A Little Death in Paris
by MindfulWrath

Summary

What started as a holiday quickly goes awry when a gruesome murder is committed under the noses of Detective Free and his partner, Mr Gruchy. They're well acquainted with the methods and motives of murder; but there are more things in Heaven and Earth, after all, than are dreamt of in their philosophy.

Notes

An immense thank you to Noh, Mer, and @achievementblunder for helping me not sound like a total idiot when writing French <3
Miles was a tall, round-shouldered man, with a full-moon face and a frizz of brown hair. His beard was neatly trimmed, and his suit almost fit him. He greeted Dan and Gav with a manic grin and a sweep of the hand as they ducked in the theatre door.

"My dearest friends!" he effused, while Dan shook the freezing rain from his umbrella and Gav doffed his hat. "I'm so so glad you could make it, what horrific weather, I bet it's been a real damper on the vacation!"

"Nearly over anyways, innit," said Gav, fixing his hair in the window.

"We've mainly been staying in," said Dan. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it up, then offered a hand to Miles in greeting.

Miles clasped it with both of his own and rattled it like he was trying to get money out of it. His skin was feverish after the chill outside. He went to shake Gav's hand and was summarily ignored, so instead he clapped and rubbed his palms together.

"Eh-henyway," he said, that manic grin frozen on his face,"hey, I'm so glad you decided to spend your last night of vacation with me. Just—pleased as punch, fellas!"

"Not as though we've got anything better to do, is it," said Gav, twisting his rain-wet forelock just so.

"Don't be rude, B," Dan said aside.

"When in Rome, B."

"It's Paris, actually."

"No, is it?" he said, finally looking away from the window to wrinkle his nose at Dan.

"Lose your own head next."

"That's what I've got you for, innit."

"If your head popped off I wouldn't stick it back on, I'll tell you that. Just let you roll about on the floor, maybe kick you about a bit."

Gav cracked up and clasped his own face in both hands, hunching his shoulders and waving his leg at Dan.

"You keep off of my head!" he said.

"Nah, come here, give it over," said Dan, making a swipe for Gav's perfect hair.

"Uh, hahah, fellas?" Miles said, strained. "How about, uh, how about you come on back and meet everybody? Since we have a couple minutes?"

Gav cleared his throat and straightened his shirt. Dan tried to rub the smile off his own mouth.

"Right, yes, capital idea," said Gav. "Lead on."

"Great, great," said Miles, halfway to a simper. "Here, programs for the both of you, hahah, just to
"Where do we know him from again?" he whispered.

"Edinburgh," Gav said, meandering after Miles and flipping through the program that had been foisted into his hand. "The poisoned parlourmaid. He was one of the guests, and he was absolutely bloody useless."

"Oh, bollocking hell, that Miles?"

"That Miles. Thought the pretentious authorship bit would've tipped you off."

"I think I blocked it out of my head. Wish you'd told me sooner."

"You never asked, I thought you remembered."

"It was—what, six years back?"

"Five."

"Five, 'course I don't bloody remember."

"He obviously remembered us, otherwise we wouldn't've been invited, would we."

"We didn't have to come."

"Nah, it'll be good for a laugh."

"Are you having a laugh?"

"Not yet. Reckon I might be, in a minute."

"So!" Miles said, holding the door into the house for them. "This is our little playhouse, ahaaha, it's not much, but it's home."

The Théâtre des Variétés had, at one time, been splendid. The seats were plush with moth-eaten velvet. Tarnished brass railings lined the balconies, and woodworm had gotten into all the beams and banisters. A smoke-gray chandelier hung from the ceiling, dribbling so many stalactites of wax that it seemed the whole thing was melting. There was a smell of mildew and lamp oil, a haze of sawdust in the air. The curtain was open and the working lights raised, revealing a minimalistic set and a scuffed black stage. There were muffled voices and hurried footsteps, the creak and clank of things moving about on rusty winches.

"Blimey," said Dan, gazing around open-mouthed. "Bet this place was fantastic, in its day."

"Oh, and it will be again, just you wait!" Miles said, wagging a finger. "Soon we're going to be rolling in it, fellas, and tonight you're being treated to a special sneak-preview of our ticket to the big time! Come back in a couple years, you'll see, you'll see."

From backstage, there was a deafening crash, followed immediately by a leonine shout.

"Christophe, espèce de fils de pute dégénéré, maudit branleur de merde!"

"Ah, and there's the first of our jolly little crew!" Miles said, unflapped. "Bones! Oh, Bonesy! We
have company, come out and say hello!"

"Casse-toi!"

"He's very charming, you'll love him," Miles said over his shoulder. He strode down the aisle and jogged up the stairs onto the stage, beckoning for Dan and Gav to follow. The two of them shared a glance.

"Absolute madman," said Dan.

"Bloody mental."

"All these creative types are though, aren't they?"

"Let's go and see." With a wink, Gav hurried after Miles.

If the house was dilapidated, the backstage was an absolute wreck. Beams and ropes and black curtains turned it into a maze. The smell of sawdust was overpowering, the bustle and shout amplified. A dark-haired woman in crinoline skirts hurried past, and Miles snagged her by the waist and spun her round. She shrieked and shoved him off.

"You disgusting oaf, how many times must I tell you?" she spat, each French syllable dripping with venom. "Keep your filthy hands off me."

"Yes yes, I see we're playing hard-to-get as always," said Miles, laughing. "Blake, these are my friends I told you about! Detective Free and Mr Gruchy?"

The woman planted a hand on her hip and tossed her hair. She looked the both of them over with a disdain that made Dan's leg hair crimp.

"A pleasure. Now if you will excuse me, we have a show to put on."

"Bella, come on," Miles wheedled. "They're famous! I told you how famous they are, didn't I? We have to be hospitable to our guests!"

"I have to do no such thing for friends of yours," she said. Without another sound, she flounced off into the backstage tangle, her heels thudding on the wooden floor.

"She's a charmer," Miles sighed. "Now, I know Bones is back here somewhere, we just need to find him. He's a slippery bastard, hahah, I'll give him that! Bonesy! Oh, Bonesy!"

A stooped, dour old man materialized at Miles' elbow.

"What?" he said.

"Aah!" Miles screamed, leaping a foot into the air. He came down laughing. "Ahah! Hah, hey, well there you are!"

"Right where I'm meant to be, yeah?" said Bones, slurring his English so badly it almost slid all the way back to French. He gave Dan and Gav a needling look. "These your little friends from Edinburgh?"

"They're not from Edinburgh, but I met them in Edinburgh, yes," said Miles, with the strained patience of a primary school teacher. "Detective Free and Mr—"

"The other one, yeah," said Bones. "I've read about 'em. Hopefully don't need the services, yeah?"
Heh heh.

"One would hope," Dan said, clipped.

"Heh heh," Bones said again. There was another loud crash and he whipped around like a terrier, snapping out in French: "Christophe, I'll have your head!"

"Sorry, Mr Brouillard," came the warbling reply.

"Bonesy's our stage manager," Miles said aside. "He's been with the theatre longer than any of us. Money's been tight, so we only have the one stagehand, and he's—well."

"He's what you call a little wanker," Bones said. "'Scuse me, I've got to go put right whatever it is he's fucked up. Enjoy the show, gents."

"Yep, thanks," said Gav.

"Ooh, let's see, where's everybody else," Miles said, as Bones shamblled off. "Chad and Torrian are probably back in the dressing rooms—maybe the green room—we might have time to drop in on them. Elyse and Peake will be up front, I don't know if they're coming to watch tonight. Ooh, what time is it, we might be able. . . ."

Miles dug around in his pockets, muttering to himself. For the sake of moving things along, Dan checked his own pocket watch.

"Quarter to eight," he said.

"Oh, plenty of time, plenty," Miles said, coming up with that manic smile again. "Our very very dear benefactor should be here soon, I certainly have to introduce you to him before the show, but—let's go and see if we can catch Chad and Torrian, they're our leading men, wonderful fellas, great to work with. Wrote the parts for them, you know? Gosh, I just—I love those guys, sincerely. C'mon, c'mon, let's go and see."

Miles started off into the backstage area like a jungle explorer, leaving Gav and Dan to pick their way through after him.

"Halfway feel I ought to have a machete or something," Dan remarked, ducking under a dangling mass of ropes.

"I somehow feel that'd go poorly," said Gav.

"D'you think any of these go up to the chandelier out there?"

"I'm sure they go to something or other, and none of it I'd like falling on my head."

"We have one little, ah, effect that happens in the second act, but most of it isn't attached to anything right now," Miles mentioned. He tugged on a stray rope and something clattered up above. He shrieked and leapt out of the way, but nothing came down. "Ahah! Hah. Well. Still. Good idea not to meddle."

Before they could wade farther into the mess and bustle, they were intercepted by another pair, a man and a woman. She was dressed in similar fashion to Blake, while he wore a simple suit, sans jacket and with the sleeves rolled up.

"Luna, this is the last straw," the woman said, stalking up to him with a threatening finger extended.
"Mademoiselle Jenzen, our esteemed leading lady!" Miles said, spreading his hands and grinning that manic grin as though nothing was amiss. "And of course, our brilliant director, Monsieur Marquis."

"Don't play this off, Miles," Marquis said. "And don't think your having guests will get you out of trouble. You've been warned."

"Ah, Blake's overreacting," said Miles, flapping a hand. "It was nothing! Fellas, wasn't it nothing? Just a friendly little squeeze, that's all!"

"Er," said Dan, going sticky all over.

"Well," said Gav, stuffing his hands in his pockets and looking somewhere else.

"Blake said you put your hands on her, and that's all that matters," Ms Jenzen said.

"I will not have you harassing my actors, sir, I will throw you—"

"Out on the street, with nothing but the shirt on my back, yeah yeah yeah, I've heard it, I've heard it," Miles interrupted. "Listen, Marquis, she's overreacting! It was nothing. C'mon, it's almost opening night, Dubois'll be here any minute now, let's just—take it easy! Tomorrow the cash'll start rolling in, and then all of this will seem just . . . so silly, hahah. Karine's taking this all way too seriously."

"Do not call me by my Christian name, you filthy little—" Ms Jenzen began, fire on her breath. Marquis caught her by the elbow.

"Not in front of the guests, cherie," he said quietly. "He can be dealt with later."

Ms Jenzen exhaled a cloud of steam, then shook her finger at Miles again.

"We aren't done," she said.

"Hey, love you too, sweetheart," said Miles, taking her hand. Ms Jenzen dealt him such a resounding slap across the face that it made Dan wince.

"Do not ever touch me," she hissed.

"Luna, go and put your guests away, please," Marquis sighed. He kept his hand on Ms Jenzen's arm, although his grip was gentle.

"Jeez, all right," said Miles, rubbing his face and pouting. "C'mon Gav, Dan, let's go put you two back in the audience."

"Er, pleasure to meet you both," Dan said to Marquis and Ms Jenzen, forcing a smile.

"Lovely dress," Gav added.

Miles brought them back to the house, chattering on about the play with the enthusiasm of a proud parent, while Gav had gone quiet.

"What's wrong?" Dan whispered. Miles hopped down off the stage, expounding about themes.

Gav just shook his head, scowling. Dan let it go. His attention was promptly caught by the sight of the front-of-house doors opening and another figure entering.

"Ah-hah, et voilà!" Miles said. He continued on in French, striding up the aisle to meet the figure halfway. "And this here is our very good friend and benefactor, Mr Casimir Dubois! Mr Dubois,
Misters Free and Gruchy, the ones I told you about?"

Dan tugged Gav along by his elbow until he picked up the motion and came along. Dubois did not offer his hand to shake, although he did give a courteous nod and a smile.

"A pleasure," he said. His voice was soft and hoarse, as though he was recovering from a cough. He had not taken off his gloves. His clothes, though well-tailored and high-quality, could not disguise his waifish figure. There was a consumptive pallor about him that, combined with the gloves and the voice, gave Dan a worrisome tickle at the back of his throat.

"Mr Dubois is single-handedly keeping our little theatre afloat just now, hahah," said Miles, rubbing his palms together. "A real Samaritan, a real lover of the arts!"

Miles leaned in and added, in English, "And he doesn't speak a word of English, the silly duck, so if you really have to say something awful to him, just don't do it in French and we won't go broke."

"Miles!" Bones called from the stage. "We're at five, you useless fucking shithead!"

"Oops, hahah, there's my call," said Miles, ingratiating. "You two enjoy the show, now! Et vous, aussi, Monsieur Dubois, hahah. Au revoir!"

Miles bustled off down the aisle, scrambled up onto the stage and ducked into the wings. Dan and Gav turned back to Dubois.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr Dubois," Gav said politely, in French.

"I assure you, the pleasure is all mine," said Dubois, with a warm smile. "I've heard a great deal about you, Mr Free. You have an impressive resume, to say the least."

"To say the least," said Gav, puffing up like a bluebird.

"I doubt we have the time to say much more, alas," said Dubois. He turned to Dan and added, "And you must be the infamous Mr Gruchy, whose contributions have proved invaluable in very nearly every case reported in the papers."

"They do use that wording an awful lot, don't they," said Dan. A warmth suffused his chest, despite the minimal level of recognition. He wondered if this was what Gav felt like every time, or if he'd gotten used to it.

"Almost exclusively," said Dubois, a twinkle in his eye. "It does lead one to wonder what the particular contributions were, and why they were considered unprintable."

"Everything, essentially," said Dan. "He does the detective business, and I do everything else."

"Oy," said Gav, pouting.

"It seems to work well for you, regardless," Dubois said. "And I am given to understand you are old friends of Mr Luna's?"

"Acquaintances, at best," said Gav.

"Ah, so his wild exaggerations were even wilder than anticipated," said Dubois.

"Oh, dear, what's he said about us?" Dan sighed.

"It is perhaps best not to repeat it, and simply assume it was all false," Dubois said.
"Please, do," said Dan, rolling his eyes. "We've been here five minutes and I'm already regretting it."

"It's been a good deal more interesting than the show's going to be," said Gav.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Mr Free," said Dubois. "It is quite the production."

"You've seen it?"

"Most of it," said Dubois. "I was treated to some advanced showings, a glimpse here or there at the script. Mr Luna certainly is talented, if perhaps . . . how shall I say . . . very comfortable in his box."

"That's an awfully diplomatic way of putting it," said Gav. "You'd think, being the money behind all this, that you could say whatever you wanted, as bluntly as you liked."

"You'd think," Dubois said dryly.

The front-of-house doors opened again, and another two people entered. Dubois turned and unleashed a brilliant smile. He extended a hand, and one of the pair—a woman—trotted right up and took it.

"Elyse," Dubois said warmly. He kissed her hand and she wriggled with delight. "I was so hoping you'd join us."

"I can't be absent if you are here," she said, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. She was American, and her French was clunky.

"No?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "I only came for you."

"Aw," said Elyse, turning her face away and batting the compliment out of the air.

"And good evening to you as well, Mr Peake," Dubois added, craning over her shoulder.

"Hi," he said, raising a hand. He immediately turned away again and started shuffling down one of the rows of seats.

"Eloquent as ever," said Dubois. "Still, I like his idea. Shall we?"

"Yes, let's go!" said Elyse. She took Dubois' arm and tugged him off. He tossed a helpless, but good-natured, look over his shoulder at Dan.

Up on stage, Marquis slipped out from the wings. The curtain wheezed closed behind him, and he, too, went up the aisle to the back of the theatre, a notepad in his hand.

"What d'you think? Front row centre?" Dan asked Gav.

"Ah, might as well," said Gav.

As they settled into the squeaky, creaky seats, the gas lamps dimmed; the bustle and mutter from backstage went quiet; a sense of taut expectation thrummed in the sawdust air. Rain pattered on the roof far above, rattling through drainpipes and dripping into mildew patches on the carpet.

The stage lights rose, and a voice boomed out.

"Acte Premier : La Petite Mort!"
The play was, to Dan's immense surprise, really rather engaging. It followed the story of a pair of criminals—played by Miles and, according to the program, Torrian—who kidnapped and ransomed the beautiful daughter of a wealthy dowager duchess (Ms Jenzen and Blake, respectively). Neither one of them, to Dan's astonishment, subsequently fell in love with the girl; rather, she promised them both a hefty chunk of her estate if only they would help her to murder her mother so that she could collect the inheritance. That was about when Dan started getting honestly interested in the story, rather than muttering heckles back and forth with Gav.

A plan was concocted, and tensions began to rise between the two criminals and their kidnapping victim. During a cutaway to the estate, the girl revealed to her mother that her plan was to turn the miscreants against each other—but in the very next scene, Miles and Torrian connived to murder the girl as well, as soon as one or the other of them had married her, so that they could collect the entire estate and live like kings.

"Or at the very least, like Dukes," Miles' character quipped.

"Technically only the one of us will be a Duke," said Torrian.

"I'd draw less scandal."

"And I'd make a better husband," Torrian leered.

"The hell you would. We'll draw straws."

"And Devil take the loser?"

"Better the Devil than the woman."

Torrian raised his glass and grinned a roguish grin.

"Better the Devil than any woman," he agreed.

Gav leaned over and spoke in Dan's ear as the two criminals drank to that toast.

"D'you know, I'm rather starting to like the cut of this fellow's gib," he said, so close and so quiet that his breath raised gooseflesh on Dan's neck. Dan's only response was to reach over and squeeze Gav's knee with a cheeky wink.

Towards the end of the act, Chad finally made his appearance. In his personage was the fiancée of the young lady, a noble and honourable man who, upon hearing of the kidnapping and all that had come after, swore that he would put a stop to the whole dreadful business before anyone got killed, and thereafter live happily ever after with his bride-to-be.

"Oh, bloody hell, here we go," Dan muttered to Gav, rolling his eyes.

"Bound to happen sooner or later," Gav muttered back.

"But it was going so well."

Gav just shrugged, so Dan slouched down in his seat and turned his attention back to the play.

The first act concluded with a confrontation between the criminals and the fiancée. What started as a
civil disagreement quickly escalated to argument, and then fisticuffs. Just when it seemed Chad would be overwhelmed, he pulled out a gun and shot Miles through the chest.

Dan jumped so violently he wrenched his back. His ears rang. The muzzle flash burned in his eyes. Miles staggered back, clutching his chest while blood soaked through his costume, mouth gaping, eyes wide. Dan's hands clenched on the arms of his chair. He took slow, deep breaths through his nose. When Miles fell flat on his back, Dan watched him, watched every minuscule swell of his chest and belly as he breathed.

Chad fled the scene, and Torrian looked on in stunned horror, and the curtain fell. Peake and Elyse and Dubois all applauded from the back of the theatre. Gav reached over and touched Dan's taut, trembling arm.

"Dan," he said, and that was all.

"Yeah," said Dan, prying his hand off the armrest and wiping his forehead. "Yeah, I'll be right in a moment."

"You're sure?"

"Bit of warning might've been nice, but you can't have everything," said Dan.

"It was a blank," Gav reassured him. "Front of the gun was completely blocked. Couldn't've fired if it'd wanted to."

Dan let out a slow breath and nodded. He forced a smile. Marquis walked past them, up the stairs to the stage, and ducked behind the curtain. His notepad was now covered in scribbles.

"Shall we go out and mingle?" Dan said.

"If you'd like," said Gav.

"I'll like it better than staying in here."

"Fair play."

Together, they meandered up to the front-of-house, where Elyse was chattering at a somber-looking Peake. She caught sight of Gav and Dan and broke off immediately, beelining for them.

"Howdy, y'all," she said, sticking out a hand. "Miles told me all about y'all, great to meetcha! I'm Elyse, that's the only name I go by, don't ask for any others, y'hear?"

"Er, sure," said Dan. He shook her hand, and she grinned at him. "I'm—Dan. I s'pose."

"Funny name," she said, then pivoted to shake Gav's hand as well. "And you're the Golden Boy hisself! Wow-gee, you're shorter'n I thought!"

"I always stand on my toes in photographs," Gav said dryly.

"Hah!" Elyse crowed. "Boy, I like you! Y'all likin' the show? Keepin' up with all that plot and shit? 'Cuz boy, I tell you what, I wouldn't know what the hell was goin' on if I hadn'ta had it explained to me, hoo-ee. Even worse in French, ain't it."

"It's certainly different, I'll give it that," Dan remarked. "Some interesting undertones."

"Oh, yeah, sure," said Elyse, nodding emphatically. "Miles is fulla crap, of course, but he sure can
write. Sometimes. Good at all the talkin', anyhow."

"The first act hasn't quite gone how I'd expected," Gav said. "He seems the sort to keep himself in the forefront throughout, doesn't he."

"He sure 'nuff is," she said. Leaning in conspiratorially, she continued, "But Cassie has both hands on the purse strings, and so when he says y'all better switch up who plays who, the who's get good and switched, heh."


"Naw naw naw, we're just real good friends," she said, patting his arm. "For the time bein', y'know. He'd be a real catch for an ole widow like me, but I'm still workin' on bringin' him around to that point of view."

"Is he about?" Gav asked.

"Prob'ly somewhere," said Elyse. "He'll come on back 'fore the next act starts."

"Ah well," said Gav. "We'll catch him up afterwards."

"So, Mrs—er, Elyse," Dan said. "You . . . know Mr Peake, I'm guessing?"

"Yeah yeah, 'course," she said. "He was pals with my husband, back in Nevada. And now I'm handlin' all the finances and everythin' for this ole theatre of his, so's he don't have to worry his li'l head about it."


"How'd you end up in Paris, then?" Gav asked. "Seems a long way to come for a theatre."

"Yep!" Elyse said brightly.

She grinned at them both. Dan cleared his throat.

"Er," said Gav.

"How 'bout y'all? On a case, or what?" Elyse asked, looking between the two of them.

"Not at the moment," said Dan.

"We've been on holiday," said Gav. "After this, it's back to London to see what's waiting for us."

"We didn't leave a forwarding address," Dan said, with just a dash of mischief.

"Wait, so . . . y'all just ran off to Paris together?" Elyse said, frowning. "Just the two of y'all? Ain't that a li'l odd for a boss and his employee to do?"

"I'm not his employee," Dan said, at the same moment as Gav said, "I'm not his boss."

There was a brief, awkward pause. The two of them looked at each other. Gav scratched his nose. Dan made a constrained gesture.

"We're partners," Gav said.

Elyse's eyes narrowed, and Dan said, "I s'pose much in the way of you and Mr Peake."
"Awright, awright, yeah, now I see where y'all're comin' from," she said, relieved. She chucked Dan on the shoulder, rather hard. "Bet you get just as sick of him, too, huh."

"Can't stand him," Dan forced himself to say.

"Where has Mr Peake gone off to?" Gav said, making a great show of looking around. "Could've sworn he was here a moment ago."

Elyse looked back over her shoulder. "Huh? Oh. Prob'ly went up to his office, he ain't fond of chit-chat."

"You don't say," said Dan.

"Yep! But that's all fine, y'all still got me!"

" Seems that way," said Gav. Something caught his attention and his face lit up. "Ah, but—it's Mr Crawford, isn't it?"

Elyse whipped around again. Indeed, Torrian had just come through the doors, still in costume and busying himself with something in his pocket. At the sound of his name, he looked up, then raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey," he said. Offstage, he was a Yankee. "You must be uh . . . the uh . . . G—wait, no, don't tell me, ahhhh. . . ."

"Miles' detective friends?" Elyse hinted.

"I wouldn't say friends," Dan and Gav said simultaneously.

Torrian frowned. "No?" he said. "Too bad. He's a funny guy."

"Hell yeah he is," said Elyse. She clapped Torrian on the shoulder and wiggled him. "Y'all drive poor Aaron up the gosh-dang wall, dontcha."

"Marquis' always up the wall, that's just directors," said Torrian. Belatedly, he stuck out a hand to Gav. "Torrian Crawford, by the way."

"Gavin Free," said Gav, shaking his hand. "But I s'pose you knew that."

"Yeah, of course I knew it," Torrian said with a smirk. He shook Dan's hand, as well, and Dan introduced himself in much the same manner.

"Where's ole Chaddeus?" Elyse asked, still leaning on Torrian. "Y'all pop the stitches on y'all's hips, or what?"

"Same place he always is," said Torrian, wrinkling his nose. "I was gonna go out and have a smoke, while we have the time. You two're invited, if you want."

"Neither of us smoke, but thank you," said Dan.

Torrian shrugged. "O. K.," he said. "Well, enjoy the rest of the show, I guess."

"Yep, cheers," said Gav.
Torrian nodded to the two of them, then shuffled out into the cold and rainy night. Before the door was even closed, Elyse was already chattering again.

