arms came about her waist, she kicked and twisted and bit out curses. "Let me go, damn you. Don't you know it's the only way I can hold on? My head's not clear enough to use my abilities if I don't..."

Renaud hauled her up and deposited her back on the chair. She almost swallowed her tongue when she looked up into his face. His expression was cool, but his eyes were burning angrily. “You’ve mistaken a drug’s effects for clarity. You can’t ruin yourself like this.”

“Why do you care about how I do to myself?”

Renaud didn’t reply to the question. Instead, he tugged at the cravat on his neck. The long piece of white linen had her widening her eyes in shock as the implication of what he was about to do came to her. “You can’t.”

“This is for your own good, Haidée.” Expertly, he jerked her hands behind the chair and tied them back. She writhed, but it was no use. She only succeeded in dragging the chair across the floor.

“Jacot. You bastard.”

He left her in the chair as he went to her trunks himself. She could hear the clinking glass as he gathered up all the bottles of poppy wine that she had stashed. Then he walked to her window and opened it.

“Damn it. No!”

He turned, giving her a pitying glance before throwing all the bottles out the window. A great shattering crash, muffled by distance, was heard a second later. Haidée flinched and bowed her head. She blinked rapidly and realized that she was crying.

She heard his footsteps as he walked toward her. He crouched at her feet and took her chin in his hand. She jerked her head away, not wanting to look at him. His arms fell back to his side.

“I hate to see you hurt yourself.”

She didn’t respond. The only indication that she had heard him was the tightening of her lips.

“Don’t you care about yourself, Haidée?”

Behind the chair, she clenched her fists. “Does it matter what I think about myself? Everyone is always saying that what they’re doing for me is what’s good for me. Why can’t I think for myself instead of people assuming they should think for me? The director to the theatre that I worked in sent me here for a vacation. You throw out all my medication.”

“You’re not a dependent kind of person,” he said lowly. “I don’t think you are. But you were becoming dependent on those bottles. You were using them as a crutch to help you

deal with unpleasant things. How can anyone take you seriously if you insist on using something else to prop you up?” He leaned forward and cupped his fingers over her fists. He untied her wrists and massaged them to get the circulation back into her hands. “I realized that yesterday meant something to me. I don’t want you here one day and then gone the next.”

“You sound like a besotted young girl.”

He stood up and looked down at her. She didn’t look back at him—she remained in her chair. “Are only young girls allowed to be besotted?” he asked. Then he turned to open a door. Before he left the room, he said, “You missed lunch, but Colette saved some food for you. Come down when you’re ready.”

When he was gone, the marten emerged from underneath the bed where it had been hiding during the confrontation. It crept up to the chair and chirped inquiringly as it looked up at her.

Haidée brought her hands back into her lap and rubbed her wrists, remembering the imprint of his fingers. She sniffled and wished she had a handkerchief on hand. “He must think I’m a fool and a brat.”

The marten climbed up into her lap and curled up in a ball. She put her hand in its soft fur and felt the small creature breathing. She took in her own breath. She was at the bottom now, but she was still alive.

October 29, 1796
Part XLIII

Her only companion in the dining room was the marten who was stuffing its cheeks full of dried currants.

Haidée slowly spooned warm, yet plain porridge into her mouth, thinking of nothing in particular and tasting even less. She had stayed up in her room for the rest of the day, curled up in bed, trying to control her shivers and the phantom longing for a bottle and the sweet tang of poppy wine. She had drifted in and out of sleep—some of it dreamless, some of it filled with nightmares. She tried not to remember any of the horrifying images that her subconscious had stirred up.

Renaud had come into her room during the night through the connecting bathroom door. She could sense him standing over her while she lay on her side away from him. She had forced herself to breathe evenly—to pretend that she was asleep. His hand had touched her cheek and then smoothed down her hair. Then he left and then to her consternation, she had started crying again.

That morning, she had asked for porridge. Colette had clucked over her, asking if she felt better. And even Madame Boulanger looked at her oddly. She didn’t want pity, but then again, she didn’t know how to tell others that without sounding like a spoiled lady

throwing a tantrum or a whining child. So she said nothing.

After breakfast, she disposed of the bowls and silverware in the kitchen and headed down the cellar, thinking that Renaud was down there jotting notes into his book, trying to piece the puzzles of the recent deaths together. But there was no one down in the lower laboratory. The cold lamps did not appear to have been lit recently. She went back up and saw one of the servants, the butler Villiers, heading toward the kitchen. She asked him if he had seen Renaud lately.

Villiers shook his head. "Only early this morning at dawn, Mademoiselle," he replied. "He had an early breakfast with Monsieur Everard."

"Monsieur Everard has recovered?"

"Yes, but he is not quite the same." The butler looked tired. "Monsieur Everard and Monsieur Renaud went down to the village to talk with the magistrate. It seems now that Monsieur Everard is now seriously considering the fact that the deaths of the other astronomers were not so coincidental."