"So y'all're up in London-town, huh?" she said. "I been there, once, hoo-ee, what a place! I ain't never seen nothin' like it! 'Til I got here to ole Pair-ee of course, but what's that to do with anythin'. Y'all like it? Y'all have fun?"

"It's home," Dan said diplomatically.

"Cold and wet, Jolly Old England," said Gav.

"Bless her soul, hate her guts."

"Slogging through the muck builds character."

"Upper lip's never stiffer than when it's frozen solid, innit."

"You wouldn't know, with that bloody caterpillar on your face."

"Oy," said Dan, smoothing his moustache with one finger. "I like my moustache, thank you."

"And it must like you, otherwise it'd've got up and migrated to warmer climes."

"You're horrendous, how dare you," Dan said, laughing. "That's my moustache, don't disparage my moustache. I've worked very hard on it, haven't I."

"Yeah, 'course you have, 'cos now it just looks like a caterpillar instead of a caterpillar with mange."

"You're a fine one to talk, with that bloody rug on your face."

Gav clapped both hands to his jowls, as though to protect his beard from the insults thus hurled at it.

"Sod off, it's lush!"

"Lush?" Dan cried, hiccuping with mirth. "Call that lush? It's a jungle, B, it's the bloody Amazon. If we hacked it down we'd find Dr bloody Livingstone."

Gav burst out laughing, folding in half. Elyse looked between the two of them with a glazed smile, like she was watching a tennis match but had no idea how tennis was meant to be played.

"Dr Livingstone!" Gav wheezed. "Bloody hell!"

"Yeah? You like that one?"

"You're a piece of work, I'll tell you that."

"Aw, cheers."


"Come off it, you sound like an old man," said Dan. "But speaking of, d'you want to have a poke about and examine the facilities?"

"Aw, Miles ain't show y'all the front-of-house amenities?" Elyse asked, leaping upon the opportunity like a panther. "Well hey, then I can show y'all around, if—"
“Er, thanks, but I think in this case, we'll make our own way,” Gav said. "It's always a bit more fun to wander, innit."

“I . . . guess. Well, y'all have fun, then, and don't fall in! Hahah."

“Hahah,” Dan agreed, taking Gav by the arm. "We'll do our best."

The moment the door closed, Gav shoved him up against the wall. Dan tangled both hands in his perfect hair and kissed him, breathing his breath, tasting his tongue. Gav's hands went to his hips and he pressed his thigh up between Dan's legs.

"Bloody hell, B," Dan gasped. "Ease off, we haven't got the time for all that."

"Not with that attitude," said Gav. He pecked Dan on the lips, kissed down his neck, and sank to his knees.

"You're not serious?"

"We're on holiday, I'm bloody well going to enjoy it."

"The door doesn't even lock!"

"Makes it fun," said Gav, twinkling.

"Get back up here," Dan said, hauling him back up.

"Dan," he whined.

Dan pulled him in and kissed him again. He wriggled a hand into Gav's waistband. Gav pressed against him and hummed into his mouth.

"Get to work, we're short of time," Dan said.

"Don't you dare tell me what to do," said Gav. Deft fingers spidered down Dan's chest and slid into his trousers. Dan kissed him again to muffle the groan that oozed out of his throat.

"La petite mort, indeed," he panted.

"That's the best sort," said Gav.

The second act opened on Chad, staggering onto stage with the murder weapon still clutched in his hand. In a frenzy, he threw it away, shucked off his blood-spattered outer layer and threw it into the Seine. He gave a long and breathless soliloquy, all of which boiled down to My God, what have I done? It was a stirring performance, and left Dan with a knot in his belly.

Ms Jenzen came upon him in this state, and he tearfully confessed his crime to her. She comforted him, promising that he had done nothing wrong. He, in a noble panic, decided to turn himself in to the police; she dissuaded him. Slowly, she talked him around to covering up his crime, rather than coming clean about it, and slowly Chad settled with the idea. She asked him what had become of the second criminal; he didn't know. She sternly told him that so long as the other lived, Chad's life was
in grave danger, as the miscreant would certainly come for revenge.

"Been reading a bit of the Scots Play, hasn't he," Gav whispered to Dan.

"Yeah, she's a real Lady Macbeth."

Gav elbowed him sharply, fixing him with a fierce look.

"What?"

"Bad luck to say the name in a theatre, B."

"Codswallop."

Gav snorted. "Codswallop, what're you on about."

"It is!"

"Sound like an old man, don't you."

Dan kicked him in the ankle. Gav wrinkled his nose and pinched Dan's arm.

Meanwhile, Chad and Ms Jenzen had cleared the scene, and Torrian had taken the stage. His hands were bloody, his face hard and waxy. By staggers and monologues, he made his way to the dowager duchess's home, where she was alone. In a hateful fury, he broke into her bedchambers and strangled her to death, muttering words of vengeance under his breath while she struggled and choked.

"Bloody hell," Dan muttered, as Torrian dragged the limp body from the bed.

"Violent, innit," said Gav, sounding sick.

"Yeah, I'm just—I've got to wonder what the first draft was like, d'you know."

"Christ alive. Don't even want to think about it."

But it only got worse from there. Torrian set a grisly trap for the young lovers, lying in wait for them to return home. His sanity unraveled on stage, a masterful performance that was painful to watch.

Meanwhile, Ms Jenzen and Chad worked together to dispose of Miles' body. Its only appearance was as a carpet-wrapped lump, dragged to a butcher's shop where Chad was to destroy it utterly, mix its meat in with the rest and hide the entrails among their kind. Gav got up and left at that bit, and Dan hurried after him.

He found Gav all the way outside, standing under the awning while a freezing mist sifted down around them. The bustle of the city was muffled, the stars smothered by low and smoky clouds.

"Oy," Dan said. The word fogged in front of his face. "Catch your death of cold out here."

"I'm fine," Gav said, choked. "I'm fine, just—needed a moment. Breath of fresh air. I'm fine."

"D'you want me to get your coat?"

"No, no," said Gav, shaking his head. He swallowed and winced. "Won't be that long."

"If you're sure," said Dan.
Droplets pattered down from the awning. The mutter and hum of Paris was thick and soft as cotton around them. Dan wandered to Gav's side and nudged him with his shoulder, keeping his hands in his pockets.

"D'you want to talk about it?" he asked quietly.

Gav shook his head, staring at something across the street. Dan rolled up onto his toes and back, looking out over the city, counting the plumes of smoke from chimneys above the silhouetted skyline.

"I wonder how many seats're in there," he said.

"Oh Dan, don't even," Gav sighed.

"Just trying to help."

"I don't need help, thank you."

"All right, all right," said Dan. "Sorry, B."

Gav took a deep breath and let it out again. He made no move for the door, although he was shivering. He sniffled, then wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

"We'll have to tell them something," he said.

"Sudden attack of food poisoning?"

"They'll never go for it."

"Just say you've got a weak stomach, it's true enough."

"Sod off."

"We haven't got to go back in. Could just take off now. We don't owe anybody anything."

"It'd be rude."

"Grand, so let's be rude, I've always wanted to try it," said Dan.

Gav snorted, then covered his mouth with his hand. Dan flicked his kerchief out and handed it over, wordless.

"Thanks, B," Gav said, wiping his face. "You can have mine, if you want."

"Have you used it?"

"Nah."

"Then give it here."

Gav took out his own kerchief and handed it to Dan, who stuffed it unceremoniously into his pocket.

"Would've made more sense for you to use your own, honestly," he said.

"Then why'd you give me yours?"

"Seemed the thing to do, didn't it."
Gav blew his nose with a sound like a trumpet, then stuck Dan's kerchief into his pocket.

"I think we'd best go back in," he said. "My coat's in there, after all, innit."

"It's only just inside the door, we could pop in, grab it, and run."

"No, I'm all right," said Gav, with considerably more sincerity now. "We may as well see it through to the end."

"If you like. Frankly, I'm done with the whole sordid lot of it."

"It'll certainly draw a crowd though, won't it."

"Not a doubt in my mind."

There was another brief pause. Dan bounced on his toes. The cold was biting at his nose and ears, needling his cheeks.

"What are we going to tell them, though?" he said.

"I'm sure we'll think of something," said Gav. He hesitated, then reached out and touched Dan's wrist with his knuckles. Dan took his hand and squeezed it. Gav squeezed back.

"And when this's all over," Dan said quietly, "we'll go back to our room and stay in bed all day tomorrow."

"We've got a train to catch," Gav pointed out.

"Train be damned."

"We'll have work."

"Work be damned, then, too!"

Gav cracked a smile. He swung Dan's hand like a schoolgirl.

"Let's go back in," he said. "Bloody freezing my balls off, en't I."

"Ooh, can't have that," said Dan, and Gav laughed, and that was really all he'd wanted.

The two of them slipped back inside, although they settled in very back row to keep from disturbing anyone. They arrived just in time for the climax of the show. All the players were onstage (with the exception, of course, of Miles), and their agitated dialogue was building to a proper flaming row. Torrian stood to one side, where a thick rope was tied against the set. Blake lay on the floor—yes, still breathing, Dan could only just make it out—in the centre of the stage, while Chad and Ms Jenzen stood opposite.

Torrian taunted, and Chad, without his gun, rushed him with a feral snarl, while Ms Jenzen egged him on like a harpy. Torrian yanked on the rope, grinning fiendishly.

There was a clatter, a rattle, a *swish*, a collective startled look upward.

A body dropped from the rafters with a noose round its neck.
Blake screamed. Torrian leapt back and dragged Chad along with him. A shout rose from the audience, a wail from backstage. Ms Jenzen clapped both hands over her mouth and staggered backwards into the wings. Marquis sprang to his feet. Something crashed offstage. Blake screamed again, scrambling across the floor, and Chad started for her while Torrian tried to drag him back through the set and Elyse and Peake and Dubois all clambered from their seats.

Dan leapt up and shouted out.

"Everyone freeze!"

The actors and audience all froze. The commotion from backstage died down. Dan's hand was tight on Gav's shoulder, half propping himself up and half holding Gav down. Dan took a deep breath and lowered his voice, fought to keep the tremor out of it.

"Come out here, please," he said. "Off of the stage, into the house. Stage-hands as well, everyone."

There was a collective shuffle. Marquis darted down the aisle and caught Ms Jenzen's arm as she dismounted the stage. Bones emerged from the wings, dragging a weeping boy behind him—undoubtedly Christophe. Chad and Torrian followed, dazed and waxen. Blake scurried down with her face in her hands and Elyse rushed to meet her, instantly fussing.

"Is there a telephone in this theatre?" Dan asked. He did not look at the body. He looked anywhere but at the body.

After a moment's pause, Peake answered.

"No," he said. His soft voice carried well in the stunned silence.

"Then someone'll have to go for the police," said Dan. "The rest of us ought to stay here."

"Oh, palsambleu, you don't think—" Marquis began, paling.

"We've seen a few," Dan said. "It's best to go in order and worry about thinking afterwards. If you could all go up into the front-of-house, that'd probably be best. Mr Free and I will stay with the body. I trust you can all keep eyes on each other?"

"We can all go and be murdered in a pack, is what you mean," Blake snarled.

"Hey, hey, easy, honey," said Elyse, patting her arm. "How 'bout you and me go and get the law together? So's we can watch each other's backs."

"Oh, running away together?" Chad said abruptly. "Making your getaway?"

"How dare you—"

"Stop it," Dan interrupted, before the argument could get any farther. "Open up the bloody window and yell for the police, if you can't trust each other to leave."

Blake stood for a moment, her chest heaving, her lips pinched tight together.

"I am in costume," she said miserably.
"That's fine, sweetie, we'll yell, then," Elyse said. "C'mon, c'mon, let's get everybody outta here. No call to hang around."

A manic little laugh slipped through Torrian's lips, over which he clapped his hands. Chad turned away, wincing. Blake glared at Elyse with an expression of utmost distaste. Christophe sobbed helplessly, still clutched in Bones' grip, then folded over and threw up.

"Putain de merde," Bones muttered under his breath, while Ms Jenzen buried her face in Marquis' shoulder.

"Go on," Gav said, lurching into motion like a wind-up toy with the key finally pulled out. He brushed himself off, mechanical and precise. "All of you, go and wait in the front of house, please. No one is to leave until the police arrive, nor is anyone to disturb the scene. Mr Peake, you have the keys, yes?"

"Yeah," came the soft reply.

"Please lock up, then, and don't unlock until the police arrive. Mr Brouillard, I would presume you have a secondary set of keys?"

"'S right," said Bones.

"Please give them to Mr Peake for the time being. Now all of you, up to the front of house. Right now."

To drive the point home, Dan came down and started shooing actors up the aisle. With a little encouragement, they all went out. The doors swung shut behind them just as Gav hopped up onto the stage. Dan followed him. He folded his arms, steeled himself, and looked at Miles.

The face was blue, the eyes wide and bloodshot. His mouth hung slack, and his tongue had swelled up inside. His clothes and hair were disheveled. His toes dangled a good five feet above the stage. There was some sort of red gunk under his fingernails, perhaps blood. He'd changed out of his costume, back into the rumpled suit he'd met them in. The stench of death surrounded him. The rope creaked under the gentle twisting of its pendulum weight.

At the sound of a tsk, Dan whirled round. Dubois was standing at the foot of the stage, gazing up at the body.

"What a hideous way to die," he said softly, so softly that he might have been talking to himself. He rubbed his throat, wincing.

"Er," said Dan, only just now remembering to speak in French. "Perhaps you should wait out front, sir. With the others?"

Dubois jumped, then flexed his fingers and tucked his hands into his pockets. He faked a smile and let out a slow breath.

"Yes," he said. "Perhaps that would be best."

He lingered a moment longer, looking over the body, before ducking his head and hurrying off up the aisle. A shiver ran through Dan as the front-of-house door shut, leaving just him and Gav alone with the corpse.

"Hope you're not thinking of coming off holiday for this," Dan said.
Gav scoffed, circling the body like a cat trying to work out the best spot to jump from.

"It's either that or be a suspect, innit," he said. "Once the police get here, anyway. They will ask, they always do."

"Maybe they won't've heard of us in Paris."

Gav took his eyes off the body just long enough to throw a disparaging look at Dan.

"Yeah, all right," Dan grumbled. "What d'you need?"

Wrinkling his nose, Gav said, "A ladder?"

"Bloody hell, B."

"Well we're not cutting him down, are we, not before the police get here. Unless you'd rather go and stay with the civilians up front."

"Ladder," said Dan, already making for backstage.

"Yeah, thought you might."

It didn't take long to find an appropriately-sized ladder, even in the mess of backstage. Dan took an extra couple minutes to look over the rigging lines, taking care not to touch anything or stand in any footprints but his own. Nothing looked obviously amiss, but there was a wall-mounted steel ladder that led up into a dark tangle of catwalks above.

"D'you know," he said, lugging the (much smaller, wooden) ladder out onto the stage. "Technically this still counts as disturbing a crime scene."

"Somehow doubt that ladder was instrumental in the doing of it," said Gav. He was peering up at Miles' hand, mouth open and lip curled. "They would've had to drop him off the catwalks."

"Ah, you noticed them, then?" Dan said, plopping the ladder down and kicking it open.

"First time through, yeah," said Gav. "Thought to myself: now there's a quick way to kill someone if ever I've seen one."

"We were meant to be on holiday."

"Can't help noticing things, B," Gav said, chipper. "It's only the fault of having eyes in my head."

He came around to the ladder and set his foot on it. Dan put a hand on his arm.

"Gav," he said.

"What?" said Gav, finally looking at him.

"All right?" Dan asked.

Gav hesitated just a half-second too long.

"Yeah, 'course I am," he said. He started up the ladder, brushing off Dan's hand. Two steps up, he paused, then looked back down. "You?"

"I'm all right," said Dan.
"Grand, fantastic, nothing to worry about, then," said Gav. He clambered the rest of the way up the ladder, which Dan took it upon himself to hold steady.

"Any better up close?" he asked.

"Tremendously," said Gav. "He was strangled. Someone out there'll have half the skin on their arms clawed off, 'cos it's under his fingernails now."

"Wait, strangled?" said Dan. "And then had a noose wrapped round him?"

"And then got shoved off a catwalk," said Gav. "Or—no, that wouldn't've been it, would it. Dan, go and tug on the rope that's labeled Device back there."

"Would you come down off the ladder first?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"You'll tip over and break your bloody neck."

"Dan."

"Fine, I'm off, I'm off."

Dan hurried off backstage once again. It took a good deal of searching, but eventually he found the correct rope. It was under tension, and didn't move at his first cursory pull.

"A good tug, B!" Gav called from the stage.

Dan grumbled to himself, then grabbed the rope in both hands and heaved on it. Whatever was on the other end was heavy, but not immobile. There was the faint sound of Gav gagging. Dan hurried back to find him still on the ladder, looking a bit green but none the worse for wear. Miles' body was swinging visibly.

"Is he attached to it?" Dan asked.

"Oh yes. Somebody's been fooling with the rigging."

"Had to be Christophe or Bones, wouldn't it, then."

Gav shook his head. "Could've been anyone, really."

"Not the actors. They were on stage. And the other four were all in the audience with us when he dropped."

"That's just it, Dan, the drop didn't kill him. I reckon it was intermission. Everyone's running about, no one'll notice if someone's missing for a few minutes, if somebody fiddles with the Device up on the catwalks. Anybody could've popped off for a bit, strangled the bloody hell out of him, lugged him up to the catwalk and tied him off, then popped back down and left him through the whole second act."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Nah, 'course it does," Gav said, looking insulted.

Dan folded his arms. "You've got to be one hell of an athlete to lug a body up a sixty-foot ladder."
Gav opened his mouth, then shut it again.

"I s'pose," he said, begrudging. "Still. Must've been intermission, it's the only time any of them had the free time to do it."

"Fair play. Got any ideas so far?"

"If I had, I wouldn't tell you," said Gav. He finally climbed down from the ladder and dusted off his hands. "Much too early in the game yet."

"I reckon it was that Belladonna woman."

"Could've been."

Scowling, Dan said, "So you have got an idea, and your idea is, Dan's wrong."

"No, I said we'll see, 'cos unlike some people, I don't jump to conclusions."

"Yes you bloody do," Dan muttered. He glanced at the body and shivered. "Anyways. S'pose we'd best go up front and wrangle the suspects."

"I s'pose," said Gav.

Dan chewed his lip for a moment. Gav did not look at him.

"Could make a quick canvass of this whole backstage area," Dan offered. "Make sure nothing's obviously amiss. Y'know, at least 'til the police arrive."

"Sounds like a capital idea," said Gav, just a touch too quickly. "Why don't you take Stage Left, I'll go Stage Right, and we'll meet up at the dressing rooms, yeah?"

"Will do," said Dan. He turned smartly and paced off to his left.

"Stage Left, B," Gav sighed.

"What's the difference?" said Dan, half turning back.

"Forget it," said Gav. He headed off the other way, flapping a hand. "Doesn't matter anyway!"

Dan spent a few minutes idling around backstage, mostly just taking care not to disturb anything. He wandered behind the set, past another ladder that led up to the catwalks, back by the dressing rooms and then around to the other side of the stage.

He found Gav wedged into the back corner of the theatre, struggling for breath, his hands over his eyes and his knees up to his chest.

"Gav," Dan said softly, keeping his distance. "It's me."

Gav whimpered and started rocking back and forth. The heels of his hands were pressing into his eyes so hard that it was making his arms shake. Torn, Dan hesitated for a moment before approaching. Gav didn't react, until Dan knelt down and took his wrists.

"No!" he yelped. "No, no—"

"Shh, shh, it's all right, it's me, B, it's me," Dan said. He kept his voice and hands gentle as he tugged Gav's hands back from his eyes. "You're hurting yourself, c'mon, ease up a touch. That's right,
there's a lad. The eyes haven't got it, you won't get anywhere by mashing them in."

Gav sniffled, still struggling for breath. His teeth were bared, tears leaking down his cheeks. Dan guided his hands away from his face, then shifted his grip from wrists to palms. Gav grappled onto him, squeezing. He still wasn't breathing right, sucking down erratic gasps of air and scarcely pausing to hiss them back out again.

"Oy, look at me," said Dan.

He shook his head so violently his teeth rattled. A sob and whimper fell out of his mouth. He shrank back against the wall and turned his face away like he expected to be struck.

"Gav, Gav, c'mon, it's me," Dan said, squeezing his hands. "It's all right, B. Look at me, c'mon."

"You—no, you look—he looks—it's too—I can't, I can't, I can't," Gav babbled, his face reddening as his breath continued to fail him. Dan extracted his hand from Gav's grip and cupped his cheek, even though it made Gav whimper and flinch.

"B," he said. "That's my hand. I'm here, and that's my hand. Tell me what the back of my hand looks like."

"I can't—no, I—I can't—"

"Yes, you can," Dan said. "What's the back of my hand look like, Gav?"

Gav's brow furrowed, his eyes scrunched shut even tighter, sending a fresh wash of tears down his face. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and some of the redness drained from his cheeks.

"You've got—three freckles," he choked out. "In the shape of . . . a right triangle. There's . . . two other freckles, paler, one in line with the—the base of the . . . and the other one sort of makes the triangle into a cross. You've got some veins that make a Y under your pinky. Paler band round your third finger where you used to wear a ring. There's a scar on your wrist from where you fell off a horse. You keep your nails short, but not so short that they haven't got the white bits on the ends."

"There you are," said Dan. "Now you've got that image to mind. That's a much nicer thing to look at, isn't it?"

Gav sniffled again and nodded. He was still shaking, but at least his breath was coming slow and steady and he'd stopped trying to crumple himself up.

"Can you look at me?" Dan asked.

With a great mustering of courage, Gav pried his eyes open and looked at Dan. He stared for a second, then let out a despairing chuckle that dropped all the tension from his shoulders.

"Bloody hell, I'm a mess," he said.

"You've every right to be," said Dan, wiping the tears from Gav's face. "Better now than in front of the police, anyway. Get it out of the system, and all."

Gav sniffled and shook his head. He peeled himself off the wall and keeled over into Dan's arms.

"The holiday was meant to help," he mumbled. "But it hasn't at all."

Dan pressed a kiss to Gav's head, breathing in the scent of his hair, the warmth of his body.
"It was worth a shot," he said. "And anyway, this is a bit macabre, even for us. Bit of warning might've been nice."

"It follows us," Gav said miserably. "It's like I said, Dan, it follows us. There's no retiring. There's no getting away. It'll always find us, some way or another, it never stops."

"That's not at all true," said Dan. "Look, I'll tell you what, we'll retire right here and now, today, and we'll go off and live in the country somewhere and grow vegetable marrows."

"We can't just leave."

"We could. Soon as this business is done, just pack up the whole lot and take off. We could go to America, even. One of those massive empty spaces they've got, where there's nobody around for miles."

Gav sighed, stiff and exhausted as though by great pains.

"I'm sure that'd be grand," he said, "for you."

"Gav."

"There's no getting away from the inside of my own head, B."

"No, but it's no call to go stuffing more hideousness in there. And bloody hell, there's such a thing as distraction, B."

"Will you still be using that stupid back-of-the-hand trick once we've run off together?"

"So long as it still works, yeah."

"You might change it up a bit."

"All right," said Dan. "Next time I'll have you describe my arse."

To his immense gratification, Gav burst out laughing.
Chapter Notes

Certain names have been changed because it was brought to my attention that the people in question do not want to be included in any fanfics. I sincerely apologize for not doing my due diligence in the first place, and will make sure to double-check for every character in the future.

On the bright side, Dan thought, nobody seemed to be handling the situation well.

After making sure that Gav was stable and presentable, the two of them left the main part of the theatre and joined the rest of the cast and crew in the front-of-house. Ms Jenzen was sitting on the floor with Elyse and Blake both fussing over her—from her dazed expression and the milky pallor of her cheeks, it was entirely likely she'd fainted. Torrian and Chad were off in a different corner, Torrian with his hands still clamped over his mouth and Chad simply sitting there, dazed. Marquis was pacing, Dubois stood staring out the window, and Bones and the stagehand were nowhere to be seen.

"Have the other three gone for the police, then?" Gav asked. At the sound of his voice, Marquis leapt in the air and cursed; Elyse and Blake each laid a hand on Ms Jenzen, either restraining or comforting; Chad got to his feet, Torrian went rigid, and Dubois barely spared them half a glance.

"No," Marquis said, smoothing down his shirt. "Christophe could not stop being ill, so Mr Brouillard took him to the water closet."

"Has anyone checked on them lately?" Dan asked.