"I see. So there is no one here running the observatory at the moment?"

He shook his head. "No one, unless you count Monsieur Davenport. He just arrived a moment ago with Father DeLorme. I was just about to go to the kitchen to get a tea tray for them in the library."

"Could you add another cup?" Haidée asked. "I'll be in the library as well."

"As you wish, Mademoiselle."

As Villiers turned back towards the kitchen, she made her way down the hall towards the library. The marten tagged along, its claws tapping lightly against the floor in a faint staccato. The library door was closed, but she could hear conversation on the other side. Instead of knocking, she pressed her ear against the door. The men were discussing the weather and wondering whether or not there was going to be rain the next day when Edouard Garnier was scheduled to be buried.

She knocked.

"Come in," Davenport's voice sounded.

She opened the door and peered in. Davenport was behind his desk as usual. Father DeLorme had taken one of the chairs near the hearth. "Good morning, Father DeLorme. Monsieur Davenport."

"Ah, Mademoiselle Avenall!" said Davenport with a smile. "Please come in and join us. Father DeLorme and I were having a chat. When Villiers comes back with the tea, I'll have him fetch an extra cup for you."

“Oh no, that’s not necessary,” she replied as she sat down on another chair facing the two men. “I ran into Monsieur Villiers just as I was about to come here and told him to bring another set for me as well.”

“Mademoiselle Avenall, it is good to see you regardless,” said DeLorme. The priest’s mouth quirked upward and his eyes sparkled. “I see you have a pet. A familiar of yours?” he asked, indicating the marten at her heels. The small animal had plopped itself down beside her chair and began the arduous task of grooming itself.

Haidée’s skin prickled at the allusion to witches. “A familiar? Definitely not that, Father. It’s not even a pet really. The marten happened to follow me home, that’s all.”

Davenport seemed amused. “Don’t listen to her, Father. She pampers the creature and spoils it by letting it eat whatever it wishes. That marten is even more spoiled than my cat.”

At that moment, Villiers came in to deliver the tray of tea. The priest began pouring out the cups of the beverage despite Haidée’s protest that pouring tea should be her job.

“Nonsense, Mademoiselle, I am happy to oblige,” the priest waved her off. “On another note, I was just curious—has everyone been sleeping well lately? You know, I have performed the exorcism the other day to ban whatever demons and evil spirits I could think of.”

She thought back to her nightmare-riddled sleep the previous night, completely unaided by tonic. “I suppose it was as well as it could be under the circumstances.”

“Excellent. Although I know that Monsieur Garnier’s death has been quite a blow to the observatory. I heard that you and Monsieur Renaud actually discovered him. I must say, I admire your nerves. The specter of death hits most women quite hard.”

“I would not say that my nerves are all that strong,” Haidée replied. “I am an actress. I can hide weak nerves rather well, I think.” Except from Jacot Renaud, she thought privately. Briefly, she wondered if he had left with Everard because he didn’t want anything else to do with her after her pathetic breakdown the previous day.

“It’s all a sudden and a shock about Garnier,” said Davenport, pulling her back to the conversation at hand. “What exactly had he been doing yesterday? No one seemed to have noticed that he was missing from the observatory.”

“Monsieur Garnier had been working in his laboratory the last few days,” said Haidée. “At least that was my impression. He wasn’t entirely himself, though.” She frowned in thought. “He kept saying that something was watching him. I think the deaths of the other astronomers frightened him.”

“Well, all the recent deaths frighten me,” exclaimed DeLorme. “But I’m afraid we must

forge onward. Do you think there will be a request for new astronomers, Monsieur Davenport?”

The observatory librarian looked thoughtful. “I think there will actually be a glut of astronomers wanting to obtain a position here on Mont Saint Filan. It’s not every day that an intellectual is allowed to have his own space and isolation and have autonomous control of his own research. Why, I know some who are particularly eager to get a place here...”

Haidée half listened to Davenport and DeLorme discuss the possible new residents of the observatory. Instead, she thought of where she herself would be going. When the next full moon came again and the tide went out, where would she go? She could only see herself going back to Paris, back to the grind of the theatre. But the same old routine left her cold—she wanted something different. Renaud had mentioned Vienna. That would be different. Perhaps she should quit the theatre and go traveling. Whether Renaud was going where she was going would be irrelevant.

“Oh my, look at the time.” DeLorme was looking at his pocket watch. He stood up and shrugged into his black coat. “I have a meeting with the carpenter down at the village about the coffin for poor Monsieur Garnier. I’m afraid I will have to take my leave.”

Davenport and Haidée said their farewells and soon, she was alone with the observatory librarian. Davenport gave a wary sigh and sipped his tea. His brows were furrowed in thought.

“It was quite obvious to me that Monsieur Garnier was killed,” she said.

The observatory librarian put down his cup. “I did not see the body. There were markings on him as well?”