"Mr Peake is with them," said Blake.

"That's fine, but has anyone checked on them lately?" he pressed.

"I'll go," Torrian said, stepping forward.

"Very good," said Gav. "Mr James, if you wouldn't mind accompanying him? Best practices, no one ought to be left alone at any time."

"Oh," said Chad. "Yeah. Yes, I can—yeah, let's go."

He glanced at the front window before Torrian shepherded him off towards the water closet.

"Has anyone called for the police?" Gav asked. "Anyone at all?"

"We yelled out, like your pal said," Elyse said. "Some folks ran off, I guess they'll be comin' on back with the law."

"Is it—" Ms Jenzen began, quavering. Elyse and Blake immediately refocused on her.

"Easy, darlin', you take it easy now," Elyse clucked. "Don't you worry your li'l head about nothin', we're all gonna be just fine now, y'hear?"
"Is—is it really him?" Ms Jenzen went on anyway, staring up at Gav and Dan with huge, dewy brown eyes. "Is it really Miles?"

"I'm afraid so," Dan said gently.

"Oh, God," she cried, and buried her face in her hands. Elyse rubbed her shoulder, murmuring steel-string comforts over the sound of her weeping.

Blake got up and fixed her skirts, then came over to Gav and Dan. She, too, had been crying, although she was making a very good show of composure.

"It was Bones, was it not?" she said. "While the rest of us were on stage, he murdered Monsieur Luna. That is why you sent Chad and Torrian for him. Yes?"

"At this point, it's best not to jump to any hasty conclusions," Gav said. "When the police arrive, they'll handle everything in due course. 'Til then, our only job is to stay calm and not disturb the scene."

Blake stared at him. Her fists and jaw clenched, and a fire lit in her eyes.

"You mean you intend to do nothing?" she demanded. "A man has been murdered and you—you intend to do nothing?"

"We intend to wait for the police to arrive," Gav began, but before he could finish, Blake threw up her hands in disgust and stalked away.

"Oy, don't leave the—" Dan said, starting after her.

"I am going to the corner!" she snapped over her shoulder—and she did, flinging herself onto Torrian's vacated space, and fumed mightily.

"Oh, bloody hell, one of that sort," said Dan. He shook his head. "I don't envy the police on this one, I'll tell you that."

"I never envy the police," said Gav. "Shocked they're not here already, actually."

He exchanged a glance with Dan.

"D'you think we'll have to?" Dan asked.

"I hope not," said Gav.

"How long shall we give it?"

"Five minutes, no more. It's already been long enough."

"Be fair, it's a rough neighbourhood."

"Which is why I would've expected them to be here right away. Probably an officer on every bloody corner out here, isn't there."

"Pardonnez-moi, messieurs?"

Dan turned to see Dubois hovering a respectful distance away. He had recovered from his earlier bout of ennui and carried now only an air of vague puzzlement.
"Er, oui," said Gav. He continued on in French. "Sorry, can we help you?"

"I was only wondering if you could tell me what is happening." Dubois said.

Dan slapped himself in the forehead. "Oh, right, because—English," he said. "Terribly sorry. Really you haven't missed that much. Bones is with—"

"Christophe," Gav supplied.

"In the water closet, and Chad and Torrian have gone to retrieve them."

"And Mr Peake," said Gav. "Ms Belladonna is rather upset that we've not done anything, and Ms Jenzen appears to be suffering some sort of hysteria."

"Yes, I had gathered," said Dubois. "The fainting was something of a clue. Did you find anything?"

"Did we...?" said Dan, frowning.

Dubois gestured. "During your investigations."

"We haven't investigated anything, that's for the police to do," Dan said. "We only made sure to secure the area so that no one else would be hurt."

"A surprisingly lengthy process," Dubois said, quirking an eyebrow.

"Er... yes. Well. Lots of nooks and crannies, hideaway holes, that sort of thing."

The corner of Dubois' mouth turned up. He stepped in a little closer and spoke a little softer.

"Mr Gruchy, if you are going to lie to me, you could at least have the courtesy to do it well," he said.

"I—well," said Dan, floundering. He looked to Gav, who was equally floored. "We—in all honesty, sir, we—we made a brief initial examination, and then... had to take a moment to get our heads together. I didn't like to say so outright, because it was a rather personal affair."

"Hm," said Dubois, leaning back on his heels. "I suppose I cannot fault you for that."

"Were you hoping to?" Gav asked keenly.

"Not particularly," said Dubois. He waved a hand. "I won't trouble you any further, then. Should you need me, you know where to find me."

And with that, he wandered back to the window and resumed his staring.

"Odd fellow, isn't he," Dan said under his breath. Gav just shook his head, chewing on his lip.

Shortly, the contingent from the water closet returned. Young Christophe still looked green, and Bones had the affect of a man who desperately needed a drink. Chad and Torrian had braced themselves, and were looking less deathly, if not more lively. Peake trailed along at the back of them, so unobtrusive that Dan almost didn't notice him at all.

"Police aren't here yet?" Bones demanded, dumping Christophe on Chad and striding over to Elyse.

"Naw, they're takin' their precious time," Elyse said. She glanced at Gav and Dan and added, "Might
have to be gettin' on without 'em, if it takes *too* much longer."

Bones grunted. He took out a flask and sucked down a hearty swig.

"Hell with 'em," he said. "Useless fucking pigs."

"Does it usually take this long?" Dan asked. "Police response."

"This shithole?" Bones said. "Be lucky to get anyone at all."

"There's been *a murder,*" Dan pointed out.

"Dime a dozen," said Bones.

"Yes, but this is hardly some back-alley stabbing," said Dan.

"They're not to know that," said Marquis. He was still pacing, albeit in smaller circles now. "Someone will arrive, sooner or later, and then—pah, they will have to go and get more police, because they are idiots."

"I'll drink to that," said Bones, and did.

"And then there will be no show," Marquis muttered. "No one will attend, they will close the theatre, *palsambleau,* we will have to give refunds. . . ."

"Gruchy, why don't you go and get someone?" Gav said.

"What, by myself?" Dan exclaimed.

"Yeah, why not? I'll stay here and keep an eye on things, you go and retrieve the law."

"You'll stay here doing bloody nothing whilst I'm wandering about alone in the dark getting stabbed in bloody back-alleys," Dan retorted.

"Nah, come off it, you'll be fine," said Gav.

"You come with me, then."

"God, no," said Gav, horrified. "I'm not going out there."

"Neither of you should go," said Torrian. "We can wait it out, can't we?"

Christophe moaned quietly, and Chad sidled away from him. The boy wandered into the centre of the room, staring around with huge, wide eyes.

"*Mon Dieu,*" he moaned.

"*Monsieur Demarais, s'il vous plaît,*" said Dubois, scornful.

"My God," he said again. "He's dead. Don't you all realize, he's dead?"

"We realize it, now shut up about it," Blake said.

"He is in the next room," he whispered. "His body is in the next *room,* and you all stand around here? Doing nothing? Saying nothing? My God, my God!"

"Chris, honey, calm down, now," Elyse said, leaving Ms Jenzen's side to go to him. Christophe
rounded on her like a viper, coiled to strike.

"Do not touch me!" he cried. "Keep away from me, I want nothing to do with you!"

"Sure, sure, but how 'bout you talk a li'l slower so's I can—"

"You're as mad as the rest of them!" Christophe went on, his voice rising in hysteria. "You and your secrets and your smiling faces and your little parties—"

"Awright, quiet down now," she said.

She grabbed Christophe by the arm. Christophe struck her in the nose so hard she went staggering back three steps. She came up red and frothing, teeth bared, eyes sharp with rage. Christophe turned the color of sour milk.

"You li'l sonnuva bitch—"

"Hey," said Peak.

The whole room went quiet, the hush of a theatre when the lights turned down. Peak had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched—never was there a more unobtrusive figure—and yet Elyse shrank from him like a scolded child.

"He hit me," she complained.

"He'll get his hiding soon enough," Bones said.

"Leave the boy alone," Blake snapped. "I can't bear to hate you any more than I already do."

"Blake, stop it," said Marquis. "Christophe, if you can't control yourself, we shall have to restrain you."

"You are in his pocket," Christophe said, rounding on him. "You horrible, cowering—"

"Be quiet, boy."

"Look, just let him be," said Torrian, stepping into the fray. "You're only upsetting him more. Let him have his hysterics, and then he'll calm down."

"It isn't the time for that," said Marquis. "Someone will get hurt."

"Namely that degenerate son of a whore," Bones said, cracking his knuckles. Christophe backed up, trembling.

"Oy, if we don't stop this, there's going to be another bloody murder," Dan muttered to Gav.

"So stop it then," said Gav.

"Me? What d'you want me to do?"

"Ah, just wade on in there and break it up, you know how you do."

"You're trying to have me killed."

"You'll be fine, come off it."

Just then, Christophe bolted, and it was only a quick grab by Marquis that kept him from fleeing the
"Stop this right now, Demarais!" he said, while Christophe thrashed like a wild thing. A flailing elbow clocked Marquis in the head and he staggered.

"Let go of me!" Christophe screamed, pushing his advantage, kicking at him with both legs. "Let go of me, you bastard, you crony, you—"

"Ah," Dubois said mildly. "Les voilà enfin."

The whole room froze. There was a sharp knock at the door. Dubois answered it, and everyone scrambled to get themselves together. Marquis dropped Christophe like a sack of bricks. Christophe scuttled off to the corner, Elyse hurriedly fixed her face, and everyone else adopted postures of such stilted nonchalance that the whole lot of them together made the place look like a wax museum.

"Good evening, officer," Dubois said. "Thank you for your prompt response."

A stout, Black policewoman shouldered in past him, flinging a jaded glance around the room. Her eye caught on Gav, but then hurtled onwards without remark.

"Right, what's the trouble?" she demanded. "Someone's dead, are they? Out back, I'll assume, since I didn't have to step over anyone on the way in."

"My poor dear officer, I extend my sincerest condolences for how interesting your night is about to become," Dubois said fondly.

The officer whipped around and fixed him with a keen look. He smiled at her, something of mischief in the expression. She appraised him, disliked what she saw, and turned to Gav.

"You, sir," she said. "What's happened?"

"Well," said Gav. "A man's been hanged from the rafters."

The officer stared at him. She turned to Blake.

"Is that true?" she asked.

"It is," said Blake, smoothing her skirts and keeping her eyes averted.

"Has the body been touched?"

"Not that I am aware of," she said carefully.

The officer nodded. She craned her neck and lifted her chin at Ms Jenzen.

"Is she all right?" she asked.

"As much as can be expected," Blake said. "There was a brief episode of hysteria. It seems to have passed."

"I'm all right," Ms Jenzen volunteered, though her voice was thready.

"Should I call for a doctor?"

"No, no, please, I'm all right."
Marquis stepped forward. "Madame, if you don't mind, one of my actors is dead, and someone has killed him. We cannot afford pleasantries."

The officer spared him a glance, then turned back to Ms Jenzen.

"And what's your name, miss?"

"Excuse me, I was speaking to you," Marquis insisted, reddening.

"And I was speaking to this young woman, sir," said the officer. "You will have to wait your turn. Miss?"

"Jenzen," she said. "Karine Jenzen, officer."

"That's a lovely name, thank you," said the officer. She whipped out a writing pad and a pencil and cast another hard look around the room. "I shall need everyone's names and addresses, your role at this theatre, and your relationship to the deceased. No one is to leave this room until we are all accounted for. Is that understood?"

"You're not even going to look at the body?" Torrian exclaimed.

"No one," she repeated, "is leaving this room, until I have all the information needed to find you if you run off. I will not be leaving either, because this is not my first trip around the block. Now. You may call me Officer Gabriel, and Ms Jenzen, we will begin with you. . . ."

It took about half an hour to get everyone's information properly squared away, mostly because Officer Gabriel was an absolute stickler for details. Through her unflinching persistence, Dan learned that Marquis and Ms Jenzen were cohabiting, that Christophe lived in the theatre, and that Dubois must have been staggeringly rich, because he kept a room on the Champs Elysées. Gabriel saved Gav and Dan for last, but when she did approach them, it was with no additional courtesy or reverence.

"And you, sir?" she said to Gav.

"Detective Gavin Free, but I suppose you knew that," said Gav. He gave the address of their hotel unprompted, then said, "And Mr Gruchy and I met Mr Luna once before, several years ago, in Edinburgh."

"Under what circumstances?" said Gabriel.

"Another holiday," said Gav. "Unfortunately, one that was also cut short by—"

He broke off. His eyes went glassy. Dan stepped in without missing a beat.

"An unfortunate death," he said.

"And you are?"

"Daniel Gruchy. Same hotel. We're a matched set."

"Yes, I know," said Gabriel, writing it down anyway. "So to be clear: you are on holiday currently, correct?"
"We are," said Dan.

"And what brought you to this theatre?"

"Mr Luna caught wind of our being in Paris, and sent us a letter inviting us to come and see the show. We were planning to head back to London tomorrow, so we were allowed an advanced showing."

"Offered, or requested?"


"So a man you met once during another murder several years ago in a place over five hundred miles from here caught wind of your presence in this city, where he happened to be putting on a play, and you requested access to the dress rehearsal because of previously established plans?"

"Well—" Dan said.

"Do you have any record of these plans? Train tickets, for example?"

"Not—not on us, at the moment, no," Dan stammered.

"No? That's unfortunate," said Gabriel, making a note.

"Well, when you put it like that, it does sound awfully suspicious, doesn't it."

"It's my job to be suspicious. What prompted you to attend?"

"Thought it might be good for a laugh," Dan mumbled.

Gabriel made another note. She glanced at Gav, but didn't say anything to him.

"Where might the two of you be found in London?" she asked.

Dan gave her the address of their office in Hoxton, and she wrote that down, as well. When she'd finished, she snapped her notebook shut and looked around the room.

"Is there an office here anywhere?" she asked.

"My office is here," Elyse volunteered, in her clunky French. "It is nearby the coat closet."

"I have one, too," said Peake. He pointed to the wide staircase on the other side of the room. "Upstairs."

"We'll use Mrs Willems', thank you," said Gabriel. "Come along, the two of you, we're going to confer. The rest of you: please do not leave this room for any reason, even in pairs. This will be a brief consultation."

"But what about—" Marquis began, and was silenced by a look from Peake.

"Gentlemen, if you'll follow me, please," Gabriel said, and strode off. The sea of thespians parted before her, and Dan followed in her wake, tugging Gav along by his elbow.

They found the office without too much trouble, and Gabriel let herself in. Dan set Gav in a convenient chair and then went back to close the door.
"Right," Gabriel sighed. "Right. All right. So here we are. What's the plan, gentlemen?"

"What's—you're asking us?" Dan cried.

"Keep your voice down, you'll alarm the civilians," said Gabriel. "If you don't have a plan, then fine, I'll make my own. I just assumed that since you were here first, you'd have come up with something already."

"Well," said Dan. He looked over at Gav, let out a breath and shook his head. "More officers? Coroner? I s'pose there'll be an inquest, after all—"

"No," said Gabriel.

"No? What d'you mean, no?"

"I mean no," said Gabriel. "There will be no more officers, nor any coroner. It is just us three, Mr Gruchy, and we must make do with what we have."

"But that's ludicrous!"

"That is how it will be."

"What the hell sort of policeman are you, anyway?" he demanded.

"The sort who is doing her best with very limited resources," Gabriel retorted. "I defer to your expertise, Mr Gruchy. I would defer to Mr Free's, but I see that he is not currently with us."

"Look, you're asking me what the procedure is, and I'm telling you," said Dan. "More officers, and a coroner, and an inquest. Take all these lunatics back to the police station, do interviews with them, work out where everyone was and what their alibis are, and just—do the damned police work!"

"And I've told you, that's not an option."

"Why not?"

Gabriel pinched her lips together. She glanced at the door, and at Gav, and then sagged under the weight of some invisible burden.

"Because I am on probationary leave," she admitted. "And if I go back to the station, I will be fired."

Dan's mouth hung open.

"You're not even a real bloody—what the—"

"I am a real officer, thank you sir, I am simply not on duty at the moment," she interrupted. "I heard the call for help. Nobody else made any move to summon the authorities, so I ran home and retrieved my uniform. I'm afraid we are on our own, Mr Gruchy. I'm afraid we will have to make do."

Dan shook his head and scratched his jaw. He could have done with a coffee, or maybe just a swig out of Bones' flask.

"In the words of young Mr Demarais, My God," he said.

Gabriel made a face. By the door, Gav finally reanimated.

"Where...?" he said vaguely, looking around the room.
"Elyse's office, in the theatre," Dan said. "You've not been here before."

"And how...?"

"Officer Gabriel brought us. It's only a short walk from the lobby. Big brown door with a plaque on it?"

Gav paused, then snapped back into focus.

"Right," he said. "So we're working out what's to be done, are we?"

"Er, maybe we should—" Dan said, glancing at Gabriel.

"I speak English, it doesn't matter," she said, with almost no discernible accent. "Yes, we're working out what to do."

"It'll just be the three of us," said Dan. "No backup."

Gav shot him a quizzical look, and Dan shook his head. The corner of Gav's mouth pinched downward, a little we'll-talk-about-this-later.

"Right, then," he said, rubbing his hands together. "So. Miss Gabriel, if you could guard the body, we'll go through a round of interrogations with everyone and see what we can work out. Best to do that first, so they won't have time to get their stories straight. Somebody should send for a coroner at some point, shouldn't leave Mr Luna hanging up there any longer than is necessary. S'pose it could wait 'til we've caught the bastard, but that'll depend on how long it takes."

Gabriel watched him. Gav cleared his throat.

"Er," he said. "If that's agreeable to you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you speaking to me?" said Gabriel, blinking. "I wasn't aware."

Gav let out an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes.

"Officer Gabriel," he said. "We'll need to do a round of questioning with all the suspects, and if you could remain with the body—"

"Why?" she interrupted. "It's not going anywhere."

"All right, all right, different plan," said Dan. "We've got to do the questions, that's for sure, but those people out there are all lunatics, and they'll rip each other to shreds if no one's keeping them in line. Officer, would you mind terribly taking care of that?"

Gabriel straightened her uniform and gave a decisive nod.

"That's very much in my wheelhouse," she said.

"Brilliant," said Gav. "Shall we get to it?"

"Who first?" Dan asked.

Gav thought about it.

"I think we'll start with Mr Peake and work our way down," he said.
Peake's office was large, and had the same faded opulence as the rest of the theatre. There was a
desk piled high with papers, a tremendous mess on the floor, and only two chairs. Dan pulled out the
one from behind the desk, and Gav settled into the other. He didn't notice when Dan glared at him,
his attention fixed on Peake. Dan came to stand behind Gav's chair, hovering closer than was
comfortable. Gav elbowed him in the leg and he took a half step back, considering his point made.

"So, Mr Peake," said Gav. "How long have you owned this theatre?"

Peake chewed his lip, looking around the room as though he'd written it on the wall somewhere.

"Mm, three years?" he guessed.

"How did you acquire it?"

"I bought it."

"Er," said Gav. "I had assumed, yes, but who from?"

"Bernard, I think. Man named Bernard—Bertrand? Could've been Bertrand, actually."

"If I may, what was the asking price?"

"Oh, I don't remember," said Peake. "Ask Elyse."

"Has she been working with you since you bought the place?"

"Mm-hm."

"And before that, as well?"

He nodded.

"For how long, would you say?"

"A while," said Peake, shrugging. "Five—no, maybe six years. Seven? Not more than eight."

"She mentioned you knew her husband, at one point," said Gav. "Is that how you met her?"

"Yeah."

"And where was that?"

"Nevada."

"And what brought you all the way to Paris, from Nevada?"

He shrugged again. "Friend of a friend."

"Was it work? Or was it a running from rather than a running to?"

"No running," said Peake, his eyebrows pulling together. "Just a friend of a friend, and then the
theatre. That's all."
"You just decided to buy out a theatre?" Dan said. "Traveled all the way across the Atlantic for a friend of a friend and then . . . bought a theatre?"

Peake considered it.

"Yep," he said.

Gav scrunched his mouth over to one side, then shook his head.

"How did you meet Mr Luna?" he asked.

"He walked in."

"And?"

"Said he had a play."

"And you said yes? Just like that?"

"Mmhm."

"Must've been somewhat desperate for shows."

Peake shrugged.

"Was anyone else involved with the decision?"

"Elyse."

"Not Mr Marquis or Mr Dubois? No one else who works here?"

"No," said Peake.

"Who of those that work here did you hire?"

"No one," said Peake.

"No one?" Dan blurted. "What, the place just came pre-rigged with actors and directors and stagehands?"

"Well," said Peake. "One director and one stage manager."

"If you don't mind my asking, who was in charge of hiring the others?" Gav said.

"Marquis got the actors and Bones found Christophe."

"And where, if you know, did Mr Dubois come from?"

"I don't know," said Peake.

"Do you know who might?" he asked.

"No," said Peake.

"I see. We'll just have to ask him, then."

Peake didn't respond. Gav flicked a look at Dan and made a constrained gesture.
"Mr Peake, what was your opinion of Mr Luna?" Dan asked. "As a person. Did you like him, dislike him? Indifferent?"

"I don't know. He was kinda in the way, I guess."

"In the way of...?"

"Getting work done."

"I was under the impression he was the work, or at least at the head of it," said Dan.

"Other people did all the work. Luna mostly talked."

"I know the phenomenon," Dan said dryly.

"Can you think of any reason why someone would want to kill Mr Luna?" Gav asked, ignoring him.

"Anyone who might've had a grudge against him?"

Peake blew out a breath and considered the ceiling.

"I don't know," he said again. "Sorry."

"Final question, Mr Peake," said Gav. "Could you tell us where you were during intermission?"

"Here," said Peake.

"For the entire duration?"

"Yeah."

"And you were alone?"

"Mnhm."

"Right. I think that'll do for now," said Gav. He got to his feet, and Peake followed suit. Gav shook his hand. "If you could send up Mrs Willems, please."

"Sure," said Peake. He trudged out and eased the door shut behind him.

"Useful," Dan said.

"Chatty chap."

"Talk your ear off if you let him. Oy, where's my chair?"

"There isn't one," said Gav, sitting back down.

"Then why've I got to stand? Why can't you stand?"

"You know why."

"'Cos I'm your bloody sidekick?"

"'Cos I've got bad knees," said Gav, making a face at him.

"They're about to get worse," said Dan.
"B, don't say that, B! What're you gonna do to my knees, B?"

"Have 'em off."

Gav pouted. Before Dan could do anything about it, there was a rap at the door.

"Yes, come in," said Gav, straightening his cravat. Elyse poked her head in.

"Y'all asked for me?"

"We just had a few brief questions, if you don't mind," said Gav, gesturing to the other chair.

"Oh," said Elyse. "Well sure. I don't know what help I'm gonna be, but—ask away!"

She perched on the edge of the chair and smiled, attentive as a terrier. Gav worried his lip between his teeth and rubbed his knee.

"Earlier I asked you how you wound up in Paris," he said. "You didn't answer me. Mr Peake said a friend of a friend brought the two of you here; could you elaborate on that?"

"Not by much," said Elyse. "Sorry fellas, that's all it was. Friend of a friend gave us a li'l tip that there might be some lucrative business, we showed up, and here we are!"

"And has the business been lucrative?"

She made a face and waggled her head. "Not yet! Not just yet, but it's gonna be real soon."

"You seem to have a great deal of faith in Mr Luna's play," said Gav.

"Naw, well, I got a lotta faith in Aaron, and all the actors, o'course," she said. "I'm sure they can pull it off."

"I somehow doubt the show's going to go on, now that one of the lead actors has died during dress-rehearsal," said Dan.

"Naw, what?" said Elyse, laughing and smoothing down her skirts. "That's what we got understudies for! Aaron oughtta know the part, he's seen the dad-gum show enough times, hahah. Or—y'know, I bet Cassie could do it, he's keen as mustard and he's got a mind like a steel trap, oh sure, he could do it easy."

"Mrs—Elyse, I sincerely doubt anyone will want to come and see a play when there was a murder committed in the theatre not twenty-four hours prior," said Dan.

Elyse made a face that wasn't quite a smile. "Well, y'know. Ain't no call for anybody to really know about it, is there? Hahah. I mean. Ain't no journalists or nothin' here. Oh! Hey, I got it, we'll just say we don't do refunds. Got plenty of tickets already sold, that'll do the trick."

She nodded to herself, pleased as punch. Dan opened his mouth, but Gav spoke before he could.

"Mr Peake mentioned that you handle the finances here," said Gav. "Did you know of anyone to whom Mr Luna owed any debts? Or anyone who owed debts to him?"

"Naw, not that I know of," said Elyse. "He did some gamblin' on the side, time to time, but it never got to be a problem or nothin'. Leastways, he never borrowed no money from me."

"He was independently wealthy?"
She made a face. "Well..."

"What?"

"He never mentioned it if he was. Talked a whole lotta talk about that starvin' artist hoo-hah, but I ain't never seen him starve. Miles was fulla crap. God rest his soul."

"Can you think of any other reason someone might want to kill him?" said Dan.

"Oh, half a dozen off the top of my head!" Elyse chirped.

Dan and Gav exchanged a look.

"These being?" Gav said.

"Well, he annoyed poor Aaron to death," she said, counting off on her fingers, "wouldn't keep his hands off poor Blake—though you'd be hard damn pressed to figure who was more ticked off about it, her or Karrie—bullied the livin' hell outta poor lil' Chris, damn, what else? Ole Chaddeus had some kinda beef with him, but I don't know what it was and he wouldn't admit it, neither. Guess just about anybody mighta killed him if they hated his writin' enough, hahah, right?"

"Not impossible," said Gav. "Thank you, Elyse, you've been very helpful."

"Aw, shucks," she said, ducking her head and batting the compliment out of the air.

"There was just one more question, if you don't mind."

"Lay it on me."

"What was the price of this theatre?"

Her eye twitched. She wrinkled her nose and waved a hand.

"Oh, couple hundred bucks."

"Good lord," said Dan. "That's a substantial down-payment, for a whim."

"Uh, yeah. I mean, it was—just about all we had, but we're doin' all right. We're doin' fine! It'll all come together, you know what they say: the Lord will provide!"

"So I've heard," said Gav. "I think that will be all, Elyse. Would you mind terribly sending up Monsieur Dubois when you go back down?"

"Sure thing!" she said, hopping to her feet. "But uh, just a li'l tip? Y'all ain't gonna get nothin' outta him."

Gav stood as well. "No? Why not?"

"Oh, y'all just won't," said Elyse. "Cassie likes his secrets. 'Tween you and me, I think he thinks it makes him all dashin' and mysterious, and that's the only reason he does it."

"Thank you for the warning," said Gav. He took her hand and kissed the air above her knuckles. She blushed and flustered her way out.

"Something's off," said Dan. "She's hiding something."
"Most people are, B."

"She's hiding something about the theatre, then. Or about someone in it, I don't know."

"We'll see," said Gav.

Dan threw up his hands. "You never believe me! Any time I've got any kind of idea, you never bloody believe me!"

"I believe you, B, I just think you're reading a bit too much into it."

"One day, one day, I'll be right, and then you'll be eating your words, yeah?"

"We'll see," Gav said again.

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, B."

"Yeah, B, but a wrong clock is wrong forever."

"Why you—"

"Messieurs?"

Dan jumped two feet clear off the floor and Gav yelped. Dubois, poking his head into the room, offered a mild smile.

"I hope I am not interrupting?"

"Not at all," Gav said. "Please, come in, have a seat."

"Thank you," said Dubois. He settled into the chair, then looked around. "There seems to be a dearth of seats, alas."

"Unfortunate, unpleasant, but we'll have to carry on," said Dan.

"I suppose we must," said Dubois. "Although I do sincerely pity Officer Gabriel. She has her hands full."

"Part and parcel," said Gav.

"Especially since she isn't even being paid," said Dubois, the corner of his mouth turning up.

"Here, how did you—"

Gav elbowed Dan in the leg, much too late. The other side of Dubois' mouth curled up. He sat back and crossed his legs at the ankle.

"Good, I'm glad you knew," he said. "I should hate to have been the one to break the news to you."

"How did you know?" Gav asked.

"I saw her in the street when Elyse and Ms Belladonna sounded the alarm," said Dubois. "I noted her as the only pedestrian who changed course, and then, obviously, recognized her when she arrived."

"Very astute," said Dan.
"Thank you."

"Much like you're trying to change the course of this conversation?" Gav suggested.

Dubois' smile snuck out a little farther. He made a helpless gesture.

"I felt it was important," he said.

"I think we'll stick to what I think's important, for the moment."

"Mr Gruchy doesn't get a say?"

"I agree with Mr Free," Dan said.

"Do you," said Dubois, a knowing twinkle in his eye. Dan flushed and clenched his teeth.

"Mr Dubois," Gav said, more sharply than was necessary. "Could you tell us, please, how you came to be associated with this theatre?"

"Certainly," said Dubois. "I found the company curious, and Mr Luna's ideas promising. I am a lover of the arts, and I take the opportunity to sponsor them when I can."

"How did you run across them, then?"

"Mr Luna was a very loud man," said Dubois. "And he kept loud company. They were difficult to miss."

"Hm," said Gav. "If I may: how did you acquire your considerable wealth?"

"You may not," said Dubois.

"Sorry?"

"You may not ask, and furthermore, I will not answer you," said Dubois. "It is irrelevant, and not your business."

"Look here, if it's legitimate—"

"Then it is none of your business, Mr Gruchy," Dubois said coolly. "Is it not?"

"I—well, I—I suppose it isn't," said Dan.

"Thank you. With that out of the way, we may move on to relevant questions."

"Very well, Mr Dubois," said Gav. "Could you tell us where you were during intermission?"

"I remained in my seat," said Dubois.

"No you didn't," said Gav.

Dubois stared at him. He narrowed his eyes, chin lifting.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"You weren't in your seat by the time Dan and I got up, and you didn't come back in until after we did," said Gav. "Where were you?"
"Mr Free, I assure you, I remained in my seat for the entirety of the intermission," said Dubois. "Perhaps you simply did not see me there."

"You're right, I didn't, because you weren't there," said Gav. "If you're going to lie to me, Mr Dubois, you could at least have the courtesy to do it well."

Dubois' eyes sparkled. His mouth pinched as he fought down a smile. He spread his hands and shrugged.

"What makes you so certain that I am lying?"

Gav scoffed and rolled his eyes. Dan cocked a thumb at him.

"He remembers everything he's ever seen," he said. "He's got a photographic memory."

"I'm so sorry," Dubois said, with immediate and staggering sincerity. Gav took it like a punch to the chest.

"I—oh," he said. "That's . . . not the usual reaction."

"And yet it is, I feel, the only appropriate one," said Dubois. "Especially in your line of work."

"Well," Gav stammered. "Well, I—I'm sure everyone's got a few things they'd . . . rather forget. Hahah."

"For the fortunate majority, time dulls the teeth of our memories," said Dubois. "Otherwise, they would have ripped us all to shreds long ago. You show stunning fortitude in the face of what must surely be fiercer beasts."

"Mr Dubois," Dan said, stepping in to save Gav from having to think of something to say. "Perhaps we could return to the matter at hand?"

"If we must," said Dubois. "What was the question?"

"Where were you during intermission?"

"Ah, yes, how could I forget. It is not your business."

"Now look here, sir, you can't just keep giving that answer to everything. You've lied to us once already, just come clean about it and we can move on."

"No, thank you, I don't think I shall," said Dubois.

Gav sat forward, his gaze sliding downwards.

"Mr Dubois, would you mind terribly removing your gloves?" he asked.

"I would, in fact, mind," said Dubois, sharpening.

"That puts you in an awfully suspicious light," Dan warned.

"So suspect me; it troubles me very little."

"Look here, if you've got nothing to hide, then—"

"I have plenty to hide, Mr Gruchy," Dubois interrupted, tapping on the arm of his chair. "The only
fact relevant at this moment is that I did not kill Mr Luna. Everything else is my own business, and none of yours."

"And how are we meant to know you didn't kill him if you're hiding things?"

"Presumably, by catching whoever did."

Dan floundered. Dubois was hard as steel, and equally unyielding.

"I think that will be all for now, Mr Dubois," Gav said. "You may rejoin the others."

"Thank you, sir," said Dubois, getting to his feet. "If I can be of any assistance that does not require divulging the details of my personal life, please do not hesitate to let me know."

"I'm sure we won't," said Gav.

Dubois nodded to him and took his leave. A silence hung in the hair after him like a pall of smoke. "Well," said Dan. "It's got to be him. Hasn't it?"

"If that man's got no dirty secrets, then I'm the King of Spain," said Gav. He hesitated, then added, "But d'you know, I believe him."

"You what?"

"I believe him, that he didn't kill Miles."

"D'you care to mention why?"

"Cos Miles was strangled, and Dubois' only got eight fingers."

Dan gawped. Gav held up his right hand and pinched his pinky and ring finger.

"These ones are fake," he said. "The glove's stuffed with something and the missing two are sewn onto the middle one. Lovely stitching, very neat."

"Which is why he wouldn't shake hands," Dan realized.

"And why he won't have the gloves off."

"But that's ridiculous, I mean, he's a suspect in a murder case and it could clear his name in a second! Unless he did do it, and he'll know we'll be looking for an eight-fingered man."

"I'll have to look again," said Gav. "I wasn't close enough for detail. But I still don't think he did it. I think Monsieur Dubois' only sin, in this case, is vanity. He doesn't want to show anyone the hand 'cos it ruins the aesthetic of him. I'm sure it drives him up the wall."

"Takes one to know one, eh?"

"You what?" Gav cried, livid in an instant.

"Sorry, sorry, nothing," said Dan. "But look: he won't tell us how he got rich, he won't tell us where he was during intermission, he won't show us his hands—what're we meant to think, anyway? He's looking pretty good for it."

"I think we'd best put Dubois in a box for later," said Gav. "I don't think he killed Luna and that's all
that matters at the moment."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then I'll eat my hat."

"Hubris," said Dan, shaking his head. "Pure hubris."

"Go down and get Marquis, would you? We've got a lot more to get through and not an awful lot of time."

"Hope you brought kitchenware," Dan muttered, heading out.

"Heard that!"

"You were meant to!"
The Middle Men

They didn't get much out of Marquis that they hadn't already known—he disliked Miles on a personal level, but bore no particularly virulent grudge against the man. He'd already been working for the theatre when Peake bought it out, and found him (and Elyse) to be no worse than the previous owners. He'd been backstage during all of intermission, giving performance notes to Ms Jenzen and Ms Belladonna.

"Just the two of them?" Gav asked. "Not the men?"

"None of the men were present, and I have learned by now that hunting for them is a waste of my time," said Marquis. "I would have given them their notes in full after the second act, before they left for the night."

Likewise, since he had been in the green room the entire time, he had not noticed anything or anyone suspicious.

Up next was Bones, whose story was entirely different. Intermission was his busiest time, during which he and Christophe bustled about setting everything up for the second act. He'd noticed the coming and going of a few people—Marquis, Torrian, Chad, and Miles—but nothing and no one that had seemed out of place. He could not tell them where Miles had gone for certain.

"Upstairs, more than likely, though," he said. "Christ, I don't like to think about it."

And he shuddered.

His reviews of Peake, Elyse, and Miles were all glowing. He was, like the latter two, convinced that this play would restore the Théâtre des Variétés to its former glory and make them all as wealthy as Dubois.

"Speaking of," said Dan. "D'you know where he came from? He seems an interesting fellow."

Bones pursed his lips and shook his head. "No, sir, no no. I'd stay well clear of that, if I was you. Not the sort you'll want to associate with."

"Do you suspect he might have killed Mr Luna?"

"Hah! Him? No. Not fucking likely. He's a mollycot, not a murderer."

Dan pressed his fists and bit his tongue. He kept his eyes forward, taking deep breaths through his nose. The cool air did nothing to quell the fire under his skin. Gav kept his composure better, but there was an edge in his voice when he spoke.

"Thank you, Mr Brouillard, that will be all," he said.

Bones went away. Dan let out a breath like a gasket releasing steam.

"A real class act, that one," he said. "How often d'you think he washes his dick?"

"I doubt he ever has," said Gav. His face was caught up between a smile and a sneer.

Dan cracked his knuckles and his neck. He went over to the window and pulled the curtains aside. It was still raining, the sky low and brown in the lamplight. The cobbles were painted gray and orange and white. The street was empty.
"Who next?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Gav.

"D'you want me to pick?"

"If you like."

Dan let the curtain fall closed. Gav was slumped in his chair, eyes closed, resting his forehead on his knuckles.

"We haven't got to do this," Dan said softly.

"I haven't got to where I am by giving up, and I don't intend to start now."

Dan chewed his lip. He picked his way across the room and knelt at Gav's side, touched his knee.

"Not every hand is winnable, B," he said.

"Would you mind terribly retrieving Mr James, please?" said Gav.

Dan bowed his head. He patted Gav's knee.

"I'll see if there's coffee, as well," he said. "But, Gav? If ever you get to a point where you want to walk away, I'll be with you. All right? No judgement."

"Yes yes," said Gav, waving a hand at him. "Time's a-wasting, B."

"Time's not the only thing," said Dan.

Chad's shock of ginger hair had gotten even more shocking by virtue of being stood out at all angles. He'd accepted a coffee, but only to hold it on the arm of his chair. His stage makeup was smeared and smudged. His American accent was just as garish.

"It's awful, isn't it?" he said. "Just awful. It's the kind of thing that—you always—it's the kind of thing that happens to other people, isn't it? You always think of it that way."

"In our profession, you learn not to rather quickly," said Dan. "But nearly everyone says the same thing, so you're not alone."

Chad nodded. He went to take a sip of his coffee and sloshed it over the side of the cup. He set it down again and rubbed at his face.

"Right," he said. "Sure. Sorry. What do you need to know?"

"The rug in the second act," said Gav. "There was nothing in it, correct?"

"That's right," said Chad. "Because we had to dump it, we—Miles was never . . . in it. Not even in rehearsal. Too cumbersome, too—too dangerous."

"D'you know of anyone who might've had a grudge against Mr Luna? Someone who might've wanted him dead badly enough to carry it through?"

"Oh, God," said Chad. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed. "Uh. N-not . . . there were—of
course not everyone liked him, but I can’t . . . I mean, you don’t think of your—the people you work with, and your friends, you don’t ever think of them as murderers. No, no, I can’t—sure, plenty of people didn’t like him, but I can’t—I can’t even imagine anyone actually . . . ."

"All right, perhaps that was a bit too aggressive of a start," Dan said. Gav sipped his coffee and propped his ankle on his knee. "Let’s try something easier. How long’ve you been with the Théâtre?"

"Hm," said Chad. Again, he lifted up his coffee to take a sip, and again spilled it before he could.
"Oh, Jesus, sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me today. Uh. I—so this is my first time working with this venue. Um. But I’ve been doing the—acting . . . thing for about six now. Um. I—Torrian and me have been . . . y’know. What’s—what’s the word I’m looking for, um. . . ."

"Working together?"

"Sure, yeah sure, that. So—I don’t exactly remember where we met Miles—Mr Luna. But it's—it's been a few years, y’know? Three or—or maybe four, we've known him. Always promised us we'd strike it rich someday, said he’d make us—make us stars, or—"

He scratched the back of his head and cleared his throat. This time, he managed to get the coffee all the way to his mouth before it went everywhere.

"It sounds like you were very close," said Dan. "This must all be tremendously difficult for you."

Chad shook his head. He set his coffee down on the floor and took out his kerchief to wipe up all the spills.

"It uh . . . hasn't really sunk in. I mean, even though I saw, it hasn't really—y’know, I've been—I've been shooting him in the chest for the past . . . and he always gets back up as soon as the curtain closes, y’know? It's like—it's like why didn't we just close the damn—even though I know it wouldn't've changed anything, I still—any second now he'll just walk through the door and. . . ."

"Mr James, if this is too difficult for you, we'll send you on your way," Gav said.

"No, no, I want—I want to help, I'm sorry, I'm getting . . . caught up in my own head," said Chad, stirring the air with his hands. "Sorry. No, sorry, we can—we can keep going, I'm fine."

"Could you tell us, then, where you were during intermission?"

Dan wouldn't have thought it possible for Chad to get any paler, but he went so white that it was a wonder he didn't faint.

"I . . . was getting notes from Marquis," he said. "For the performance. You—oh Jesus, you don't think that's when—"

"Curious," Gav remarked. "Considering Mr Marquis stated that you weren't there."

"Well—I—maybe I'm thinking—I must be thinking of another night, I don't—I don't know, I'm sorry, my head's all a mess."

"Understandable," said Dan, glaring at Gav. "Things do tend to get confused under this much stress."

"Hahah, well, good, I'm not—so I'm not the only one," he said. "No, I—that must've been last night. Tonight I was—I was just—you know, it's the funniest thing, but I can't actually remember! I know—I know how that must sound, I know, but I—"
"You may go, Mr James," Gav cut him off. "Thank you, and please send Mr Crawford up."

"I—oh," said Chad. "Are you sure? I mean—you don't—look, really, I didn't kill him, I swear it, I swear to God—"

"Of course you didn't," Dan said gently. He came over and took Chad's arm to guide him from the room. "Try and get some rest, if you can. It's looking to be a long night of it."

"Yes, yeah, I'll—I'll try, thank you, sorry, thank you—"

When he had gone, Gav shook his head and scoffed.

"What a bloody mess," he said.

"Ease off, B, it's a terrible shock."

"Or otherwise he's a good actor," said Gav. "Which he's demonstrated, at length."

"Come off it."

Gav shook his head. "Never trust an actor, B. Especially one that's the centre of attention."

"You're a cold-hearted bastard, d'you know that?"

"Good," said Gav. "That's what I'm meant to be."

"Is it?" Dan said, more sharply than he'd intended. Gav's hand clenched on the arm of his chair.

"One of them is a murderer, Daniel, I'm not mucking about with the pity game."

"Being a prick doesn't make you a better detective, Gavin."

"And being a sodding doormat gets you walked all over. Where is Crawford?"

"Why don't you go down and get him, if you're that eager?"

"Maybe I will," said Gav, shoving himself to his feet. "Since I'm the only one round here who can be bothered to do anything."

"Oh, you're a bloody riot, you are."

Gav glared at him, and Dan glared back. A gust of wind spattered rain against the window. Raised voices wafted up the stairs and through the closed door. Gav was the first to look away, rubbing his arm. Dan cleared his throat.

"Sorry, B," he said. "That went a bit far."

Gav shrugged. "Things do tend to get unpleasant, under this much stress," he said. "Er . . . sounds like there may be something happening downstairs. Should we have a look, d'you think?"

"You mean should I have a look?"

"I'll be right behind you," Gav promised.

"Oh all right," Dan sighed. "Come on, then, let's go and see who's cocked it up."

He headed down the stairs, Gav trailing along at his elbow. They left all the coffees in the office,
which, considering the scene of chaos that greeted them, was probably a wise decision.

Bones was rolling on the floor, clutching at his face. Gabriel held Torrian back while he spat curses at Bones. Elyse and Blake knelt by Ms Jenzen, who had fainted again, and Christophe was weeping in the corner.

"What the bloody hell is going on in here?" Dan roared, striding into the midst of the ruckus with all the force he could muster.

"I've had enough!" Torrian shouted, thrashing in Gabriel's grip. "I've had enough of this shrivelled dick and his ugly mouth!"

"You are being ridiculous!" Marquis cut in, before he'd even finished.

"Fuckin' maniac!" Bones choked.

"The only maniac in the room is you!" Blake retorted. The clamour erupted anew, with such volume that it rattled the windows.

"Everyone shut up!"

Dan lunged to the side, shielding Gav. The whole room froze. It wasn't until Peake spoke again that Dan realized he was the one who had shouted out.

"Thanks," Peake said.

Dan took a deep breath. Gav put a hand on his arm and pushed it down, stepping around him.

"I think," he said, "that it's very late, and everyone is very high-strung at the moment."

"Specially Miles," said Elyse. Blake shoved her in the chest and knocked her onto her rear.

"This being the case," Gav went on, "I think it's best if those of you we've spoken with already went home. Miss Gabriel has your addresses, we're all very aware of what it'll mean for you if you decide to run, so let's not make a production of this, shall we? Everyone we have not spoken to, please remain here."

Bones was the first to move. He clambered to his feet and shook his head. Blood was spattered on his shirt, and one of his eyes was swollen.

"Lunatics," he muttered.

Gabriel let go of Torrian. The two of them glared at Bones as he skittered out.

Peake was the next to go, beckoning Elyse to come along with him. She hovered by Ms Jenzen's side, glancing between her and Peake.

"I will stay with her," Blake said to Elyse. "Go."

"Well, all right," said Elyse, dubious. "Maybe we oughtta—oh, hey, darlin'?"

Ms Jenzen sat up slowly, with ample assistance from Blake and Elyse. She shook her head and rubbed at her eyes.

"What's happening?" she mumbled.
"Hey, yeah, some of us are headin' home, sweetheart," Elyse said. "I been asked to head on, but I can stay if you want me to."

"Is—who else. . . .?"

"I am staying," said Blake. "And I will not leave without you."

"Where is Aaron?"

"Here," he said, sidling around Gabriel to get to her. "I will stay, if I am allowed."

"Provided you behave yourself," said Gav.

Marquis' jaw clenched. He let out a slow breath and knelt on Ms Jenzen's other side. "I will stay if you need me."

Ms Jenzen nodded. She rubbed her eyes again. "I think—I will be all right. If you stay."

"And so will I," said Blake.

"Y'all sure you don't want me to—"

"Elyse."

She looked up. Dubois was hovering by the door, expectant.

"I should hate for you to have to walk home alone," he said. "May I accompany you?"


He smiled, indulgent. "That's Italian, but very close."

She went to him, and he took her hand, and led her out into the cold, rainy dark.

"Should I wait for you?" Chad said to Torrian. "Here or—I could, if it's—I mean, if nobody thinks that—"

"I think that would be fine," said Dan. "We don't want anyone to have to wander about alone."

"Don't you have your wife and kids to get home to?" Torrian asked.

"Not tonight," he said bitterly. "They're not expecting me."

"O.K., so stick with me," said Torrian. "There's enough space at my place."

"Sure," said Chad. "Sure, yeah, sure. Sounds good."

Torrian clapped him on the shoulder, then turned to Gav and Dan. "So . . . what now?"

"First, I think I'd like to know what happened," said Gav. "Miss Gabriel, d'you mind?"

She blinked at him.

"Sorry, were you speaking to me?" she said.

"Officer Gabriel," Gav said, then muttered, "for God's sake."
"Oh, right," she said. "Perhaps we'd better talk about it upstairs?"

"And leave everyone else alone down here?" Dan asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"We're fine, now," said Torrian. "All the issues left."

"Except one," said Marquis, shooting a dirty look at Christophe.

"Darling, stop, please," said Ms Jenzen, pressing her forehead to his shoulder. "I can't take any more. Please stop, please just stop."

He softened, put an arm around her and kissed her hair.

"Of course," he said. "I'm sorry. I will say nothing more about it."

"Mr Marquis, would you mind keeping an eye on things?" Dan said. "You seem . . . reasonable enough."

"I don't believe there will be any further issues," said Marquis. "But if there are, I will intervene to prevent them from escalating out of control."

"Mr Crawford, if you would keep an eye on Mr Marquis," said Gabriel.

"Yes ma'am," said Torrian, saluting.

"Don't do that."

"Sorry."

"And make sure Mr Demarais doesn't . . . just make sure he doesn't, would you?"

Torrian glanced back at Christophe, who had curled up into a little ball on the floor and was making pitiful noises.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Officer Gabriel, shall we?" said Dan.

"Let's," she said.

"What was all that about?" Gav asked, dropping into his chair. Dan took the other, stretching out his legs with a groan.

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Gabriel. She hovered between the two chairs, then parked herself up against Peake's desk. "None of them were sensible."

"To be expected, I s'pose," said Dan. "They've been through rather a lot. What set it off?"

"So far as I could tell? A disparaging remark from Brouillard."

"Surprise, surprise," Dan muttered. "Who to?"

"It seemed more generalized."
"And Crawford just went for him?" Gav asked.

"No. Mr Crawford told him to knock it off, and all the Whites in the room took a great deal of offense to his tone, and it promptly went tits-up."

"Er," said Dan. "Right. I can see how that might happen."

"Quite," said Gav. He cleared his throat. "Crawford seemed like he had it in for Brouillard, anyway, d'you know what that was about?"

"You'd have to ask Mr Crawford," said Gabriel.

"Of course. What else have you got?"

"Excuse me?"

Gav waved a hand. "About the suspects, what've you got for me?"

Gabriel gave him a once-over so chilly it made Dan's extremities try to retreat into his stomach.