“Yes.” Haidée paused for a moment, looking into the flames of the library hearth. “How well do you know the inhabitants of Mont Saint Filan?”

“I know everyone on the island,” said Davenport. “I know the parentage of most of them as well as what sort of education everyone has had as well as their general personalities and some of their personal affairs.”

She nodded. “Good. I need you to help me make a list. I need to know who else on this island, besides the astronomers, who have had training in certain natural arts.”

The observatory librarian gave her a hard look. “I think I see where you’re going.”

October 29, 1796
Part XLIV

The list contained a discrete number of names. Davenport had supplied her with the necessary background information on each of the persons listed. The list should have

helped. But if anything, it made her more frustrated and confused. There was no one on the list that she hadn't thought of before. And from what the observatory librarian told her, there wasn't anything that she haven't been told before or haven't considered.

After musing over the list with Davenport and discussing possible motives, the observatory librarian had suggested that she go out for a walk to clear her head. It was like that in science, he had told her. If one of the astronomers had a block in his thinking, he would distance himself from the laboratory for a couple of hours.

"Ideas and insights can't be forced," Davenport had told her. "It's a nice day out today. Go walk about the island, or even just the vegetable garden that Madame Boulanger and Colette keep just outside the kitchen. A change of pace might trigger your mind to make a connection that you haven't before."

So with the list in hand, she left the library and went back up towards her room to get her coat and bonnet. Perhaps she should also get a drink to fortify herself, she thought. But when she stopped in front of her door, she smiled wryly to herself as she remembered. Renaud had thrown out all her bottles. She would just have to do without any sort of fortification.

The marten's nose twitched as it followed Haidée up the stairs to the second floor bedrooms. It scented something very, very wrong. It squeaked and began pawing at her bedroom door in a frenzy.

"Now what?" she said, glancing at the small animal at her foot. "There's no food in my room." She suddenly laughed. "There's no tonic either if that's what you're looking for."

Haidée opened the door and stepped through the threshold. Her foot caught on something. A brown envelope skidded across the floor and stopped just short of the rug next to the bed. The marten raced towards the envelope, making a ruckus. Its body quivered with excitement, but it made no move to touch it.

"What's this?" She went over and picked the envelope up. She flipped it over and found no markings on the outside. "Curious." She slipped a finger under the flap and pulled out a folded card. She opened it and felt her face pale.

She stuffed the card back into the envelope and stormed out, forgetting her coat and bonnet, even forgetting to close the door to her room. By the time she got back out to the hallway near the foyer to the observatory's front door, she saw Davenport adjusting his hat before heading out.

"Monsieur Davenport. I must speak with you."

"Ah, Mademoiselle Avenall. Was there something..." the observatory librarian's voice trailed off when he got a good look at her face. "My God. What happened?"

"This happened."

She handed him the envelope. He looked at the card and frowned. "It's a symbol of some sort. It looks sort of like a flower to me. I don't see why this has you so upset."

"You don't understand, Monsieur Davenport," she said urgently. "It's a sign all right. It's a mark. It was the same kind of mark I saw on the wall on the border of the farm next to the observatory's property. It was where Monsieur D'Aubigne's body was found. And not far from where I found Monsieur Garnier's body."

"It's the sacrificial sign you told me about a moment earlier," Davenport said, aghast. But instead of stuffing the card back into the envelope in horror as had been Haidée's initial reaction, he stared at the sign in morbid fascination. "This thing can kill?"

"No, that thing can't exactly kill," she admitted. "It's not quite the same as the one at the wall. An element is missing—several of the outer strokes have not been written in—so the sign can't be activated. I think this is a warning to me, to stay out of this investigation."

"But why would whoever responsible want you out of the investigation? Everyone else thinks that you're just an actress on vacation."

"But you know what I'm doing."

"I was in the library the entire time," he protested.

She shook her head. "I know. I don't think you could have planted it in my room."

"It could have been any number of people," Davenport pointed out. But his eyes kept straying to the symbol. "You know, now that I think about it, this looks sort of familiar."

"Familiar? You've seen it elsewhere before?"

"No, I haven't seen this symbol before. I don't know anything about sorcery so why should I know anything about marks. No, it's the style. There's something about the way this symbol is written that is eating away at my memory." He gave her the card without putting it back into the envelope. "I'm pretty sure I recognize the handwriting, but I can't remember who it was."

"You will tell me as soon as you remember?" she said.

Before the librarian could reply, the front door opened, revealing Everard and Renaud. The head astronomer was bent over as if a heavy burden weighed down his shoulders. He looked exhausted. Haidée froze as her eye met Renaud's gaze. He seemed somewhat impassive at her appearance.

"I see you're up," Renaud said neutrally.

“I’ve been awake for a while,” she said tentatively.

“Are you feeling well?”

“As well as I can be.”

“Mademoiselle, I’ll be at home looking over my correspondence,” Davenport cut in. “Come by tomorrow and we’ll discuss the handwriting. I’m sure I’ll have the answer then. Good day, Monsieur Everard. Monsieur Renaud.”

The men nodded to the observatory librarian as he took his leave. The head astronomer gave a sigh as the door finally closed and mumbled, “It’s useless.” He raised his eyes to Haidée. “You do not look well, Mademoiselle.”

“I think that is to be expected,” she replied. “Now if you excuse me...”

The head astronomer suddenly interrupted, “What is that?” He was looking at the card in her hand. “That thing looks dangerous.”

“It looks dangerous, but it isn’t, unless you add a few lines,” she replied.

Renaud looked over her shoulder. She heard his quick indrawn breath when he realized what he was looking at. “That looks exactly like that sign on the wall.”

“It’s not quite exact,” she explained again. “Without some of the lines, it’s actually quite harmless. I found it in my room. Whoever had done this probably slipped it under the door. I think it’s a warning.”

Renaud’s expression darkened. “He knows about you,” he said lowly.

Everard looked puzzled. “I don’t get it. Why would someone want to target Mademoiselle Avenall. She is a woman, not an astronomer.”

“Killers don’t need to be reasonable,” Haidée pointed out. “But this is just proof that the murderer is indeed well versed in the dark arts if he can manipulate a sign so that it looks like a dangerous one but it doesn’t actually do anything. In fact, it was just a while ago that Monsieur Davenport and I were making a list of everyone on the island who might have the capability to do so. I thought the list was...” She paused when she noticed that the men were staring at each other. “What is it?”

The head astronomer’s voice shook. “Galliard. We have to get back.”

October 30, 1796
Part XLV

Haidée looked back at the two story building on the main street of the village facing the Cormorant. Renaud stood beside her, tucking the brim of his hat down so that it

shielded part of his face.

The sky was overcast. It drizzled.

The marten hid from the weather in her coat pocket.

“Galliard knows,” she said.

“Judging from what happened to him, he knows too much,” Renaud remarked.

The previous day, after Renaud and Everard had simultaneously come up with the conclusion that the magistrate was behind what was happening, they had rushed back to the village to confront him with the conclusions. Haidée had followed, not liking the fact that two ill-equipped men were going out to face a necromancer. Renaud could only wield secondhand spells. Everard, although head astronomer, was an academic and an old man. Galliard, on the other hand, was in his prime. And who knew what sort of tricks he had learned during his time at the Sorbonne.

But when they had barged into his first floor office in the building across from the Cormorant, they found the magistrate sprawled face up on his desk. A bit of blood trickled from his mouth. Their fellow vacationer and political upstart, Maurice Ducos was an inert lump on the floor nearby. Fortunately, the two men were still alive although both were unconscious.

Help came from the Cormorant. The innkeeper, although surly, had some of his men haul Galliard’s body to the second floor of that building where he was put to bed. Ducos was sent back to the inn where his friends could take care of them.

And while all of this scuffle went on, Haidée noticed something very significant. The murderer’s warning sign was carved on the desk.

The next day, Haidée and Renaud accompanied Everard to Galliard’s abode. Both Galliard and Ducos were still unconscious. With this evidence, she began to suspect that some sort of sleeping spell was placed on the two men—to prevent them from saying anything about who attacked them. She was sure that if she had access to their bodies, she could examine them for marks. But with Everard and others hovering over them, she did not think she would have any chance.

They had left Everard at Galliard’s house. The head astronomer had volunteered to look over the magistrate. Perhaps he was feeling guilt for suspecting the man who had looked up to him as an astronomy mentor.

Slowly, Haidée and Renaud made their way down the main street. The village was empty, deserted.

“What I don’t understand is why he would spare Galliard and Ducos. Wouldn’t it be more of a hassle to leave them unconscious? They could awake at any moment and tell

everyone who the murderer is,” said Renaud.

“Yes, that is a point,” she replied. “But I think there is one particular reason that you’re missing. All the previous victims were astronomers. They had some ability. Since Ducos was spared as well as Galliard, I think it is safe to say that both men do not have the ability. A necromancer needs power. If the victim is powerless, the victim is useless.”

“But still, he could have still killed them to keep them silent.”

“Using necromancy to kill has some drain on your own resources. It wouldn’t be worthwhile to use a spell to kill unless you were gaining more power back. Of course, the culprit could have just killed them the usual way—but I think leaving Ducos and Galliard alive speaks volumes.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our murderer despises messes. Poison would be too difficult. But the other ways, such as pistol or blade would be far more bloody. Have you noticed that other than the inked symbols, the victims’ bodies were unmarred? Even with the body we found in that secret room—it was perfectly preserved even with the severed foot.”

“All right. So the murderer is fastidiously clean. But that doesn’t really narrow it down to anybody. What about that list that you made with Davenport?”