"Mr Free, let us get one thing straight," she said. "I am working with you, not for you. You will not speak to me like a servant, and if you continue to do so, you can find a new officer. Have I made myself clear?"

"I'm starting to see why you're on probation," Gav said dryly.

"Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes yes, all right. If you don't mind, could you kindly impart any nuggets of wisdom you've acquired in your time observing the suspects?"

"I would be happy to," said Gabriel. "If you think you can keep quiet for that long."

Dan snorted. Gav glared at him.

"You as well," said Gabriel.

"Me? I've kept quiet! When have I not been quiet?"

Gabriel raised her eyebrows at him. Dan folded his arms and slouched back in his chair.

"At your leisure, officer," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "Now: it's been properly Shakespearian down there, so strap in. . . ."
Much Ado

The web was as tangled as Gabriel had warned them.

Blake's animosity towards the menfolk was well-established, to the point that they shrugged off all but the most aggressive insults from her. She and Ms Jenzen, however, loved one another fiercely (which, Gabriel hypothesized, might have been a further source of friction with Marquis). Bones found all the actors tiresome, and exhibited a particular distaste for Dubois. He got on best with Peake and Elyse, and was prone to taking out his frustrations on Christophe.

Elyse, meanwhile, was bound and determined to be everyone's friend, regardless of whether or not they desired her as one. Torrian was unreceptive to these attempts, perhaps even annoyed by them, while Dubois treated her with an avuncular fondness. Peake spoke practically only to Elyse, with occasional comments to Marquis or Bones, and otherwise kept to himself. Whenever he did speak, it was treated as gospel.

Chad and Torrian formed another unit, nearly inseparable. Their opinions rarely differed, and where they did, Torrian deferred on matters of culture and Chad conceded on points of technical skill. Both of them bore a terrific distaste for Bones and a pitying discomfort around Christophe. They seemed the most willing to actually listen to Blake, but never at the cost of contradicting any of the other men.

"Ms Jenzen," Gabriel said, "was the most intelligent and canny person in the room, and if we're looking for someone to be our inside woman through all this, we'd do best to pick her."


"That's because you've got no respect for women, and you're a fool," said Gabriel.

"Right on both counts," said Gav.

"You're not any better," said Gabriel. "You can choose to believe me or not, but I'm telling you what I observed. The woman is a genius, and she's got everyone down there wrapped round her little finger."

"Could she have killed Luna?" Dan asked. He still smarted from the rebuke, but there was nothing to be gained from pouting.

"Could have, most likely didn't," said Gabriel.

"Hasn't got the hand strength for it," Gav said.

"No, Mr Free, because she is too smart to murder a man in front of a pair of world-famous detectives," Gabriel snapped. She took a deep breath. "Sorry. I didn't mean to lose my temper."

"Well," said Gav. He shrugged. "Thank you for that, at least."

"You're an arse," said Dan.

"And what're you, bloody Lancelot?"

"I'm trying to be decent, which is a hell of a lot—"

"Decent? To who? 'Cos you're bloody well not being—"
"You wouldn't know decency if it stood up and—"

"Gentlemen."

Gav flung himself back in his chair like a child. Dan folded his arms and glared at the window.

"The sooner we get done with this, the sooner we can all go home and sleep," Gabriel said. "Now. I've told you what I've learned. What've you got?"

Gav muttered something under his breath. Rubbing at his eyes, Dan shook his head.

"A load of old arse," he said. "Gav, why don't you summarize?"

"Why don't you?"

"'Cos I can't bloody remember it all, you absolute pillock."

With much sighing and rolling of eyes, Gav gave a summary of everything they’d learned from their interviews thus far. Gabriel sat quietly through all of it, nodding along, watching Gav intently. When he’d finished, she pursed her lips, drumming her fingers on her arm.

"It's more than nothing," she said.

"I'd call it a start, and that's generous," said Dan.

Gabriel shrugged. "To save us time, why don't I just sit in for the rest?"

"No," said Gav.

"I promise to be very quiet and stay out of the way," said Gabriel.

"It doesn't matter, that isn't how it works."

"I might have to agree with Gav on this one," Dan said, squirming. "We've got a sort of a system set up. Prefer not to have, er, outside elements when possible."

"Fine then, I won't waste my time trying to convince you." She pushed off the desk and strode for the door. "Who shall I send up?"

"Mr Crawford would be ideal," said Dan.

"Please."

"Sorry?"

"Say please."

"Er . . . Mr Crawford, please," said Dan.

"Much better."

When she left, a tension hung in the air behind her.

"Gav," said Dan.

"Not now," said Gav.
"All right."

Presently, Torrian arrived. He stalled by the door, glancing around the room.

"Come in, come on, haven't got all night," said Gav.

"Sorry about the lack of chairs," said Dan.

"Right," said Torrian. He made a face. "So. Questions, huh?"

"Questions it is," said Gav. "And 'cos I'm bored with the faff: where were you during intermission?"

"I was out having a smoke," said Torrian.

"The whole time?"

"Yes."

"I never saw you come back in."

"I used the stage door." The corner of his mouth pinched. "Marquis gets snippy if we go through the house."

"Then why did you go out that way?"

"I was avoiding Marquis."

"What for?"

"So I could actually go out and have a smoke and not get roped into notes."

"I thought those were rather important to a production," said Dan.

Torrian shrugged. "I would've heard them all afterwards." He sobered, his brows pulling together and his head bowing. "I guess it doesn't matter, now. Damn, poor Miles."

"Did you get on well with him?"

"I did," said Torrian, pulling himself together. "Chad and me worked with him for a few years. He could be—he wasn't always good company, but at least he looked out for us."

"And you don't get on well with Marquis?"

"Marquis? He's got a stick up his—he's uptight, but not worse than any other director," said Torrian. "They're all wound too tight."

"I see," said Gav. "Would you mind telling us why you attacked Mr Brouillard?"

"I didn't attack him, I punched him in the nose," said Torrian. "And he deserved it."

"What for?"

"He said some things."

"What sort of things?"

"I don't want to repeat them."
"Whether or not you want to, you'd better."
Torrian hunched his shoulders. "He said Miles wasn't the one who should've been hanged."

Dan caught Gav's eye. Gav nodded.

"Did he say who he thought it should've been?" Dan asked.

"No, but we all knew who he meant."

"We don't," said Dan. "So if you wouldn't mind telling us."

He chewed his lip. His gaze darted all about the room.

"I don't know if I can tell you," he said.

"For God's sake," Gav muttered. "Not another one. Gruchy, let's just have Gabriel arrest the lot of them and be done with it."

"Look, I would tell you, seriously," said Torrian. "But it could get someone hurt, or worse, and—it doesn't have anything to do with what happened to Miles—probably—but . . . oh, hell."

"If we promise you it'll go no farther than us," Dan started.

"I won't believe you," said Torrian. "Sorry. You're police."

"We're not police."

"You're police-adjacent."

"Was it Dubois?" said Gav. His voice was flat, disinterested.

The side of Torrian's mouth pinched. He shrugged. "I guess you knew, after all," he said.

"Lucky guess," said Gav. "That'll be all, thank you."

"Really? Everyone else was up here for longer."

"And the night was younger, and I had more patience," said Gav. "Good evening, Mr Crawford, please don't leave town until this's all wrapped up."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Everyone's a suspect. Send Ms Jenzen up before you go, would you?"

Torrian frowned. "O.K., then," he said. "Good night to you both."

When he had gone, Gav clicked his teeth.

"D'you know, I'm starting to hope it was Bones," said Dan.

"Of course you are," said Gav. "'Cos you're a bloody-minded fool."

"When popular opinion has it that one should be hanged, one does tend to get a tad bit vicious," Dan said, clipped.

Gav sighed. "Can't argue with you."
"What's our plan for Ms Jenzen?"

"You handle her. I can't politic well enough tonight."

"I'm glad you're big enough to admit it."

"I'll chuck you out the bloody window."

"Very politic of you."

There was a tap on the door, like a mouse scratching its ear. Dan straightened himself out, and Gav fixed his face.

"Yes, come in, please," he said.

The door nudged open, and Ms Jenzen poked her face in.

"You called for me, messieurs?"

"Yes, yes, we just had a few brief questions, then we'll send you along home," said Dan. He offered his chair to her. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm so sorry about earlier. It's been difficult for everyone."

"It's perfectly all right," said Dan. He crossed to Gav and kneed him pointedly in the leg. Gav rolled his eyes mightily and vacated his chair.

"Do try to keep your composure, if you could," he said, perching on Peake's desk instead. "I should hate to have to pause in the middle to pick you up off the floor."

"Oh, be quiet," Dan said, glaring at him.

"I'll do my best," said Ms Jenzen. She took out her kerchief and blotted the tears off her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I'm not usually like this. It's all just been such a terrible shock. . . ."

"I'm sure it must," said Dan. He leaned his elbows on his knees and laced his fingers together. "I'll try to be as gentle as I can be, but I'm afraid some of the questions may be rather distressing."

She nodded and sniffled. "I'm ready," she said.

"Thank you. I know this can't be easy. How long have you been with the Théâtre, Ms Jenzen?"

"A few years, now," she said. "But—only through Mr Marquis. This was my first role onstage."

"First ever, or at this venue?"

"First ever, sir."

"Really? I'm astounded. You were incredible, I never would've guessed."

Her cheeks pinkened, and she ducked her head.

"It was very little to do with me," she said. "I had good direction, that's all. Mr Marquis is wonderful."

"There's only so far direction can go, and talent must carry the rest," said Dan.
"You're too kind, Mr Gruchy, sincerely."

"I try to be. Your fellow actors seem a curious bunch. Have you known them long?"

She shook her head. "I met most of them at our first rehearsal, two months ago."

"You seem to have made very good friends with Ms Belladonna."

"Oh, yes, Blake is such a darling, I adore her," Ms Jenzen gushed. "I don't know what I'd do without her. She's been wonderful, absolutely wonderful."

"I understand there was some... friction, between her and Mr Luna."

Ms Jenzen's face fell. All the color drained from her cheeks and tears welled up in her eyes.

"There—there were some... incidents, yes," she said. "But—oh, please, don't tell me you suspect—!"

"We don't have anything decided just yet," said Dan. Guilt gnawed at his stomach and sweated all over his hands. "We're just trying to establish the facts, as they stand."

"Blake didn't—Blake couldn't have, you must believe me," Ms Jenzen entreated. "I know that there was bad blood between them, but Blake is a good woman, she would never hurt a soul, you cannot suspect her!"

"She's no more a suspect than anyone else," said Dan, pacifying. "Here, something you can do to help us get this all clear: can you remember what happened during intermission tonight?"

"Intermission?" said Ms Jenzen, her brow furrowing. "Well—Blake and Chad and I went into the green room, and Mr Marquis came back to give us our notes, and afterwards he went away, and we talked. Oh—oh, merciful heavens, you don't—that's not when—"

"Ms Jenzen, please try to stay calm," Dan said, as she hyperventilated.

"It is, isn't it?" she cried. "That's when he was—and we all just sat around while—oh, God!"

"I know, I know, it's horrible. Take deep breaths, Ms Jenzen, it will be all right."

"I can't—I can't—"

She pressed a hand to her breast. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Dan lunged forward and caught her as she toppled out of the chair.

"Right on cue," Gav remarked.

"Sod off," said Dan. "It's probably only the bloody corsetry, innit."

"Of course, blame the corsetry."

"Someone's got to."

In his arms, Ms Jenzen whimpered, and Dan helped her to get upright.

"Hello then, there you are," he said. "Had a bit of a spill, but you're all right."

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. Her eyelids fluttered, her chest heaved with laboured breaths. "So sorry, I.
"Not to worry, dear. Take all the time you need."

"I . . . where is—where is Aaron?"

"Downstairs," said Dan. "If this's too much for you, we can send you on home for the night. There's nothing so urgent that it's worth risking your health over."

"I would—I think I would like that," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm useless."

"Not a bit. Can you stand? Here, I'll help you, those stairs are tricky even for someone who's got all his wits about him. . . ."

Together they went down, and Dan handed Ms Jenzen off to Marquis. The two of them left. Only Blake, Christophe, and Gabriel remained.

"Who is next?" Blake asked.

"Er," said Dan. "You, I s'pose. If you don't mind."

"I would do nearly anything to be allowed to go home."

"Right. Well. We'll try to be as quick as possible, then."

Upstairs, Gav had reclaimed his chair. Blake went directly to the other one, and Dan resigned himself to standing for the rest of the evening.

Blake's accounting of events was mercifully brief. She readily admitted to despising Miles for his lecherous advances, but corroborated Ms Jenzen's claims that both women, Chad, and Marquis had all been together for most of intermission. She also confirmed that it was an uncouth remark from Bones that had set off the earlier altercation in the lobby. Her composure remained intact throughout, although at times her voice shook and her fists clenched.

When the interview was over, Dan asked, "Have you got someone to go home with?"

"That, sir, is none of your business," she said coldly.

"No, I meant—really nobody ought to be alone."

"Your concern for my well-being is very cute," she said. "Unnecessary, but very cute. Good night, Mr Gruchy. Good night, Mr Free."

"Yep, cheers," said Gav. "Send Christophe up on your way out, would you?"

She left, and Dan sank into the empty chair.

"Oh, God, what are we meant to do about Christophe?"

"How d'you mean?"

"He lives here, doesn't he? In the theatre?"

"And?"

"There's a body in it!"
"Oh. I reckon we could send him off with Gabriel."

"If she'd take him. I wouldn't."

"We'll put him up in a hotel for the night."

"Will it be our hotel? 'Cos we're a bit strapped for cash at the moment. And speaking of which, we'd bloody well better find somebody to pay us for all this bollocks if we're going to be sticking with it."

"Someone ought to turn up," said Gav. "Maybe Dubois, if he didn't do it."

"And if he did?"

"We'll find someone else."

The knock that came was much more forceful than Dan would have expected. He started. Gav nearly fell out of his chair.

"Yes?" he called, clutching his cravat.

Gabriel shouldered in, lugging Christophe behind her.

"He's not doing fantastically," she said.

"Grand," Gav sighed. "Just what we need."

"I don't know anything," Christophe blubbered, clutching Gabriel's arm. "I don't know anything, please, please, tell them I don't know anything!"

"All right, pull yourself together," said Dan.

"I don't know anything! I didn't see anything!" He went still, his eyes turning to flint and his teeth to knives. "You mean to frame me. You saved me for last because you mean to use me as your scapegoat! Let go of me! Let go!"

"For goodness' sake," said Gabriel, while Christophe thrashed like a garden snake in her grip. "They're just asking questions, like they have with everyone else, and if you hit me again I'll box your ears!"

"You wouldn't dare," Christophe hissed.

Gabriel raised a warning hand. He flinched and dissolved into blubbery again.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I never meant it! Please don't hurt me, please, madame, I swear I'll be—"

"Quiet, would be optimal," Gav said.

Christophe zipped his lips.

"Thank you," said Gav. "Mr Demarais, how old are you? In a word or less."

"Sixteen, sir."

"That's two words, but it's a significant improvement, so I'll let it pass. How long have you been working with the Théâtre?"

"One year, nine months, and twenty-six days."
"Very . . . precise, thank you. Er . . . and it was Mr Brouillard who hired you?"

He nodded.

"And you live in the theatre?"

Another nod.

"Do you have anywhere else you could stay?" Dan asked. "Until all of . . . this, is done with? Only it is rather a crime scene."

"Oh, no, I will never sleep here again," said Christophe, turning huge eyes on him. "Not now, no. Not now that Luna is here."

Dan looked at Gav. Gav raised an eyebrow.

"And by that you mean. . . ?" Dan prompted.

"His ghost, sir, I mean his ghost. It's with the others now. He was horrible enough when he was alive, I will not—I cannot—no, I will sleep on the street before—although if you could spare a few francs so that I don't have to?"

"Left my wallet at home," said Gav.

"Cleaned out," said Dan.

"Fine, here," said Gabriel. She dug in her pockets and came up with a handful of coins, which she pressed into Christophe's hand. "I know it isn't much, but it should get you a bed for the night."

Christophe dropped to his knees, effusing gratitude like vomit and weeping copiously. Gabriel rolled her eyes and extricated herself from his grip.

"Yes, yes, you're welcome. Come along, back on your feet, I'm not lugging you all the way back down the stairs, as well."

"Thank you—I'm so sorry—thank you, thank you, bless you, God bless you—" Christophe blathered, waddling backwards on his knees. "It will not go to waste, thank you, I'm sorry, thank you —"

"Hang on, hang on, where're you going?" said Gav. Christophe froze like a fox at the baying of hounds. "Mr Demarais, could you please tell us where you were during intermission?"

"I—I was dead!" he cried. "I was dead, I don't know anything, I didn't see anything, I was dead!"

He leapt to his feet and threw himself at the door. Coins fountained from his hands when he crashed into it. He darted through the silver hail, wrenched the doorknob, and leapt out. There was a complicated series of thuds, a scramble, a skitter, and the sound of another door being slammed into.

"What . . . just happened?" Dan said, watching the last coin roll away under Peake's desk.

"I don't know, and I can't be arsed to work it out," said Gav. "We'll catch up with him when we've had some sleep."

"If we're done, the two of you really ought to send for a coroner," said Gabriel. "And some police who are on-duty, as well."
"Oh, bollocks," said Dan, hitting himself in the forehead. "This is going to be a mess and half, isn't it. Why didn't you call for us right away? What've you been doing for the past four hours? Where've all the suspects gone? Bloody hell."

"D'you know, it's just occurred to me, we could've gone for them as soon as Mis—sorry, Officer Gabriel arrived," said Gav, frowning.

"Excellent timing, Detective, very well-thought," said Dan, rolling his eyes. "Wait, here's an idea: if we tell them we thought Gabriel was on-duty and legitimate—"

"You'll ruin my life," Gabriel cut in.


"We'll work it out later," said Gav. "We've still got one suspect left to interrogate."

Gabriel frowned. "We do?"

"Oh, yes," said Gav. With a groan, he got to his feet, then gave her his most mischievous look. "We still haven't been to see Miles."

"Every time with the bloody dramatics," Dan said, shaking his head.

Gav rounded on him, the very picture of wounded pride, and squealed, "It's my brand!"
Heights

The body didn't look any better for the intervening time.

"Good lord," Gabriel muttered, staring up at it from the aisle. "Someone was looking to make a spectacle, all right."

Dan mounted the stage and helped Gav up after him. Gav went right up the ladder and peered at Miles' neck, his jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed.

"I'm not saying it's got to have been Dubois," said Dan, "but it's got to have been Dubois. Nobody else had their hands torn up—correct me if I'm wrong, Free."

"Ms Jenzen was wearing gloves," Gav said absently. He came down off the ladder only to drag it round to Miles' other side and climb back up.

"Come off it, she never."

"White gloves, though. Blood would've soaked through in a quick minute."

"There, see? It's Dubois. Unless you've found ten whole fingers up there."

"Bruises. And no. Looks like he was strangled with the rope."

Gabriel came up onto the stage while they bickered. She peered at the body. When Gav got off the ladder, she went up it.

"With the rope?" said Dan. "Then how'd he get blood under his fingernails?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"And I guess it was bloody Dubois! Especially since Miles wasn't strangled by hand, the eight-fingered bastard would know it'd give him away in a second."

"If he wasn't strangled by hand, there's no reason for anyone to have been clawed up, so your glove nonsense goes right out the window," said Gav. "It could've been anyone."

"Then how did the blood get under his bloody fingernails, you massive twat?"

"It's not blood," said Gabriel.

Gav whipped round. Dan stared at her.

"I beg your pardon?" Gav said.

"It's not blood," she repeated, climbing down from the ladder. She dusted off her hands. "That's why you've not found anyone who's been clawed at."

"If it's not blood, then what is it?" said Dan.

"Syrup, or something," she said. "You can tell because there isn't any skin or hair in with it. There's some of it up under his shirt, too."

"The squib," said Gav, hitting himself in the head. "It's the bloody squib. Scratched it off himself
"when—or no, it would've been after he changed, he must've missed a spot washing up."

"Wait wait, if he had time to wash up and get changed, how come nobody but Bones saw him backstage?" said Dan.

"Maybe he didn't do his washing-up backstage," said Gabriel.

"But where else. . . ?"

Silence dropped from the rafters and snapped taut. Together, all three of them looked up into the looming darkness.

"Well, best of luck, Gruchy," said Gav.

"You're bloody well coming with me."

"I am bloody well not."

"Officer, you—"

"I'll stay down here to catch you," she said, straight-faced.

"Un-bloody-believable. You're going to get me killed, the two of you. If I don't come back, on your heads be it."

"There's a lad," said Gav, clapping him on the shoulder. "That's the spirit."

"Won't be laughing when my bloody corpse drops on your head," Dan muttered, and stomped off for the nearest ladder up to the catwalks.

The wings closed around him like marsh water, dark and chill. The building creaked and moaned. Rain pattered on the roof, skittered through the pipes. Shadows fluttered in the dim gaslight, sharp-edged silhouettes looming from the stage. Dan breathed into his hands and kept his attention broad, never allowing himself to seize upon a sight or sound. The theater, he reminded himself, was empty, save for Gav and Gabriel and himself.

He started up the ladder, the painted metal cold under his hands. Starting ten feet up, flat iron bars enclosed the length of the ladder. Dan doubted they would do much to save him if he slipped; nor would they protect him if something swung at him from behind. Indeed, someone could easily climb down the outside from above, silent and stealthy and right behind him. . . .

The theatre, he reminded himself, was empty.

By twenty feet, he was winded; by thirty, his thighs and shoulders were burning. When he finally climbed up onto the catwalks, he had to take a moment to catch his breath. The stage sprawled below him like a pit of fire. Rope garlands diced the space finely, dotted with lights and pulleys and weights like Christmas ornaments. The sound of the rain was louder up here, the smell of sawdust and mildew stronger. The air tasted of metal.

Dan picked his way along the first catwalk, and then across to an adjoining one. He kept his chin raised, did not let his gaze stray any lower than the handrails. With every step he took, he could feel the give and wobble of the catwalks, and with every step his stomach threatened to fail him. He made his way forward until there was no further forward to go, the bright stage lights directly beneath him. Across the way, centre-stage, he could see the rope from which Miles had been hanged. The catwalk next to it was completely covered by a giant cage. Dan focused on that. He
gripped the handrails and planted his feet, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

"Oy!" he called.

Gav screamed. There was a thud, either from him falling over or from him jumping.

"All right up there?" Gabriel shouted back.

"Right enough," he said.

"See anything?" Gav asked.

"Trying not to."

"Well, have a look about! You're not up there for the bloody scenery!"

"Twat," Dan muttered.

He braced himself, and inched out onto the catwalk. His hands stayed white-knuckled on the railings. The air beneath him stirred with strange currents, plucking at the cuffs of his trousers. He kept his eyes on the cage, solely and firmly on the cage, until he was standing right next to it.

At his elbow, the rope creaked. A shiver scuttled up his spine on electric filaments. A breath brushed the back of his neck. The catwalk swayed beneath him, threatening to tip him off into empty air, and he could swear, in the muttering of the rain, he could swear he heard voices. . . .

The theatre, he reminded himself, was empty, and the sooner he got this done the sooner it would be empty of him.

Dan pried his eyes open and smacked himself in the side of the head until his brain sputtered back to life.

The cage was about fifteen feet tall, ten wide, lying on its side with the top end facing Dan. Upon closer examination, it was made of cloth-wrapped wooden struts that had been painted to look like metal. There was a large hook at the apex, well-worn.

"I think I've found the Device," Dan called out. "Some sort of prop for the finale. Good bet this's what was meant to drop, instead of Luna."

"Grand; anything useful?"

"I'll vomit off this bloody catwalk directly onto your sodding head!" The world spun around him, and he redoubled his grip on the handrails, muttering, "Oh, hell, I didn't mean it, didn't mean it. . . ."

"Eugh, don't," said Gav.

"Is his costume up there?" Gabriel asked.

Dan whimpered, hopefully quietly enough that the other two didn't hear him. Gingerly, he got down on his knees, eyes squeezed shut. He fumbled around until his hand met cloth, then held the item up in front of his face before opening his eyes.

"Looks like it," he said. He fumbled around some more. "And—oh God!"

"What? What is it? Gruchy? Dan!"
"I'm fine, everything's fine," Dan said, although he was shaking so hard it made the catwalk buzz. "Just—there's a washcloth, for the squib I'd guess, and it's all wet and cold and slimy, and I—put my hand on it without looking. Eugh. But it's fine. I'm fine."