“This doesn’t shorten that list either,” she replied. “And really, I’m not sure if it’s any useful or not. Davenport doesn’t know everyone’s secrets. I don’t see how he can since he lives alone with his cat. Or really, he could be lying.”

“You think Davenport could be behind all of this?”

“I think so,” she replied. “He was at the observatory when the note was delivered after all. He could have arrived earlier while I was eating breakfast or looking for you and slipped it under my door. He has the motive, even though on the surface he doesn’t betray any of his grievances. As you say, people can hide their natures with a pleasant mask.”

“I heard him tell you to visit him today.”

“Yes. Perhaps it’s a ruse,” she murmured.

“I’m coming with you then.”

She slanted him a look. “I’m not sure how much of a help you might be if he’s in a fighting mood. After all, both Ducos and Galliard were overcome. Those two men are not lightweights.”

“No, but they don’t know how to wield certain powers either,” he replied. “Even if I only

have the marks you gave me, that's more than nothing."

They arrived at the end of the village's main street. Davenport's house was a small cottage at the end, surrounded by a dead garden and a somewhat crooked wooden fence. The windows to his house were dark.

"Do you think he's in?" Haidée asked, frowning.

"I..." Renaud paused and cocked his head to the side. Haidée looked at him in question when she heard it, a faint rustling in the direction behind the house. "I'll go check that out," he said grimly.

"It's probably just Davenport's cat," she said. "He lets his pet go wherever it pleases."

"Maybe so," Renaud replied. "Stay right here."

She sighed as he disappeared around the house. This was ridiculous. She didn't want to stand around waiting. She walked closer to the house and peered in the window. She didn't see anything so she knocked.

The door creaked open.

She pushed it further and poked her head into the darkened room. "Hello?" she called out. She reached out with her senses and stepped through the threshold.

A plaintive mewl drew her eye to the floor of the front room. Davenport's white cat was crouched beside a body, nudging the man's hand with its nose in desperation. Without another thought, she rushed towards the body.

"Monsieur Davenport!"

He was lying face down, the back of his coat slashed neatly to reveal a bit of his skin. A glimpse told her that the killer had marked him as well.

"Davenport!"

She took hold of his shoulder to shake him, clinging to the hope that he was still alive, but a cold burning sensation met her fingertips and she yelped, stumbling back. Those marks on the observatory librarian's corpse were still very fresh. Traces of their power still lingered on the body.

Haidée stared at Davenport and edged back. Her mind raced. She stood. "Jacot," she whispered. "I have to get to Jacot."

She whirled around and rammed into a dark cloaked body. A deep chuckle made her skin turn ice cold.

“Ah, Mademoiselle, I'm afraid your lover is indisposed at the moment. I hope you appreciated my handiwork.”

“God.” She struggled, but her feet felt frozen.

He laughed again and drew out a pen dripping with ink. “God won't help you now.” She felt the cold tip of the pen on her nose and her world went dark.

The killer swept Haidée's limp body into his arms and carried her out the door. He did not notice a small fur ball drop out of her coat pocket.

October 30, 1796
Part XLVI

Haidée awoke, groaning. She tried to move, but she could only turn her head. Her cheek touched a smooth wooden surface. She opened her eyes and saw a fireplace at the end of the room. The hearth was lit. On top of the mantle was a half-burned candle and a tinderbox. A bit beyond that was an open window. She recognized the place—the attic laboratory that she had accidentally stumbled upon several days ago. Her eyes soon came to rest on herself. Or at least what she could see of herself. Her arm was spread outward. Her entire body was lying on a table. She tried to move again and discovered that her wrist was immobilized by black markings on her skin.

“Ah, Mademoiselle, I see that you are awake.”

She cringed at the voice, even though she hated herself for it. There were footsteps and then her captor was looking down at her with gleaming eyes, his white hair glinting in the light like an obscene halo. Her throat worked. She tried a sneer. He didn't dignify a title. “Let me go, DeLorme.”

The priest made a disapproving sound at the back of his throat. “So discourteous! Well, I suppose I would have to expect such a thing from an actress. But I'm afraid I can't let you go, Mademoiselle. You see, I've discovered that you're an essential part of my plan.”

She felt her blood pounding in her ears. “What sort of plan?”

“Do you think I would be so foolish as to tell you what my plans are for you?” he said in an admonishing tone. He stepped away from her and she could hear the rustle of papers and the scratch of a pen.

She did not think that he was writing letters to his parishioners.

Haidée desperately tried to think of a way to keep the conversation going and of a way to get herself out of the mess. “Actually,” she began, “You should tell me what your plans are. I'm curious. And it's not like I'm going to escape any time soon. You already have me where you want me.”

“That’s true.” His voice sounded like it came from the other side of the room. The pen scratched on paper for a few more moments before it stopped. More footsteps, but this time, it approached on her other side. She turned her head and saw the priest crouching besides the wood and glass contraption that she had noticed on her first foray into the attic laboratory. DeLorme unstopped the water clock and the water began dripping.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He turned his head slightly to look at her. “I’m starting the count down,” he replied. “It’s nearly midnight.”

“What happens at midnight?”

“My, you have so many questions.” The priest straightened up and grasped the edge of the table. He leaned down to look at her wrist and she fought a horrified shiver as he smiled. “Don’t you agree my handiwork was quite clever?”

“Well, you caught me, didn’t you?”

His smile widened and his teeth flashed. “I did, didn’t I? Well, I suppose there wouldn’t be much harm in telling you what I have in store for you since you’re not going away any time soon. And I don’t think anyone will be looking for you at the moment. And even if they are, they aren’t coming here.”

“Why not here?”

“I’m sure you’ve realized that this used to be Nicholas Bisset’s laboratory. When I dispatched of him, I decided to use this place as my own workroom. He wasn’t using it anymore, was he?”

“What do you do here?”

“I planned, my dear Mademoiselle. And soon, with your help, all my plans will come to fruition tonight.”

“I’m not going to help you.”

“Who said that you were going to help willingly?” He stepped away from the table and crossed his arms. “I’m sure you know what will happen at midnight. I will put you on your back and cut away at your coat. My pen will be ready.”

“Why do you want to leech me of my powers?” she said bluntly. “Why did you kill the other astronomers? Are you looking for eternal life? Eternal youth?”

He laughed. “I’m not looking for power for myself. Do I look so selfish to you? No, this is for the greater good.”

“The greater good?”

“Of course, in your position, you cannot see it, but on my desk is the heart of Louis the Seventeenth. To beat again, it requires a great amount of energy. Once it is infused with enough power, I will put it into a body—perhaps into one of the young boys in the village. And the royal line will live again.”

“You’re mad,” she whispered. “What does the dead Dauphin have anything to do with this? I heard that some physician named Pelletan took the heart and preserved it. You couldn’t possibly make a dead organ live again. It’s against nature.”

DeLorme’s amusement chilled her. “Do you believe all the rumors you hear, Mademoiselle? Certainly, Philippe-Jean Pelletan took the boy king’s heart. One of his students took it and brought it here to me. I’m going to make the monarchy live again. That’s how it should be.”

“But why?”

“When the monarchy comes into power again, the church in France will get back up on its legs.” His lips curled in derision. “The Revolution convinced the people to forget about God. When I was a boy, this place, that you called an observatory, had been a monastery, a true sanctuary for those who revered Him. Then the rabble had to tear down the throne because the masses thought that they were better fit to govern the country. They evicted the monks and turned this place into a godless research institute!”

“But I thought the monks had abandoned this place and that the church willingly turned it over to the state...”

DeLorme slammed a fist onto the table. The jolt made her gasp. “Enough,” he spat out. “I have no need to talk to a dead woman. I have things to prepare. In half an hour, you will feel the sting of my pen.”

October 31, 1796
Part XLVII

The continual drip of the water was getting on her nerves. DeLorme had gone back to writing. She couldn’t hold up her head to see exactly what he was doing. She didn’t even know if he had one eye still trained on her. So carefully, Haidée tested parts of her body, inching ever so slightly to test the boundaries of the immovability spell that he had placed on her.

The wrists and ankles were anchored to the table—she guessed that aside from the symbols on her wrist, he had drawn something on her boots. But she could wiggle her toes and her fingers. She could speak—considering her previous conversation with her captor—and she could turn her head, but she could not lift it. Her throat felt a slight strain every time she tried to do so.

She turned her head to look at the water clock. From her vantage point, she couldn't quite tell exactly how much water had dripped from the glass vial into the bucket. It felt like the incessant dripping was something DeLorme was using to torture her before he took her life away. She frowned as a thought began making its way to the forefront of her consciousness. Why was her neck immobilized yet she could still turn her head? She looked down at her pinned arm. She tried turning her right wrist.

The slick sting of energy scraped at her wrist, but she could rotate it. She bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out and alerting DeLorme to her efforts. She looked down at her wrist. Part of the ink on her skin was smudged. The spell wasn't completely unbreakable. Slowly, she began turning her wrist back and forth, rubbing her skin against the table, hoping that the marks would smear enough for her to break through the energy holding her down.

The pen continued to scratch. The water clock dripped.

The spell around her wrist frayed, snapped. She stopped moving and held her breath, hoping that DeLorme did not notice.

He didn't. Outside, a storm raged. She could hear the wind and rain and thunder.

She began working at her other wrist when there was a sudden thumping coming from the vicinity of the floor. The pen stopped and she heard the scrape of the chair.

"What was that?" DeLorme demanded.

Haidée didn't answer. She didn't think he wanted her answer. She stopped twisting her wrist when she heard his footsteps. He did not head straight towards her, instead, he went to the water clock to examine how much water had dripped into the bucket. He was smiling.