"You're sure? You don't need me to come up there?"

"No—here, if you were willing to come up here, why didn't you do it in the first place?"

"He's got a point," Gabriel said.

"Ooh, ah, loads to see up there, Gruchy, could you move it along? Terribly late already, really ought to be getting on."

"Useless," Dan said, shaking his head.

Although he rooted around through the entire pile of laundry, Dan found nothing else of note. There were no suspicious marks on the handrails, nor on the cage, nor on the bit of the rope he could see. Dan reported this all down to Gav and Gabriel, who muttered a brief conversation between the two of them and then told him to come back down. Dan raised no objections, and indeed had to restrain himself from kissing the ground when he got back to it.

"Right," he said, wobbling out onstage. "So that's told us approximately nothing we didn't already know. What was he doing up there, d'you think?"

"Hard to say," said Gav. "But let's talk about it out front, yeah? I don't like having the Author of Damocles over me whilst I'm trying to think."

"Agreed," said Gabriel.

"Let's hook it," said Dan.

The three of them returned to the front of house, where at least there was no corpse looming over them. Regardless, Dan couldn't get rid of the prickle on the back of his neck. He put his back up against the wall and folded his arms.

"So," he said. "What brought Luna up there?"

"Getting out of the way of the stage crew?" Gav guessed. "Hiding from Marquis and his notes? Or it could've been something illicit, we've no way of knowing."

"Better view of the tits," said Gabriel.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Gabriel gestured to the ceiling. "There'd be a better view of the tits, from up there. I'll bet you anything he was up there every night, watching the women through the second act. It's not a coincidence that's where he was killed, somebody knew he'd be there."

"D'you know? She's got a point," said Dan.

"Were you looking at my tits?" Gabriel demanded, rounding on him.

"What? No! God no, I only meant—about somebody knowing he'd be up there, that's all! I don't bloody know from tits."

"He'd also die before he'd look down from any height above three feet," Gav said.
"And that as well."

"But you'd think that somebody would've known Luna had a habit of going up there, wouldn't they," said Gav.

"We never asked."

"It seems the sort of thing one might mention of his own accord."

"Look, unless they're all lying—"

"Entirely possible," said Gabriel.

"Thank you," said Gav.

"If they were all in on it, they'd all have their bloody stories straight ahead of time, which they haven't," said Dan.

"I don't think it was all of them, Gruchy, but I think it could've been any of them."

"Not Elyse."

"Could've been an accomplice, to keep us distracted."

"You are a suspicious bastard, aren't you," said Gabriel.

"It's my brand," said Gav. "The point is, we still haven't got enough information to put this all together yet."

"What, the famous detective can't solve it in a night?" Gabriel asked, folding her arms.

Before Gav could say anything, a thunderous knock resounded against the door. Dan leapt off the wall, his hand flying to his holster—which of course, wasn't there.

"Police!" someone shouted. "Open the door, please!"

"Oh, shit," Gabriel hissed. "Listen, I've got to go, they'll have my head if they find—"

"Go," said Dan.

"But—"

"Thank you," Gabriel said, before Gav could finish his objection. She darted back into the theatre and the door swung shut behind her.

"Dan, you can't—"

"I just have," he said, moving to the front door. He tugged it open. "Bonsoir, officer, and what the hell took you so long?"

The brigadier did not look impressed with this greeting. Rain dripped off his cap, and the caps of his two constables. Gav sidled up behind Dan, peering out like a suspicious neighbour. A flicker of recognition sparked in the brigadier's eyes.

"We were informed that there has been some sort of... incident?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Gav made a face halfway between a wince and a smile.
"My poor dear officer," he said, "I extend my sincerest condolences for how interesting your night is about to become."

It was five in the morning by the time they finally got back to the hotel.

Dan went directly to the bed and planted his face on it, the rest of him quick to follow. Gav made time to slap his rear before collapsing next to him.

"Easy, B," Dan mumbled.

"Brain's all gone," said Gav. "Spent it all."

"We ought to've hooked it with Gabriel. Would've served them right, for being four bloody hours late to a murder. I can't believe they made you write out everything."

"My hand's gone, as well."

"Oh, damn and blast," said Dan. He fumbled around until he found Gav's hand, brought it up to his face and kissed the palm of it. "Your poor old hand."

"Least it's over with."

"For the next two hours, 'til we've got to get up and—"

Gav groaned loud enough to drown him out. Dan toed out of his shoes, shucked off his jacket, and wriggled the rest of the way into bed. Gav came after, snuggling up to Dan's chest and tangling their legs together.

"Ugh," he said.

"What?" said Dan.

"Ugh."

"What? What're you ughing at?"

"You're all clothed. It's horrible."

"So're you."

"And it's horrible."

"Ah, well then, I s'pose we'd better fix it."

By concerted effort, they both managed to get undressed. Dan tugged the sheets up over them, and Gav wiggled in close again. Dan kissed his forehead and put an arm around him.

"G'night, B," he said.

"'S morning already."

"Go to sleep, Gav."

"Yeah, fair play."
Outside, the clatter and murmur of Paris rolled on, an engine of perpetual motion. Raindrops slithered down the windowpane, painting the room with squiggles of pale orange lamplight. Gav’s breath was warm against Dan's skin, ruffling his chest hair. Dan stared at the far wall, drawing idle patterns on Gav’s shoulder with his thumb. Gav shifted, and shifted again, sighed and sniffed and rearranged his feet.

"Dan?" he said at last.

"Yeah?"

Gav hesitated. He rolled back on his shoulder, keeping his hand on Dan's arm. His eyes were liquid amber in the lamplight.

"You don't really think I'm a cold-hearted bastard, do you?"


"No! Come off it, really, I'm not as bad as all that."

"You've got this unpleasant habit of rolling your eyes at people who're in distress, and it's not at all attractive."

"Look, no, that's different."

"How?"

"'Cos you don't know if they're faking it! They could all be faking it. At least one of them, anyway. And, besides that, can't afford to let people reel you in with the pity-game, can you. Once you start feeling sorry for a bloke, there's nothing to be done."

"I seem to manage all right."

"Yeah, apart from not solving any murders."

"It's not about the bloody murders, Gavin."

"Then what is it about?"

"It's about you being a cold-hearted bastard."

"I'm not, though! I never roll my eyes at you."

"Never? Try every other hour."

"Not when you're properly upset. I do care, B, I care for you tremendously."

Dan sighed. "I know you do. I just can't work out what separates me from . . . everyone else."

"You're important."

"Everyone's important to somebody, B."

"Yeah, but not to me."

Pursing his lips, Dan took Gav's face in both his hands. He kissed him soundly on the forehead, then squashed him up against his chest.
"You're a selfish arse, and this is not a conversation to be having when we've both been awake for twenty bloody hours."

"Selfish arse is better than cold-hearted bastard, so I'll take it."

"Go to sleep."

"You first."

"All right, cheers," said Dan. He flung himself onto his back and let out an egregious snore.

Giggling, Gav snuggled up next to him and nuzzled into his neck.

"Sweet dreams, B," he said.

Dan yawned. "Sleep tight, B."

Far, far too few hours later, Dan was woken by the sun pouring in through the window, and the smell of toast.

"S'breakfast?" he mumbled, scrubbing at his face.

"Morning, B!" Gav chirped. "Rise and shine!"

"What's wrong with you?" said Dan. He ratcheted himself upright, squinting and groaning. "What time is it?"

"Half seven," said Gav. "I've made tea, and also coffee, in case the tea's not enough, and there's toast with jam, and eggs as well, 'cos we had them—love an egg, go well with the toast, wouldn't they? S'pose you could do that if you liked, though it might not pair well with the jam, hm. . . ."

Dan looked round, blinking the blur from his eyes. Gav fluttered about the kitchen, his hair sticking up at all angles, his bare feet pattering on the floor. There were dark bags under his eyes, a tremor in his hands.

"You haven't slept at all, have you," Dan said.

"Ah, sleep, but who needs it, honestly," he said, faking a smile. "Sleep when you're dead, 's what I always say."

"And I wish you wouldn't. Come back here and lie down, at least."

"Nah, too much to do! We've got a murder to solve, haven't we."

"We don't, 'cos we've handed it over to the police, and they'll take care of it."

"Oh, but Dan, Danny boy, my loveliest most precious Daniel, you haven't looked out the window this fine morning!"

Dan narrowed his eyes.

"What's out the window?" he asked.

"Have a look! And then have a coffee. And then break out the Irish cream, 'cos you're going to
bloody need it."

With no small measure of trepidation, Dan put a hand on the windowsill and peeked out, just enough to see the street below. He dropped back, eyes wide, stomach queasy with dread.

"The press," he uttered.

"It's the damn press," said Gav.
"They won't wait forever, you know," Gav said, cradling his coffee. "Sooner or later we'll have to go out there."

"No we won't, 'cos I intend to stay up here 'til they break the damn door down," said Dan. "Bloody vultures, the lot of them. You'd think, wouldn't you, that there'd be better things going on in the entirety of Paris?"

"Well, I don't know, we're celebrities, B!"

"We're vaguely famous in certain circles."

"Nah, come off it. It's nearly a compliment, innit, having the press show up."

"It's a compliment I could do without," Dan grumbled. "You know they're only after us 'cos the police wouldn't tell them anything."

"And we won't tell them anything, either, and won't that get their knickers in a twist," Gav said. He drained his coffee and went back for another.

"Oy, stop that, you'll jitter clean out of your skin," said Dan.

"Ooh, talk of newsworthy." He filled his mug halfway with coffee, halfway with cream, and halfway with sugar. "Better than falling asleep in the midst of it all, innit."

"Is it worth running off to piss every half hour?"

"B, I've already poured it, B, you can't make me throw it away, B," said Gav, pouting.

"I'll dump it over your ruddy head if I've got to."

"No, I'll be all sticky! I can't meet the press sticky." He settled back into his chair and gave Dan a coy look over the brim of his mug. "If you know what I mean."

"For God's sake," said Dan.

"You're such a grumbly grump when you're sleepy. No fun at all."

"And you're an insufferable twit when you've not slept."

"Don't be so hard on me, B, my brain's been done over-easy."

"You're over-easy."

"Only for you," he said, and winked.

"For God's sake."

"You might feel a bit better."

"What're you on about?"

"For having a cheeky sucky-do. There's worse ways to start off your day."
"I'm going to dunk you in an ice bath if you don't stop."

"Could do with a nice bath."

"Go and have one then, and leave me alone."

"I thought we'd go together, save on water and heat and all that?"

"Gavin," Dan growled.

"Fine," said Gav, getting to his feet. "Grumbly grump."

"Call me that again, and I'll tie your balls in a knot."

Gav laughed so hard he spilled coffee all over the floor.

"It's not funny," Dan whined, "I'm not joking."

"Oh, bless your cotton socks," said Gav, wiping at his eyes.

"I'll have you."

"Do, please."

"Sod off, you randy prick. Every bloody word that comes out of my bloody mouth—"

"Dan?"

"What?"

"Love you."

Dan heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah yeah, love you as well," he said. "Would you wipe up that ruddy syrup you've spilt all over the floor?"

"Oh, tits and arse, I have, haven't I," said Gav, staring down at the mess. A manic giggle bubbled through his lips and he muffled it with his knuckles. "Whoops, oh dear."

"You're absolutely useless," said Dan. He dove back into his toast and eggs, shaking his head. "Honestly! The biggest mess in here is you."

"That's not very nice."

"No, but it's true."

"I'm a delight!"

"And a mess, and speaking of which, if you don't clean up, I'll mop it up with your beard."

"You're so cruel to me, B, you're a slavedriver," Gav whined, setting about cleaning up at last. "Absolutely no respect whatsoever. Everything I do for you—"

"All two things you've ever done for me."

On the floor, coffee-stained rag in hand, Gav pouted.
"Knock it off," said Dan.

"But Dan."

"I'm going to get dressed, and you're going to clean that up, and then we're going to work out what's to be done about the ruddy press," said Dan, getting to his feet. "And that'll be that. You twit."

"I've done more than two things for you ever! You can't just say things like that when they aren't true."

"I am going to get dressed," Dan insisted. "And if you're still bent out of shape about this by the time we've both slept more than four hours between us, then we'll talk about it."

"I will be," Gav said.

"I'm sure you bloody will be, you absolute camera."

"What's that mean? Dan? What d'you mean by that?"

"I don't know!"

With that, he stomped off to get dressed.

It wasn't too long after that one of the hotel staff came up to politely inform them about the press loitering outside. Dan thanked them and sent them away, and locked every lock on the door once they'd gone.

"All right," he said. "What's our plan?"

"We'll just go down and talk to them, it'll be over quick enough," said Gav.

"They'll follow us all bloody day."

"Not if we give 'em a juicy tidbit to chew on. Look, it'll be a few photographs, the standard old faff —"

"You can't go out for photographs, B, you're not presentable."

"I'm not presentable? You look like you've crawled out of a bin."

"And you look like the bin I crawled out of!"

Gav snorted. "I don't s'pose there's a back way out," he said.

"If there is, they're probably watching it, as well."

"Bait and switch, then?"

"I hate the bait-and-switch, and I'm not doing it."

"Of course not, it reminds you that you're not the famous one."

"Sod off."
"Stings 'cos it's true, B."

"I just haven't got a nose that sticks out eight feet in front of my bloody face. They don't recognize you, they just recognize your ruddy proboscis."

Gav scowled. Dan prodded his nose with a finger.

"I like it, for what it's worth," he said.

Gav rubbed his nose and scrunched up his face. "I'm not talking to you."

"Oh what? Come off it, it was a joke."

"Ha-ha, now come and handle the vultures."

"Don't see why you get to poke fun at me and I don't get to poke back," Dan said, snagging his coat from its peg by the door. Gav followed suit.

"Who was poking fun at you?" he asked.

"Idiot," Dan muttered.

The moment Dan and Gav stepped out the front door, they were mobbed by reporters. There was such a clamour of questions that Dan couldn't hear a single one of them, such a sea of faces that he couldn't pick any out. A camera went off with a blinding flash and a loud pop. Dan's heart skipped a beat. His hands broke out in cold sweat. There was no air, amidst the crush and press of bodies, the seething clamour. He grappled onto Gav's arm, fighting down nausea. Another camera went off. Dan flinched and squeezed his eyes shut.

"All right, all right, no photographs, please," Gav said, shouting over the rabble.

The pop of a flashbulb drove Dan's fingers into his wrist like railroad spikes. Gav pried himself loose.

"Oy, you there, I said no photographs!"

"Mr Free, can you comment upon—"

"According to the police—"

"—rumours of a—"

"—fled the scene, could you provide—"

"One at a time, one at a time! Back off, the lot of you, give us some room to breathe. You there, with the moustache, you seem to know how to keep a respectable distance. You first."

The tide retreated. Gav sidled over in front of Dan, bumped him with his shoulder. Dan touched the small of his back and pried his eyes open. His heart thundered in his ears, so loudly that he couldn't hear the little moustached man when he spoke. The morning was bright, a hot yellow haze hanging over the city. Dan took deep breaths, focusing on the smell of wet stone, on the clatter of hooves on cobbles, on the crowded smokestacks, on Gav.
"At this time, we can't disclose that to the press," he was saying. "Rest assured, we are working with the police to conduct a full investigation. Next question, please, we'll have it from—you, sir."

Another reporter, another mumbled, muzzy question. Through it, Dan became aware of a ringing in his ears. As soon as he'd noticed it, it started to fade, taking the feverish haze in his vision along with it. The morning wasn't so bright after all—thin clouds, watery sunlight, a biting chill in the air. Dan reoriented his focus on the nipping, needling sensation on his face and ears. The cold was distinctly Parisian, and could be trusted.

"While we have made some initial investigations, I'm afraid we're not at liberty to release the results," said Gav. "There is an ongoing investigation, however. In fact, you've caught us on our way to conduct it. Excuse us, please, it is in a manner of speaking police business, don't obstruct, there's a lad. Come along, Gruchy. Could one of you gentlemen flag us down a cab? Wonderful, cheers."

Gav waded through the crowd, faffing away, and Dan followed. Freezing water seeped up through the soles of his shoes. A cab was summarily flagged down, clattering and rattling, and on the mechanical strength of habit, Dan held the door open for Gav and climbed in after him. Gav gave the driver some address, and the cab moved off.

"Dan?" he said quietly.

"What? Yes, sorry," said Dan, blinking himself back awake. "What were you saying?"

"All right?"

"Yeah, absolutely. Just—dozed off, that's all."

Gav raised his eyebrows. Dan sighed and looked out the window.

"I had a moment," he said. "It's over, I'm fine now."

"Was it the cameras?"

"Partially. Partially the crowd, and the noise, and—I'm sure the lack of sleep hasn't helped. Where're we headed to?"

Gav pursed his lips, but he said, "Hunting up Mr James. I want to see if he's changed his tune now that he's had time to sleep on it."

"Not Christophe?"

"Wouldn't even know where to start. You're sure you're all right?"

"Yes, B, I'm fine. Nothing to worry over."

"All right. If you're sure."

Dan let out a breath and rubbed his forehead. He wished he'd had a second cup of coffee.

"So why Chad in particular, and not any of the others?"

"We'll get to the others," said Gav. "We're just doing Chad first."

"I'll trust your judgement, foolish though it may be."

"Nah, come off it, when have I ever steered us wrong?" Gav asked, chucking Dan on the shoulder.
"Hm? When?"

"Half as many times as you've managed to steer us right again," said Dan. "And I've had to pick up the slack."

Gav pouted at him. Dan kissed his own fingers and patted Gav's cheek.

"Got to keep that lovely head unswelled, B," he said. "Otherwise you won't fit out the door."

"Might do," said Gav. "I mean. It'd probably all go straight to my nose."

At long last, they arrived at a seedy flat, located an exorbitant cab-fare away from Dan and Gav's hotel.

"Seems an odd place for a married man to live, doesn't it?" Dan remarked, as they tromped up the front steps.

"It would be," Gav allowed. "But it's Crawford's place. I assume it's early enough that both of them will still be here."

"Oh. I'd forgotten they left together. Are we picking at Crawford, as well?"

"Might as well, while we're here."

"Having them both together might be an issue."

"I'm counting on it."

"Oh, bloody hell, you've gone cryptic again. What're you playing at?"

Gav winked at him. "You'll see."

They waited in the lobby while a bellboy went up to check if Torrian was in, then trekked up the stairs once invited. The whole building was rickety, rusted through, and Dan had to choose between getting red flakes all over his hand or risking a tumble down the stairs.

Torrian welcomed them in as soon as they knocked on his door. Chad was there as well, taking up a quarter of the sparse furniture and focusing on his coffee. The flat was cluttered, but almost entirely with literature. There was a great preponderance of books, scattered newspapers, toppled stacks of serials and several wicker baskets that were stuffed to the brim with letters. The window was grungy and small, leaving the interior in perpetual dusk.

"Can I get you two anything?" Torrian asked. "Coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee would be lovely, thank you," Dan said, settling into one of the chairs. "It's been a long morning of it already."

"Yeah, no kidding," said Torrian. "Mr Free, you too?"

"No thank you."

"I hope we're not imposing," Dan said. "Just had a few follow-up questions, in light of—new information."
"Hm," said Torrian. He brought Dan a cup of coffee, then settled into the one remaining chair. "O.K., what can I help with?"

Dan gestured to Gav, then sat back and settled in.

"Just a point of clarification, really," Gav said. "But starting with Mr James."

Chad raised his head. His eyes were wide, bloodshot. He cradled his coffee like a rosary.

"Yes?" he said.

"I was hoping you might've recalled something," he said. "Since last night was difficult for you. Perhaps where you were during intermission?"

"Oh. Right. I—think I must've gone out for a smoke."

"Not with Mr Crawford?"

"No—well, no," said Chad. He scratched the back of his head, wincing.

"I didn't know you smoked," said Torrian, frowning at him.


"Don't blame me, I don't have anything to do with it!"

"Gentlemen, please," Gav cut in. "Mr James, you would have used the stage door, correct? Since we didn't see you come through the lobby."

"That's correct."

"And Mr Crawford returned by the stage door."

"I did," said Torrian.

"Ah, then you probably ran into each other," said Gav. "That simplifies things. Mr Crawford, can you confirm that Mr James was out having a smoke by the stage door at the end of intermission?"

The corner of Torrian's mouth pinched up. "Yeah, I can."

"You know, it's an interesting thing," said Gav, sitting back and propping his ankle on his knee. "You smirk when you're lying."

Chad went white. Torrian locked up. Regardless, Gav carried on.

"I noticed it when we were first introduced," he said. "You couldn't remember our names, but played it off—apart from the smirk, of course. So would you—or Mr James—care to tell me what actually happened during intermission?"

Torrian got to his feet. "I'm going to have to ask you both to leave," he said.

"Torrian," said Chad.

"We don't have to take this! He has no right to—"

"I—just, I don't care," Chad interrupted. "I don't care. I'm done. It's gone on long enough. Just—let's just get it over with."
"No."

"Torrian."

"No! Get your head out of your butt and think about this!"

Chad looked Gav dead in the eye and said, "I was with Casimir."

"Dumbass," Torrian hissed, dragging his hand down his face.

"Where?" said Gav.

"In . . . the alley, outside the stage door."

"Doing what?"

Chad squirmed. Dan drank his coffee and kept his eyes lowered. Torrian cursed under his breath and paced to the window, shaking his head.

"Look, it's—it's really not what it seems like," Chad said. A bead of sweat crawled down his forehead. He wiped it away with his sleeve. "Just—he's very, very rich, and we were so hard up for money, and—Christ, God, it was Miles's idea, I didn't mean for it to get—he didn't, though, he couldn't have because I was with him the whole time, he didn't kill anyone, so you can't pin it on him, I know what it looks like, but—"

"A total mess," Gav said coldly. "Mr Crawford, could you perhaps provide a more coherent retelling of what's been going on here?"

"Dubois has a soft spot for redheads," Torrian said, toneless. "Soft enough to get him into a compromising position. Miles was blackmailing him. To get the play rolling."

"I see. And despite this, he continued having relations with Mr James?"

"Because of it," said Chad, his face buried in his hands. "Said if he was going to be paying for it anyway, he might as well get his money's worth."

"Christ alive," Dan spat.

"No, not like—it was a joke, it's all . . . mutual," Chad said. He sounded like he might be sick. "I'm—if there's any fault, it's mine. It's mine."

"It was you," Dan said, a flashbulb going off in his head. "That Bones made the hanging crack about. That's why Crawford went for him the way he did. Isn't it?"

Torrian nodded. "We try to keep Bones as far away as we can," he said. "Blake and Karine do, anyways. I keep an eye on the time and pry 'em off each other at the end of intermission. Bones has Christophe scuttling around for him, looking for opportune moments. Because if he can get two witnesses—"

He mimed hanging himself. Chad flinched. Dan set down his coffee and swallowed down nausea. He could still feel the cold wall of the water closet against his back, the warmth of Gav's lips against his neck, the thrill of the unlocked door . . .

"One would think that could be avoided simply by not having your liaisons at the theatre," Gav said. His disdain barely covered up the tremor in his voice.
"That's what I tell him," Torrian said. "Especially since half the time they go back to Dubois' place anyway."

"Once in ten, at most," said Chad.

"Was last night meant to be one of those times?" said Gav.

Chad nodded.

"And you were with him for the entirety of intermission?"

"I was."

"Mr Crawford, can you confirm that?"

"Yeah," he said, both corners of his mouth remaining turned down. "They were both—right about where they usually are at the end of intermission."

"Right," said Gav. He slapped his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet. "I think that'll be all. Thank you, both, for finally working out how to tell the truth."

Chad looked up at him, exhausted, tearful.

"Are you going to tell anyone?" he said. "Is this—going to get out? Is—am I—?"

"Mr James," Dan said. "I have two very important questions. The first is: do you love your children?"

"Of course I do, what kind of a question is that?"

"The important kind. The second one is: do you love your wife?"

Chad stared at him, his face slowly twisting up with pain. The tears spilled down his cheeks. His fists were clenched so hard they trembled.

It was answer enough.

"We won't tell a soul," Dan promised.

Chad collapsed into a shuddering wreck. Torrian hesitated, then returned from the window. He sat down next to Chad and put a hand on his shoulder.

Quietly, Dan ushered Gav out. They stumped back down the stairs, neither looking at the other.

"Dubois next?" Dan asked.

"Dubois next," Gav confirmed.
Compared to Torrian's run-down flat, Dubois' was a palace.