"No matter, it was probably the wind," he said. He stared down at the clock. "It's almost time. Do you know that today is the new moon, Mademoiselle?"

"I don't pay attention to such things," she replied.

DeLorme rubbed his chin in thought. "Certain powers are at their height during such times. You will be the final donor—with your energy, I'll have enough power to resurrect the Dauphin's heart."

"You're trafficking with black magic and necromancy."

"It isn't black if you do things with a pure heart."

"You killed people, DeLorme. A murderer doesn't have a pure heart no matter how much he tries to justify his actions. Killing someone is wrong."

The priest raised a hand and slapped her, hard. The left side of her face felt numb, but she did not cry out. She simply stared back at him in disgust.

“No matter what you say, the only heart you have is that of a shriveled organ from a dead child.”

DeLorme’s eyes glittered with unsuppressed rage. “Shut your mouth, witch. Everything you say is a lie.”

The thump on the floor was heard again. And then there was a crash. There was a sound of a creature squeaking and then a familiar voice saying, “DeLorme, stand aside.”

Her heart jumped as the priest turned his body towards the intruder. She saw his hand going into the pocket of his coat. With his back turned, Haidée quickly reached up with her free hand and rubbed the marks on her throat, coming away with black ink on her fingers.

DeLorme was chuckling. “Ah, Monsieur Renaud, how nice of you to join us in our little love nest. I’m afraid you caught us...”

“Jacot, watch out!” she cried.

“Haidée!”

The priest flicked his hand out revealing a scrap of paper with a deadly sign on it. She struggled up to a sitting position just as he flung out his fingers, sending the scrap flying through the air. Haidée rolled across the table and sent her legs kicking. She glimpsed Renaud flinging himself over to one side and barely missing the path of the spelled projectile before she crashed down on top of DeLorme.

“You damned witch!” the priest cursed. With surprising strength, he shoved her off him and kicked her in the stomach before strolling towards his desk.

Haidée shrieked in pain. Her eyes narrowed as she automatically curled up in a protective ball. Barely, she registered the fact that DeLorme had picked up his inked pen and was facing Renaud who had one of her second hand spells in his fingers. There was a faint chirp in her ear.

She turned her head a little to find herself face to face with the marten. “What are you doing here?”

The marten chirped again and raced away.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she muttered to herself. She struggled to sit up on the floor while still clutching her middle. She wanted to help, but she could see no way of making any symbols unless she got a hold of DeLorme’s pen. Then she eyed the water clock and the bucket. She reached out to dip her fingers in the water.

For a split second, DeLorme was distracted by her movement. Renaud took his chance and threw his spell at the priest. DeLorme ducked, laughing.

“Oh, boy, that was your mistake.” The priest was now crouched on the floor, drawing a symbol with a flick of his wrist, he raised a hand and a great cold wind suddenly blew up and slammed Renaud against the wall.

Renaud groaned and slid to the ground.

The priest then turned to Haidée with his pen poised, just as her wet finger touched the ground. Glee glinted in his gaze. “You’re not going to outwit me, Mademoiselle,” he said in a mocking tone. “Your spells will dissipate when the water dries. With ink, mine are of a more permanent nature.”

“It won’t be that permanent if it smears,” she replied.

Renaud opened his eyes. His hand slowly crept to his pocket although he still winced in pain. “DeLorme, you’re going to pay for hurting her.”

“But Monsieur Renaud, please save yourself the trouble. Don’t succumb to the charms of a witch.”

“She’s not a witch.”

Glass shattered. And the stink of alcohol began to fill the room.

In reaction, the three people in the attic laboratory turned their heads towards the noise. A large glass jar had fallen off the desk. What was left of it was shards surrounded a small black thing that looked like a lump of coal. Liquid seeped outward.

The marten sat on the desk, chattering madly at its cunning.

“No!” DeLorme shouted. “The heart!”

Haidée finished drawing a symbol on the floor with the water. She flicked her wrists towards the priest.

But DeLorme’s reaction was faster. He drew up the energy from the mark he had drawn on the floor earlier and raised up his arm to shield himself from her blow. Then he made a slashing motion with his fingers and Haidée found herself rammed against the wall, her breath knocked out of her.

Furious at the man’s treatment of its mistress, the marten leaped from the desk and sank its jaws into DeLorme’s arm.

“Devil!” he swore. He wrenched the creature off and flung the marten away. In the next

second, he scooped up the dead Dauphin's heart and lurched towards the fireplace. His fingers wrapped around the tinderbox.

Haidée was still trying to recover from the blow, but Renaud had managed to get up on his knees. She noticed that his spectacles were a few feet away, crushed, but then he didn't need them anyway.

"DeLorme, stop."

"Oh no, boy, I know when to retreat." The priest turned to give them both a derisive smile. "Perhaps my plans were ruined today. But that doesn't mean I can't try again." He opened the tinder box and retrieved a glinting metal object that looked like a key.