There was a wide window with a picturesque view, the Arc de Triomphe conspicuous within it. The furniture was plush and modern, the floors buried under thick, patterned rugs. A tailor's mannequin stood in the corner, clad in a beaded black gown of considerable quality. Dubois had an evident fondness for blue, for porcelain, for Dumas and Hugo. Everything was neat and orderly, from the bookshelves to the chessboard by the window. It was bright, vibrant, beautiful, and all of it was lost on Dan because Dubois had kept them waiting for half a bloody hour.

"Please, come in, make yourselves at home," he offered. "I sincerely apologize for the delay; it was a late night, and a late morning, and I was not presentable. Sit, sit, please. You both look as though you could use some time off your feet."

"No trouble at all," Dan said through his teeth. The sofa he settled on nearly swallowed him. Gav, observing this phenomenon, perched on the edge of it like a sparrow.

"Can I get either of you something to drink?" Dubois said.

"No, thank you," said Gav. His eyes lingered on the mannequin, something odd in his expression, before snapping back to Dubois and sticking there. "I think we'd like to get directly to business, being somewhat short of time."

"If we must." Dubois draped himself on the divan across from them and flashed a smile. "So: what can I do for you?"

"We were hoping that perhaps you'd had an attack of conscience, and would like to come clean about where you were during intermission," Gav said.

"I'm afraid I am well defended against consciences," said Dubois. "Which is terribly unfortunate, considering the time you waited. You're certain I can't get you a drink?"

"I may need one shortly," Dan muttered.

"What if I told you that someone else has established your position during that time?" said Gav.

"Then I would be sincerely confused as to why you need to ask me."

"You're sticking to your guns, then? You won't tell us anything?"

"I won't tell you anything that's irrelevant, yes."

"Then perhaps we'll tell the press hounds about your ongoing affair," said Gav. "Irrelevant as it is, I'm sure you won't mind."

Dubois smiled like a snake.

"That's an interesting threat to make," he said, "coming from a gentleman in your position."

Dan locked in place, not daring to move. He fixed his gaze on the window. Next to him, Gav went cold.

"I don't know what you could possibly mean, sir," he said.
"Of course you do," said Dubois. "Takes one to know one, Mr Free."

"Are you threatening something, Mr Dubois?"

"Goodness, no, I wouldn't dream of it. I think we all understand that's a war nobody wins."

"Let me explain this situation to you, since you seem to be having trouble grasping it," said Gav. "Luna was blackmailing you; therefore you have an excellent motive. If we presume that you are capable of convincing Mr James to lie for you—which capability you have demonstrated already—you have ample opportunity. Your adamant refusal to give us any answers leads me to suspect that all further information is equally incriminating. I'm certain the police would be more than happy to arrest you on the strength of our case thus far."

"Let me make a counter-argument: I didn't do it, and you know very well that I didn't."

"Luna was strangled with the rope that hanged him," Dan said. "Not by hand. Your missing fingers won't save you."

Dubois swallowed. His hand clenched into a fist so tight it strained the seams on his glove.

"If you would make up your minds as to which threat you're aiming for," he said, "I would greatly appreciate it."

"Very well," said Dan. "Come clean, or it's off to the guillotine with you."

A wild laugh burst out of Dubois' mouth. He clapped a hand over it. Dan lurched between him and Gav while Gav clambered over the back of the couch.

Dubois held up his hand. His lip was pinned between his teeth, white from the pressure. His fingers trembled.

"No," he said. "No, let's not do that. What is it that you need to know?"

Gav popped up behind the couch. He fixed his hair and his cravat, brushed off his trousers, and straightened his jacket. Dan eased himself back into his seat, keeping one eye on Dubois.

"For a start," Gav said, "you could tell us how you came into your fortune."

Hanging his head, Dubois winced.

"Back to the beginning, I see," he said. "If we must. It isn't mine."

"You stole it?" Dan cried.

"That isn't what I said. I have a . . . I hesitate to call him a benefactor, so let us say sponsor instead, to whose accounts I currently have unrestricted access."

Gav narrowed his eyes. "And how did you acquire this access?"

"Let us say that there is an arrangement in place, and say no more."

"Let's not," said Dan. "Let's speak honestly, for once in our lives."

Dubois regarded him with such warmth that it made him sweat. "If you insist, sir."

"I insist, sir," said Dan.
Dubois shrugged. "Very well. I sold my soul for it."

Gav opened his mouth. He closed it again.

"You . . . I'm sorry, what?" said Dan.

"I sold my soul for it," said Dubois. It was said without a hint of sarcasm.

"Mr Dubois, this is hardly the times for jokes," said Gav.

"I'm not joking."

"It's growing very tiresome, sir, and it's not helping your case."

"You asked me for the honest truth, and I've told it to you. If you refuse to believe it, that is your own problem."

"Right, so he's absolutely mad," Dan said to Gav, in English.

"Not here," said Gav. He switched back to French to address Dubois. "Would this perhaps be a metaphorical turn of phrase?"

"One could think of it that way."

"One doesn't have to be particularly intelligent to see through your little games," said Gav.

"Although one would have to be exceptionally patient to put up with them for an extended period of time. To untwist your tongue, then—"

"You may feel free to do so at any time," Dubois said, twinkling.

"Oy," Dan snapped, going hot all over.

"I'm sorry; I couldn't resist. Continue, please, Mr Free."

"Er . . . yes," said Gav. "Right. Correct me if I'm wrong: you are given unrestricted access to your sponsor's accounts, and in return, he is given unrestricted access to you."

"You have a hideous mind, Detective," said Dubois, sounding entirely too pleased about it. "But you are not wrong. Perhaps you now understand my reluctance to disclose this information."

"It is beginning to come clear," said Dan. He coughed the squeak out of his voice. "Er. In that vein, moving along: where were you during intermission?"

"A somewhat less easy question," said Dubois. "Where did Mr James say that I was?"

"You've just confirmed it," said Gav.

"In my defence, he is married."

"I don't see how that could possibly be a defence," said Dan.

"No no, not for my behaviour; for my recalcitrance," said Dubois. "Mr James consented to the activities, but he was adamant that they be kept secret."

"Even at the cost of possibly being convicted of murder?"

Dubois shrugged. "I had faith that you would be able to catch the true perpetrator regardless." He
smiled a sharp-edged smile. "The more fool me."

"Sometimes, Mr Dubois, it must be done by process of elimination," Gav snapped.

"One would think that the process of elimination was the murderer's."

"That's in extremely poor taste."

"And yet, you seem to find it amusing."

"I don't."

"You're smiling."

"No I'm not."

"Ah, clearly then, it was simply wishful thinking on my part."

"Wishing you were funny?"

"Wishing, Mr Free, to see you smile," said Dubois.

Gav went pink. Dan boiled over.

"I think that's just about enough from Mr Dubois," he said, lurching to his feet. "And we'll be very glad to leave him to his sneaking about with married men."

"Only for the time being," said Dubois. He rose as well, the picture of politesse. "There is always the possibility, in the future, of what they call a household of three."

He winked.

Dan decked him.

"Dan!" Gav cried. Dubois went sprawling. Dan stayed between the two of them, seething.

Dubois propped himself up on his elbow and shook his head. With his thumb, he wiped his split lip. He met Dan's eyes, breathless and askew, and grinned. There was blood on his teeth.

He looked absolutely delighted.

"Mr Gruchy," he said, "I think you and I are going to get along splendidly."

"We're leaving," Dan said, grabbing Gav by the arm and hauling him towards the door. "Come on."

"Wait, now hang on—" Gav sputtered.

"Don't be strangers!" Dubois called after them.

"Can you believe that mincey little prick?" Dan railed, slamming the cab door shut. "What an absolute cad! The nerve!"

"Rue Étienne Marcel, s'il vous plaît," Gav said to the driver. "I really think you're blowing this just slightly out of proportion, B."
"You're only saying that 'cos he's got you wrapped round his little finger. Souhaitez vous voir sourire, what utter twaddle!"

"Monsieur Dubois plays a fun little game where he very politely presses all your buttons until he finds one that does what he wants," said Gav. "And I'm afraid you blundered right into it."

"Me? You!"

"He was trying to get rid of us."

"Trying to get rid of me, I don't even want to think about what he was trying to get from you."

"For me to stop asking uncomfortable questions, I reckon."

"Don't be sitting in here all high-and-mighty acting like you weren't blushing like a schoolgirl up there."

Gav reddened. "I was not! Anyway, we'll be lucky if he doesn't press charges for assault."

"Be lucky if I don't bash his pretty face in," Dan muttered.

"Contrary to what you might think, Dan, jealousy isn't actually all that attractive."

"Neither is you flirting with suspects!"

"I didn't do a single bloody flirt and you bloody well know it."

Dan fumed and chewed his lip, folded his arms and glared out the cab window. Gav heaved a tremendous sigh.

"Are you going to be sulking about this all day?" he asked.

"Haven't decided yet."

"Will it help if I tell you that Dubois' moved up the list?"

"From where to where?"

"Seventh to third."

Dan made a face. He unsloshed himself. Paris trundled by outside, chilly and bustling.

"What's next?" he asked.

"Mademoiselle Jenzen. I may have to ask you to handle her alone whilst I get Marquis out of the way."

"And what're we trying to get?"

"Confirmation that James wasn't in the green room at intermission. Actually, anything you can get out of her, I don't much care what it is. See if she knows anything about Christophe, that'd help."

"Christ," Dan cursed under his breath. "Running me into the ground, you are. Never a bloody moment's rest."

The wheels clattered onto a different cut of cobblestone. The shouts of street vendors came muffled through the cab window. Dan rubbed his head, although it did nothing to alleviate the rising ache
behind his eyes, the dryness on his tongue.
"Could do lunch, I s'pose," Gav said. "If you'd like. Jenzen isn't urgent, or at least not that urgent."
"I don't care. Whatever you want."
"I'm asking what you want."
"We're already on the way."
"There's shops and things about. We can spare an hour."
"Oh, so suddenly now we can spare an hour. Where was that hour to spare this morning when you couldn't come back to bed?"
"You didn't need it then," said Gav.
"You did!"
He waved it off, craning his neck to look out the window. "Nah, I'm fine. Sleep when I'm dead, won't I."
Dragging a hand down his face, Dan sighed.
"Fine, lunch, if you'll eat it," he said.
"Lunch it is, then," said Gav.

Somewhere, a clock tolled eleven. Gav watched the streets roll by, and Dan watched Gav. The sleepless night was catching up with him—in the tightness of his shoulders, the hazy defocus of his gaze, the erratic sway of his balance as the cab jolted along. He looked like he was in pain.
"Oy, Gav?" Dan said. "You were right."
"I'm sure I was; what about?"
Dan glared at him. Gav smiled.
"I'm glad you're feeling well," Dan said through his teeth.
"Nah, come off it, you've already said the important bit."
Rolling his eyes, Dan said, "That a load of them were in on it together. In on something, anyways. All the actors conspiring to keep Chad and Dubois a secret. So . . . well done for that, I s'pose."
"Thank you," said Gav. "Oy, Dan?"
"What?"
"That was one hell of a punch."
Despite himself, Dan smiled.

"All right," Gav said, leaning his elbows on the table and gesticulating with his fork. "So you get ten
"thousand pounds, but—"

"Oh, no," Dan groaned. "Here we go again. All right, let's have it, what've you got?"

Gav wrinkled his nose. "Ten thousand pounds, but for the rest of your life, every time you see a statue, you've got to climb to the top of it and plant a flag in it."

"Do fountains count?"

"Fountains count, little tiny statues in people's homes count, statues in museums count. Gargoyles and the like, they count too."

"No. Absolutely not. I'm not climbing up no bloody churches, have you seen the height of them? And—bloody hell, you'd have to go hopping across, one to the other, 'til you'd got all the blasted things or fallen to your death. I mean, Notre Dame alone!"

"Hundred of 'em at least, probably more."

"Not doing it, there's absolutely no way."

"Nah, just wear a cap and don't look up."

"Wait, so as long as I don't see the statue, with my eyes, I haven't got to climb it?"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Well I'll just be walking round like this all the time, won't I," said Dan tucking his chin to his chest and shielding his eyes.

"But if you ever catch a glimpse of one, even through a window, you've got to climb it and plant a flag in it."

"What about photographs?"

"Nah."

"Mmmmm still no, then. I'm not taking it."

"Ah, weak. I'd take it."

"Course you would. How's this: I'll give you ten thousand pounds—"

"That's a lot of money."

"That's a lot of money. Ten thousand pounds, but every time you see a street performer, you've got to knock him out and take his place for the rest of the day."

Gav spat into his coffee. "The whole day? What about when he wakes up?"

"Knock him out again."

"What if I don't realize he's woken up and he sneaks up behind me, or something?"

"Fight for your life then, innit. Just you and some bloke in his pants—"

"Why's he in his pants?"
"Oh, 'cos you've got to take his clothes, as well, when you take his place."

"Kidding me? You'd have the police on you in an instant. Ello? There's some mad bloke out here, walked up and clocked this poor chappie right in the jaw and now he's stealin' all his clothes! Mental. You'd go to prison in a day."

"You haven't got to knock him out right away, it's not like you see him and you just run up and whack him. Wait a bit, plan a strategy."

"Hang about 'til he goes for a piss and jump him when his prick's out?"

"Could do, could do."

"How long am I allowed to wait for?"

"Ah, long as it takes. You just can't do anything else whilst you're waiting. Total focus, on the street performer, 'til you've knocked him out and taken his place."

"And I've got to do whatever he was doing for the rest of the day?"

"Rest of the day, yeah."

"What if he's like, a sword-swallowor or something?"

"Ooh, work on your gag reflex."

Gav kicked him under the table. Dan winked at him.

"Mimes," said Gav. "Chock bloody full of mimes out here. That wouldn't be as bad."

"Snake charmer? Wander out there in his turban and vest, they're like, oy, wasn't it a brown chap a minute ago? And you go, nah nah, eyes're playing tricks on you, love, watch this, and pop open the little basket—snake to the face."

"Instantaneously."

"Be fair, it'd be one hell of a show."

"D'you know, I wouldn't do it."

"No?"

"Nah."

"'Cos you'd wind up taking a snake to the face?"

"Don't want to embarrass myself. I'll stick to what I'm good at, thanks."

"I'd do it," said Dan. He sipped his coffee. "Ten thousand pounds? I'd do it in a heartbeat."

"Course you would, you can do anything."

Dan scoffed. "Flatterer."

"Well," said Gav. "Except detectiving."

"That's what I've got you for, innit."
Gav smiled at him. "That's what you've got me for."
Left alone in a room with Ms Jenzen, Dan was once again confronted by the unfortunate fact that he had no idea how to talk to women. The parlour was lovely, and the tea was lovely, and of course Ms Jenzen was also lovely. He might as well have tried to make conversation with the bluebirds outside —although the birds were less likely to faint if he said something stupid.

"So, er..." He wiggled his nose. She watched him attentively. "Are you... feeling any better? Since last night?"

A flicker of pain crossed her face. Dan kicked himself.

"I'm as well as I can be, under the circumstances," she said.

"Yes, of course. Sorry, that was a silly question."

Shaking her head, she said, "It's kind of you to be concerned. Kind of you to stay with me."

"Well, it's mostly so Free can have a go at Marquis without—er, that is—"

Ms Jenzen smiled, then touched the corners of her eyes with her kerchief and sniffled.

"I understand. I'm only glad it's fallen out this way, instead of the other way around. I'm sure Mr Free is very good at what he does but—he's terribly intense, isn't he?"

"If by intense you mean insensitive, then yes."

That got a little laugh out of her. "Oh, but you mustn't speak of him that way, I'm sure he's perfectly wonderful when one isn't a suspect."

"No, he's like that with everyone. Somewhere underneath all of it I think he's got a heart, but it could just be occasional indigestion."

She tittered again. "Mr Gruchy, you are too funny."

"I try," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I do feel sorry for poor Mr Marquis, though," Ms Jenzen went on. "I can only imagine what he's going through, poor thing."

"Nothing to worry about, really. We're just trying to pin down a few details."

"Especially about Mr James."

"What about him?" Ms Jenzen asked, just a little too quickly.

"Well, nothing much, honestly," said Dan, rolling his eyes and sitting back in his chair. "He's had some trouble recalling his movements last night, and—well, accounts conflict. I'm sure it's all honest mistakes, not to worry!"

"Yes, I'm sure it must be. Who—I'm sorry if I'm overstepping my bounds, please do stop me if these are questions I shouldn't be asking, but—who is giving conflicting accounts? He was in the green room throughout intermission. I'm sure I told you so."

She said it with such perfect innocence that Dan had to wonder if Chad, and Torrian, and Dubois..."
were all up to something false together.

"You did," he assured her. "And Ms Belladonna said the same thing, but—"

"But?" she said, tearful.

Hating himself for every second of it, Dan scooted in closer and lowered his voice.

"But unfortunately, Mr Marquis says he was not there," he said. "That's why Free's taken him aside, you see. To try and get the truth out of him, and why he found it was necessary to lie."

"You aren't serious?" she cried. "Why would he say something like that? Chad was there, we all saw him! Marquis gave him all of his notes, I remember it clearly!"

"I'm sure you do, I'm sure," he said, patting the air. "There's a perfectly reasonable explanation somewhere, it's only a matter of finding it."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. Her hands trembled as she wiped them away, her lip quivering.

"I don't understand why he would lie. Where has Mr Free taken him? I will insist that he tell the truth, I will demand an explanation!"

"That won't be necessary. When Free gets back, he'll have everything in order, and we'll get a full explanation in nice, succinct terms. It'll all seem very silly in retrospect, it always does."

Ms Jenzen sniffled and twisted her kerchief in her hands. She made a beautiful picture, like a garden in the rain, all grey skies and drooping flowers.

Dan hardened his heart and pulled on his stomping boots.

"Especially considering what Monsieur Dubois had to say about it," he said.

Her hands clenched on the kerchief. She sat straight as an arrow, her face blank and hard.

"What did Monsieur Dubois have to say about it?" she asked. Her voice barely shook.

"I think you know what he said, Ms Jenzen," Dan said softly. "And I think it's time to put an end to the silliness."

The temperature of the room dropped ten degrees. Ms Jenzen twisted her kerchief until it creaked.

"It isn't silly," she said. "It was never silly. You can't possibly understand how serious this is."

Dan bit his tongue, choking on the irony. He managed to spit out, "Apparently, serious enough to obstruct a murder investigation."

"Better one dead than three."

"You understand that all this lying placed a great deal of suspicion on James and Dubois, don't you? They might have gone to the guillotine anyway, and the real murderer would have gotten away with it."

"Not if Mr Free were any good at his job."

"What exactly do you think we're doing here, Ms Jenzen?" Dan snapped. "Because, I hate to spoil the surprise, but it's our job, and we're doing it, and we've done it well enough to see through your
lies. It's our job to prevent you from framing people for murder, whether or not that was your intent!"

Her face turned the color of fine china. Tears brimmed in her eyes. Dan reigned himself in, a sliver of guilt poking into his stomach.

"Look," he said. "It's obvious you—and the other actors—care very deeply for Mr James, and that you're willing to go to great lengths to protect him. Anyone would be lucky to have friends like that, even if you are occasionally . . . misguided, in the order of your priorities."

Her lips pinched. She kept her head high, her hands clenched on the kerchief. Her brimming eyes stayed fixed on the far wall.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Now that you know about the two of them. What will you do?"

"Well, I thought we'd start by solving the murder, and then move on to a nice spot of minding our own business."

Not a flicker of amusement. Dan sighed and dragged a hand down his face.

"Did you know about the blackmail?" he asked.

"I suspected."

"Who else knew?"

"Only the actors."

"In your opinion, how likely is it that it's why Luna was killed?"

"Not at all likely."

"Have you got a reasoning behind that, or is it just feminine intuition?"

She fixed him with a firebrand of a look.

"If Luna's blackmail scheme was objectionable enough to get him killed, he would have been dead weeks ago," she said.

"Fair play. Can you think of any other reason, then?"

"Perhaps he simply grew too tiresome."

"To Ms Belladonna, for example?"

Something in her ignited with a concussive flash. She got to her feet. Dan shrank from her.

"I have told you, in no uncertain terms, Mr Gruchy, that Blake was not involved," she said.

"You also told me, in no uncertain terms, that Mr James was in the green room with you during intermission, and that came out to be a baldfaced lie. Precisely how many people are you covering up for, Ms Jenzen?"

"Blake did not kill him, and you are a damn fool if you think so!"
"Did you?" he retorted.

Her voice dropped a full octave as she snapped out, "No, Mr Gruchy, because if I had killed him, I would not have given him the satisfaction of being made a spectacle!"

Dan held up his hands, surrendering. "All right! All right. I believe you."

Ms Jenzen reigned herself in, trembling with rage. A pair of tears spilled down her cheeks and dripped off her chin. Something squeezed round Dan's heart.

"I'm . . . sorry," he said. "About all of this. I'm terribly sorry."

She cleared her throat, and when she spoke again, it was in her customary range. "I wished he would die, and now he is dead. There is nothing to be sorry over."

"Then for all the muck it's dredged up."

"Why are you apologizing? I thought you were only doing your job."

"That doesn't mean I've got to like it when people get hurt," he said. "I wish there had been an easier way. I wish this hadn't been necessary."

Her eyes narrowed. She sniffled and swallowed.

"You didn't come here for Mr Marquis, did you."

"I'm afraid we didn't."

"He left you with me because you are better at pretending to be kind. You are better at—at twisting the wrist just so, to get what you want."

"No, it isn't like that. It's 'cos Free can't help but be a bit of a bastard, and—"

"And you catch more flies with honey?"

"Ms Jenzen, it was never my intention to—to manipulate you. I was only trying to be gentle."

"You may gently stick a knife in someone's back, but at the end of the day, she has still been stabbed."

"All right, now look, it isn't so bad as all that. We're just trying to make sure we get the right fellow, and to do that, we need the truth! You're a very intelligent and canny woman, I'm sure you understand why all this was necessary. We need your help, mademoiselle. That's why we came here."

"I will very gladly help you to the door," she said.

Dan hung his head and squeezed his temples.

"May I at least collect Mr Free, before you do?" he asked. "I hate to leave him alone, he tends to get lost."

"Please do," she said.

Dan got up and straightened his shirt. Ms Jenzen watched him, her cheeks still wet with tears, her hands still clenched around her kerchief.
"I truly am sorry, Ms Jenzen," he said.

"I truly don't care," she replied.

Dan made a face. There being nothing else to say, he excused himself from the parlor. The study was right across the corridor, and he gave only a cursory knock before entering.

"Mr Free, I think we've just about stayed our welcome here, if you're done," he said.

Gav looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. Marquis, seated at his desk and nursing a gin and tonic, made an expression of such profound relief that he must have undergone quite a grilling.

"Have we, Mr Gruchy?" Gav asked.

"Not in an urgent sense, but I believe we ought to be wrapping things up."

"All right," said Gav. "But don't stand there hovering in the doorway. Either come in or go out."

Dan came in. Gav turned back to Marquis.

"So, now that Mr Gruchy is here, let's run through this one more time."

Marquis drained his drink. He looked Dan nearly in the eye and said, "Please, sir, have mercy and shoot me in the head."

"Good lord, Free, what've you been doing to him?" Dan asked, only mostly joking.

"Taking a page out of dear Officer Gabriel's book and being thorough," said Gav. "Let's take it from the top, shall we, Monsieur Marquis? Before Mr Peake, you worked for...?"

Marquis refilled his glass with straight gin, saying, "Monsieur Barnard."

"Who sold the theatre to Mr Peake. Why?"

"He was broke."

"And yet you stayed on. Because?"

"Because I was also broke, how many times have I told you this?"

"Not enough that it's started to make sense. You couldn't have found work elsewhere?"

"I was trying to."

"Are you still? I'm given to understand the money hasn't come in yet."

"There has been enough for wages, and I had faith."

"In?"

"That my heart would give out before I starved to death," he muttered into his gin.

"All right. And when did Miles turn up?"

"Two months later."

"Only two months, yes. Awfully convenient."
"Convenience is made, not provided."

"Ooh, put that in the next book of aphorisms," Dan remarked, leaning his shoulder up against the wall and folding his arms. Marquis shot him a glare that could have taken the varnish off the furniture.

"It was Mr Peake's idea to have him on?" Gav went on.

"Ostensibly."

"Which you say because...?"

"Elyse makes all the decisions and we all know it."

"Right, of course. You said Mr Luna arrived with his source of funding already equipped. By that, did you mean Monsieur Dubois?"

"Yes."