Haidée recognized it as something similar that the marten had found on her first foray up in the attic laboratory. She had pondered it while she had been translating the spelled telescope card. And now, her thoughts clicked together. She sucked in a breath. "He can't..."

DeLorme strolled towards one of the windows and flung it open. Wind and rain gusted in, sending the priest's coat flapping. His white hair wavered in the incoming gale like a flickering white flame. He pinned Haidée with a chilling grin. "You got lucky tonight, Mademoiselle."

He stepped onto the window ledge and jumped.

Renaud finally got up to his feet and rushed towards the window. He looked out. "My God. What is he doing?"

There was a squeak nearby and Haidée looked down and saw the marten on its haunches beside her. She lifted a hand and let the small creature climb up to her shoulder. She groaned as she finally got up and hobbled to Renaud. She looked out into the wet night.

She could barely make out a dark figure in the air. DeLorme drifted through the air with one arm upraised to reveal the glinting pseudokey—a mark for flight.

"He's flying," Haidée said, half in wonder and half in horror. "I can't believe he's applying that mark to himself. That's against all natural law. He must be using dark magic to make it happen."

"Well, that isn't..." Renaud's voice was suddenly drowned out as lightning was thrown from the sky.

For a split second, they saw DeLorme illuminated in a brilliant white light that burned their eyes. Then, there was deafening thunder and then the odor of charred flesh permeated the dark air.

November 1, 1796
Part XLVIII

Laughter and voices erupted from the depths of The Cormorant's tavern. It was a crowded event. The main room of the inn was crammed with villagers and vacationers alike as they celebrated the recovery of one of the vacationers, Maurice Ducos, and Mont Saint Filan's magistrate, Merle Galliard.

Haidée sat at a small table next to a window facing the main street of the village. A solitary white candle and a basket of bread rolls decorated the bare wooden table. The marten was lodged happily among the rolls with only its tail sticking out of the basket. She put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. She looked out the window and noticed a few snowflakes drifting down from the sky.

"Well, I managed to wrestle a hot chocolate from Monsieur Fasset."

She turned to see Renaud standing by her table with two mugs in his hands. She still wasn't quite used to seeing him without his spectacles. Without them as a shield, his eyes seemed more intense and expressive. At the moment, he simply appeared amused. The corners of his mouth were turned up as he watched her.

"That sounds like quite a feat," she replied. "The innkeeper seems extremely busy with the crowd this afternoon."

"The man was scowling at me, if you can believe that," said Renaud as he placed the mug of hot chocolate in front of her and then took the seat across from her. "Fasset should be as happy as a pig in a mud puddle if you ask me. With all these patrons, his profits are going to be soaring."

Haidée held the mug in her hands and felt the warmth seep into her fingers. Tentatively, she sipped the hot sweet liquid. Delicious and oh so different from the poppy wine. Perhaps this was a new thing she could get addicted to. "Not everyone cares only for their profits."

"No." Renaud took a sip of his own drink. "Some people have other obsessions other than money."

"What are you drinking?" she asked.

"Hot cider."

"I've never tried The Cormorant's cider." Her lips almost imperceptibly tightened. "Monsieur Davenport once recommended the Green Café's cider, but it was terrible."

"Everyone has bad taste in something." He put down his mug and looked over at the crowd in the inn. "They all look happy."

Haidée looked as well and felt a little like an outsider. Except she didn't feel that she was alone. "They're glad that Messieurs Ducos and Galliard have awoken from their comas. The village doctor says he doesn't know exactly what had exactly awakened them, but he said something about not questioning the mysterious workings of nature."

"Perhaps he instinctively knows that if he were to question, the answers he would get back wouldn't be exactly pretty." Renaud turned to look at her. "He probably suspects though since we did go get him to examine Father DeLorme's body."

Haidée remembered a charred lump on the wet grass when she and Renaud had raced outside to see what had happened to the priest. A second later, she forcibly pushed the gruesome scene out of her head. "Probably."

"Everard tells me that the next full moon is in two weeks. The tide will be out. We can go back to the mainland."

"I'm glad. The director of the theatre I work at told me that a friend of his enjoyed vacationing on Mont Saint Filan. This place only disturbs me—even with DeLorme gone."

"I understand." He reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. "I'll be heading straight to Paris to report to my superiors."

She stared at their intertwining fingers. "I'll be going to Paris as well. The theatre I work at is there. I'm going to talk with the director. I've decided to quit. Maybe I'll continue my career elsewhere. Paris is getting too stifling."

"Elsewhere?"

She turned her gaze to his face. "I was thinking about Vienna," she said lightly. "I think it will be a challenge."

"Were you thinking of following me?"

She shook her head. "I'm going where I want to go."

He raised their joined hands to his mouth. When his lips brushed the back of her hand, her skin tingled. He smiled. "Then I'll make it worth your while."

THE END