"Did Elyse perhaps decide to keep him on, and Mr Luna was an accessory?"

"It is not impossible."

"Were you aware that his courtship was less than sincere?"

"Do you mean: did I know he was leading her on? Yes."

"How aware of Mr Dubois' hobbies were you?"

Marquis gave him a quick once-over, then looked to Dan. Dan kept his expression stony, his eyes fixed on the bookshelf behind the desk.

Marquis' mouth pinched at the corners. He drained his gin.

"I see you've found out our little dirty secret," he said. "I knew he was buggering Chad behind closed doors. It kept the money flowing, and I was not called upon to, shall we say, understudy for the role, so I turned a blind eye to it."

Dan frowned, but kept his mouth shut. Gav kept going, pacing the room in neat, precise lines.

"How involved was Mr Dubois with the writing of the play?" he asked.

"You've asked that already, and I still don't see what it has to do with anything."

"It's not necessary for you to. It is necessary for you to answer."

The bottle made thirsty glug-glug noises as Marquis poured himself another straight gin, considerably taller than the last.

"He made some revisions," he said.

"And Mr Luna accepted them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"
"How in the hell should I know?"


"Was there, perhaps, anything of importance you wanted to ask me?" said Marquis.

"Everything I've asked you has been of importance. However, since we're short on time and I do hate to keep Mr Gruchy standing about for too long, I'll ask you one final question."

"Thank you God and all the angels," Marquis muttered.

"When Edgard says, And Devil take the loser in Act One, what is the response?"

Marquis stared at him.

"What?" he said.

"The line," said Gav. "What is it?"

"I don't see what this has to do with anything," he said again.

"It has everything to do with everything. What is the line, Mr Marquis?"

"I don't know. He repeats it, I think."

Gav got that particular smug glow about him. He nodded.

"Thank you, Mr Marquis. You've been very helpful. Come along, Gruchy."

He turned on his heel and flounced out. Dan followed.

"What was all that about?" he muttered to Gav.

"He doesn't know the line," said Gav. "It's Better the Devil than the woman, and then Edgard says Better the Devil than any woman."

"Which means...?"

"He never intended to understudy for Luna's role, either."

Dan glanced into the parlor on the way past. Ms Jenzen was still there, stood by the window. She watched them as they went past. Dan averted his eyes and swallowed down the bad taste in his mouth. He held the door for Gav on their way out, chewing his lip.

Before he could press further about the final question, though, Ms Jenzen spoke from the doorway.

"Mr Free."

He turned back, and Dan turned with him. Ms Jenzen stood just inside the open door, her hands clasped, her head held high. Her face was stone, her eyes flint.

"Yes?" Gav said. "Sorry, was there something else?"

"When you do find the murderer, please let me know," she said.

"I'm sure you'll hear about it in the papers. The delay shouldn't be too—"
"So that I may shake his hand."

Gav blinked. "I—well," he said.

Dan put a hand on his shoulder and steered him away. He could feel Ms Jenzen watching them all the way down the block.

"So," Gav said, as they turned the corner. "Would you care to tell me what exactly went on in there to get you thrown out?"

"I'm not sure I can manage exact, but the gist is: she hated Miles with a fiery passion, she and Blake were covering for Chad like Torrian said, and Gabriel was absolutely spot-on about her."

"D'you think she might've done it, then? It's not impossible she's got Marquis lying for her. She and Blake could've done it together. Could explain why nobody's got any defensive wounds—one holds him down, the other strangles."

"I don't think she did," Dan said. "No, I sincerely don't think so, either of them."

"Did you manage to get anything out of her about Christophe?"

"Outstayed my welcome before I got to it."

"Did you manage to get anything of use?"

"Look, I did what you asked. Why're you so caught up on Christophe all of a sudden, anyways?"

"'Cos he knows something, obviously. He's the only one we never got a single answer out of, he was scared out of his mind, and we don't know where he went."

"Yeah, but he was mad, wasn't he. Talk of ghosts and whatnot, it's bollocks."

"Mad people have still got eyes. There must've been a reason he thought we had it in for him, and why he got so bloody aggressive towards—"

Gav came to a screeching halt. Dan stumbled and looked back at him. His face was stuck in an expression of perfect horror.

"Gav?" said Dan. "Gav, what is it?"

"We've got to get back to the theatre," he said.

"What?"

Gav bolted like a greyhound. Dan scrambled after him.

"What the bloody hell are you doing? Gav? Gav!"

"Not a moment to lose!"
The press were already swarming the Théâtre by the time Gav and Dan arrived. Gav tried to push through the crowd and got nowhere, so Dan broke through instead, shoving anyone who wouldn't get out of the way. The moment they were through, Gav ran inside, single-minded and tight-lipped. Dan jogged after him, his heart heavy.

Police dotted the front of house. There were a couple of whey-faced photographers, the brigadier from last night. Gav grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him round.

"Is he dead?" he said.

"Sir—Detective, you should not be here—" the brigadier sputtered. Gav shook him.

"Where?"

"B, there's no reason to go and look, you really shouldn't—"

"In—the downstairs office, sir, but—"

Gav darted off. Dan could do nothing but follow. Gav slipped between a pair of officers and threw open the office door.

"Honestly, there's no reason—excuse me, messieurs—there's no reason for us to—"

He cannoned into Gav's back. Gav staggered. Dan caught his arm.

The room hadn't used to be red.

"Oh dear God!" Dan cried, whirling away. He clapped a hand over his mouth, choking down bile.

Gav didn't move. His breath came short and ragged. Dan risked a glance back, saw him still stood there, still looking, filling his eyes with the horror. Dan fumbled for his arm and dragged him back. Gav stumbled over his own feet. He was white as a sheet, his eyes the size of dinner plates. There was a nauseous hitch in his breath. Dan hauled him across the corridor, into the water closet, and slammed the door shut.

Gav just barely made it to the toilet before he was sick.

Dan shut his eyes, keeping his back firmly against the door and his throat tight. His stomach churned. The image of Elyse's office swam before his eyes, hazy and gruesome. He winced and shook his head. Gav threw up some more, interspersed with gasps and whimpers. Dan pried an eye open just in time to see him fall back, tears streaming down his face. Gav crawled backwards until he hit the wall, curled his knees up to his chest and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

"B, no," Dan said, going to him. "Stop that, it won't help."

Gav whimpered. His arms trembled, his face reddened as he gasped for breath. Dan took his wrists, and Gav yelped, kicking out at him.

"Gav, stop it, you're hurting yourself," Dan insisted.

His only response was to dig his fingernails into his forehead. Dan pulled his hands away from his eyes. Gav wailed like someone had pressed a red-hot iron to his skin, banging his head against the
"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," said Dan, while Gav thrashed and sobbed in his grip. "It's all right, B, it's me, nothing's going to hurt you!"

Gav sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes snapping open. He wound down like a clock, all the fight going out of him.

"Gav, no, don't," Dan pleaded, frantic. He relinquished his grip on Gav's hands to hold his face instead. "Please don't go, don't go, stay here, it'll be all right, I promise."

His eyes glazed over. His face went slack. His hands slid to the floor, limp. Dan shook him.

"Gav, come on, please, it's not so bad as all that! Look, we've got work to do, you can't—don't make me—B, please, please. . . ."

But he was gone.

Dan bowed his head, squeezing back tears. Gav's skin was fever-hot. His breath came shallow and uneven. The sharp smell of vomit lingered in the air. Dan's hands trembled. He pulled Gav to him and squeezed, just to feel him breathing, just to feel his heartbeat. Gav put up no resistance, as limp and docile as a doll.

Dan fought down his tears and steeled himself. He took Gav by the shoulders and held him out at arm's length.

"Let's get you home," he said.

The hardest part, by far, was shuttling him past the press with no one noticing. Dan shouted a lot, made a spectacle of himself while pushing Gav along. Questions came back from the crowd, the flash and pop of a camera despite Dan insisting no photographs. He managed to get them both into a cab, and slammed the door much harder than was necessary. He spat the address of their hotel at the driver. As the cab moved off, and quiet folded in around them, he coughed out an apology and resolved to tip well.

Gav didn't move for the entire ride, sitting where Dan had put him and staring at nothing. There was another, briefer attack of press when they got back to the hotel, but soon enough they were back in their room, all the doors locked and the curtains drawn. Dan helped Gav out of his coat, then set him down in the room's armchair.

"B, you there?" he asked, cupping Gav's cheek.

Gav didn't so much as blink. Dan patted his shoulder and sighed.

"All right," he said. "Take your time."

For the next several hours, Dan pottered about aimlessly. He tidied the room, washed the morning's dishes, and made the bed. He wrote a letter to their contact at Scotland Yard to let him know that they'd been caught up in a case and wouldn't be back for another few days at least. For lack of
anything more useful to do, he made tea. It took some doing to get Gav to actually grip onto his cup.

"That's tea for you," Dan said, settling into the desk chair and cradling his own cup with both hands. "Loads of sugar and cream, just how you like."

Not a flicker, not a twitch. Dan nodded to himself.

"Yeah, probably still too hot, we'll give it a mo'. Anyways, d'you know, I've been thinking about what we might do when this's all over with. Obviously we'll have to take some time to get our affairs sorted back in London, but then I thought: why don't we go somewhere warm? 'S too bloody cold here, too gray. I'd like to have some sun once in a while. Won't be a holiday, of course, since we've just had one of them, but I've been thinking about all those wide open spaces, in America, like."

"Be a tremendous change, of course," Dan went on. "But most likely for the best. I think it'd be for the best. I know you've said you're not much interested in farm business—me neither, if I'm honest, much too dirty and you've got to wake up too bloody early—but there's loads of mining out there, and I'm sure they could use a bloke who knows his way round explosives, yeah? I wouldn't mind being the breadwinner for a bit, if you needed the time, though I'm sure there's a million and one things you could do, if you put your mind to it. Drink your tea, it'll get cold."

Dan slurped his own, a demonstration. Like an automaton, Gav took a single sip of his tea. Dan could almost hear the gears going.

"There's a lad. I've heard, d'you know, they'll give you a plot of land for free if you'll only build a house on it? Not sure it applies to us, of course, but it's worth looking into. I'd have to work out how to build a house, as well, but it can't be that hard, people've been doing it for centuries. D'you think you might like that? Live in a little cabin we built ourselves?"

Gav said nothing. Dan sipped his tea, trying to soothe the tightness in his chest, the chill in the pit of his stomach.

"I think I'd like that," he said. "No press, all the way out there. Nobody but us and the wind. Maybe a cat. I'd quite like a cat or two. You like cats, right, B?"

A cart rattled by outside. The shouts of street vendors filtered in, muffled. Dan's watch ticked in his pocket. He sniffed and cleared his throat.

"Drink your tea, love," he said.

In perfect mechanical silence, Gav did as he was told.

The day passed in a muted haze. Afternoon drifted to evening, and evening to night. When Dan turned in, he left Gav in the armchair; it wouldn't do to have him waking up in bed with no idea how he got there. Dan tossed and turned, listening to Paris and his pocket watch and Gav's slow, shallow breathing. He drifted on the nearer edge of dreams, all blur and whisper, his eyelids stained purple by the press photographers' flashbulbs.

"He never left."

Dan sat up, rubbing his eyes. His heart pounded. Gav was still sat in the armchair, still staring at the
far wall—but his thumb was rubbing along the seam of the upholstery, slow and idle.

"Gav?" Dan croaked.

"Christophe never left the theatre," Gav said. His voice was dull as rust. "Should've guessed. He knew all the little hideaway holes, all the places he wouldn't be found. Someone else knew. Waited for the police to go, then lured him out. Should've known."

"I'm sorry, Gav," said Dan. "But we did everything we could."

"I got it wrong, Dan."

"Everyone does, sometimes."

"I'm not meant to get it wrong. It's my job to not get it wrong."

"It's no use beating yourself up about it, B. There's nothing to be done about it now."

Gav shook his head. His jaw was tight, his eyes narrowed. Dan sighed.

"Look, we'll just—we'll have a sleep, and start fresh in the morning. All right?"

"Sleep when I'm dead."

"Will you at least come to bed?"

Gav scoffed. "What for?"

"For me." It came out sharper than he'd meant.

For the first time in ten hours, Gav looked at him. His face softened, a dawning of pain.

"Please let me be near you," said Dan.

"Oh, Dan," said Gav. He creaked out of the armchair and stumbled to the bed. Dan's arms were around him before he was even horizontal. Gav buried his face in Dan's shoulder, pulling him close, shivering.

"I love you," said Dan. "I love you, all right?"

"Love you as well, B," Gav mumbled.

Dan kissed his head and petted his hair, held his wrist to feel his pulse and the warmth of his skin.

Gav was out like a light inside of a minute.

Dan woke up early the next morning, although Gav didn't. After an hour or so of languishing, Dan snuck out of bed and made himself breakfast, keeping one eye on Gav the whole time.

Around nine o'clock, a knock came at the door. Gav only mumbled to himself and rolled over, even as Dan scrambled to get properly dressed. He was still disheveled when he answered the door, but at least he didn't look like he'd just rolled out of the obviously occupied bed.

Officer Gabriel raised a hand in greeting with half of a smile.
"Morning," she said. "I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time."


"Possibly. Could I come in?"

Dan glanced back over his shoulder. Gav had the covers pulled up so high that only his hair was sticking out. Dan made a face.

"Have you got to?" he asked.

"If you'd rather we talk dirty laundry out here, that's perfectly all right with me."

Dan's stomach bunched up. He stood aside.

"Perhaps you'd better come in."

"Thank you," said Gabriel. She made it two steps in before she caught sight of Gav. "Oh. Is he . . . ?"

"Sleeping the sleep of the dead," Dan said. He returned to his spot at the breakfast table and gestured to the other chair. "So long as we keep our voices down, I doubt he'll be bothered."

Gabriel sat down. She clasped her hands and put them on the table. Her face was grim.

"Er . . . can I get you anything?" Dan asked. "Tea, or coffee?"

"No, thank you. Word down the station is, Mr Free had some sort of breakdown at the theatre yesterday."

"I—well, I wouldn't call it that, exactly, it was more—"

She raised her eyebrows. Dan floundered.

"Well, it wasn't that," he finished lamely.

"There was a lot of additional talk about whether or not we ought to check on him," Gabriel said. "I volunteered myself, and nobody objected, so here I am. Would you like to tell me what happened?"

Dan swallowed. "I assume you know about . . . Demarais?"

"Oh yes. They had me on a wild goose chase for alibis all yesterday. I understand the scene was rather grisly."

"Understatement of the ruddy century," Dan said, and shuddered. "Yes. Well. We'd been wrapping up a few small details with the actors, and—Free had a moment of inspiration, or . . . whatever it is he gets. Dashed off to the theatre, but I suppose it was already much too late."

"Fascinating, but not what I asked."

"I was getting to it, give us a moment. Look, Free—d'you know about his condition?"

She looked at Gav, and then at Dan, dubious.

"He's got a photographic memory," he explained. "Remembers everything he's ever seen in perfect detail."

"That's ridiculous."
"Unfortunately not."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Well, either way. He occasionally gets a touch . . . overwhelmed."

"I heard there was screaming."

"All right, a lot overwhelmed," Dan snapped. "It's not his fault. If you could remember everything you'd ever seen, you'd be lucky to get on half as well as he does!"

She held up a hand. "Settle down, I'm not attacking anyone."

Reddening, Dan tugged at his collar. "Right. Sorry. Er, the point is, we're fine, and you can tell your supervisor that, as well."

"I'm sure I will," she said. "If you've got a few minutes, though, I did have a couple more questions."

Dan frowned. "Such as?"

"Just a few small things, nothing of much consequence. How long have you two been working together?"

"Oh. Er, little over six years now."

"Six years, really?"

"Yeah, it's been a while."

"Mm. And how long have you been involved?"

Dan's train of thought slipped the tracks and juddered to a halt. He stared at Gabriel, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"I—I don't know what—"

She raised her eyebrows at him. His voice died in his throat. He glanced at Gav, curled up in the room's one bed, and hung his head.

"Three years, as of two weeks ago," he mumbled. "The holiday was for our anniversary."

"Congratulations," said Gabriel. "Other than Mr Luna, was there anyone at that theatre you'd met before?"

"No?" Dan guessed. "Hang on—now hang on just a moment, what're you getting at?"

She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Where were the two of you during intermission?"

"What?"

"And, for that matter, why did you leave in the middle of the second act? Just about everyone saw you go, in a hurry, with no explanation before or after."

"I don't—good God, you can't suspect us of having done it?"

Gav stirred. Dan glanced at him and put both hands on the table as though to rise.
"It's my job to be thorough, Mr Gruchy," Gabriel said. "I'd appreciate your cooperation."

"Does your supervisor know you're up to this? Or did you come up with the idea all by your bloody self? 'Cos I could just nip down to the station, and—"

"God's sake, B, just answer the bloody questions," Gav mumbled, pressing a pillow over his head. "Cat's already out of the damn bag."

Dan subsided, fuming and trembling. Gabriel watched him. One of her hands rested on the billy stick at her hip.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to let my temper get away from me."

"I appreciate your saying so," said Gabriel.

Dan took a deep breath. He was hot all over, his heart pounding. He took another deep breath, and a third. He wrapped both hands around his coffee cup to hide their trembling.

"During intermission we were . . . well, we spent about the first half talking to Mrs Willems and Mr Crawford, and then for the rest, we were . . . occupied, with each other," he said. The words tasted of bile.

"And during the second act?"

"There was a bit of gruesome imagery and Free—and Gav had to duck out. All guts and—and things. I went with him in case it was bad."

"I was told you two also remained with the body when you sent the actors away."

"Told by who?"

"Everyone except Christophe. They guessed you were gone about ten minutes. Doing what?"

"Cursory examination of the body, and then Gav had a proper moment, and we had to take some time to recover from it. You can ask Dubois, as well, he'll tell you the same thing."

"I wouldn't trust Monsieur Dubois to tell me the time of day. Did anyone observe any of these activities? Or was it just the two of you?"

"It . . . was just the two of us," Dan admitted. "But look, honestly, we didn't kill him, it's—"

"I don't believe you did," said Gabriel. "It would've been a very good trick to get all the way up to the catwalks, murder Mr Luna, and get all the way back in seven minutes without being seen by anyone. Likewise, my supervisors had eyes on you at the theatre 'til four-thirty in the morning, the concierge here said you returned by five and the press turned up by six—and therefore, the two of you couldn't have murdered Mr Demarais, who was killed between five and five-thirty. But it's my job to be thorough, so I had to ask."

"Did you have to go grubbing about in our personal lives, as well?" he demanded. "Digging in the muck, dredging all this up, for—for—oh, bloody hell, I sound just like Jenzen."

"Yes, it's not so much fun when you're on the receiving end, is it."

"It's never much fun."

"I'd also point out that your personal lives are not at all irrelevant here, since Mr Luna was apparently
in the habit of blackmailing men in your particular situation—although now I know you weren't in this particular situation when you met him the first time. Being that you'd both mentioned being short of cash, in combination with the particularly suspicious happenstance of how you wound up at that theatre, I had to wonder."

Dan stared at her with his mouth hanging open. Gav sat up, blinking like an owl.

"You what?" he said.

"Good morning, Mr Free. It was much too much coincidence to ignore, although—like my superiors—I didn't really think you'd had anything to do with it. Unlike my superiors, though, I felt the need to make certain."

"Bloody hell," said Gav.

"Now, since I'm a very busy woman and I'm sure you have plenty to do yourselves, I'll be heading on," said Gabriel, getting to her feet. "Thank you for your time, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay in Paris. Good morning, gentlemen."

Dan scrambled to open the door for her. As she passed him, he said, "How on earth haven't you made Detective Inspector yet?"

"Because the Sûreté doesn't employ people like me," she said. "Best of luck with your investigations, Mr Gruchy."

Dan could only gawp after her as she strode away down the corridor.
The Sincerest Form of Flattery

It was noon before Dan coaxed Gav out of bed.

"Come on then, sleepy-head," he teased, tugging on Gav's arm. "Your coffee's getting cold."

"But bed," Gav whinged. He was limp as a sleeping child, and twice as heavy.

"Bed'll still be there! Look, I've even made blueberry pancakes for you, can't pass that up."

"Can't I have them in bed?"

"Nooooo, come on." Dan gave him another tug. "You can get back in bed after."

A mischievous light twinkled from Gav's eye.

"Will you come with me, back to bed?"

"Yes, thanks, I think I will, but only after you've had something to eat and don't you make that joke, Mr Free."

Gav pouted at him. Dan scowled back. Gav batted at his wrist.

"Naughty," he said. "Get your mind out the gutter, Gruchy."

"My mind? Your mind!"

"Squeaky clean."

"Bollocks."

"Ooh, naughty again!"

"Right, that's it, up you get, you lump."

Dan hoisted Gav by his underarms and lugged him to the table. Gav squawked and wriggled and then, when that failed, peppered Dan's neck and cheek with kisses. Dan was red to the tips of his ears by the time he deposited Gav in a chair.

"Aw, look at you," Gav cooed, draping his arms round Dan's neck. "Lovely Daniel, always did look well in pink."

"What is it about mornings that makes you like this? Not that I'm complaining, mind, I've just got to wonder."

Gav pecked him on the lips. "It's you."

"You're around me all the time."

"Not when I'm asleep, I'm not. After eight whole hours away, of course I'm happy to see you."

"Five quid says it's just a full bladder that makes you randy."

Gav kissed him again, drawing cobwebs on the back of his neck with his fingertips.
"Either way," he murmured.

"If you don't eat your bloody breakfast, I'll stuff it down your throat."

"Ooh, with what?"

"Augh, disgusting!" Dan cried, recoiling. Gav grappled onto him, squealing with laughter. Dan staggered and stumbled, swatting at Gavin while Gavin nibbled on his ear, until the both of them fell back into bed.

"That's better," Gav said, clamping his knees on Dan's hips. "I will be having my breakfast in bed, thanks, and there's naught you can do to stop me."

"Who's going to bring it to you, then?" He didn't bother hiding the squeak in his voice. His heart was pounding with such vigour that Gav could probably hear it.

"B, I wasn't talking about the pancakes, B."

"B, B, you're still being naughty, B, and you're not having anything else 'til you've eaten food."

Gav pouted, then kissed him again. He did something with his hips that knocked Dan's breath out. Nonetheless, Dan put a hand on his chest and pushed him back.

"I mean it," he warned.

Gav whined. Dan didn't budge an inch.

"All right," Gav sighed, hanging his head and slithering off of Dan like a silk scarf. He turned hopeful, dewey eyes on him. "But afterwards?"

"Afterwards, yes, as much as you like."

Sparkling, Gav said, "Class."

He darted to the breakfast table and scarfed down a mouthful of blueberry pancake. The sound that came out of him was positively lewd. Dan turned pink again.

"God, though, food?" Gav said through a second mouthful. "Love food. Whoever came up with food—brilliant."

"What a piece of work," Dan muttered, propping himself up on his elbow. "And this's before coffee, as well. You'll have gone up in smoke by the end of the day."

"Come and have a food, B, 's good for you."

"You just want to play footsie with me under the table. 'Sides, I've already had my breakfast."

"Lunch for you, then, innit."

Rolling his eyes, Dan joined Gav at the little table. Gav propped his heels on Dan's feet and wrinkled his nose. Dan tickled the backs of Gav's ankles with his toes. Gav gurgled and wriggled, and Dan rolled his eyes.

Although Gav started off wolfing his breakfast, it wasn't long before the manic energy dissipated. Dan watched it drain away drop by drop, watched the light fade behind encroaching clouds. He didn't comment on it, but he also found that his lunch had grown suddenly less appetizing. When
Gav tucked his feet under his own chair, the room got colder. Soon enough, Gav was staring through his remaining pancakes, making no pretence of trying to eat them. He drained his coffee and then sat turning the cup, round and round, idle hands in idle motion.

"Gav?" said Dan. "All right?"

"Thinking," said Gav.

"About post-breakfast activities?"

Gav made a face and shook his head. He went to take a sip of his coffee, found the cup empty, and clicked his teeth. He got up from the table, taking the cup with him.

"'Cos, sincerely, I was rather looking forward to that," Dan said hopefully.

Gav poured himself another cup of coffee. He returned to his chair and settled in, not looking at Dan, and took a long drink.

"So," he said. "Second murder, ought to give us twice as much evidence. You'd think, wouldn't you, that it'd help narrow down the field, but I've been thinking about it, and I'm not sure it has. If Gabriel was implying what I think she was, none of them has got a proper alibi."

Dan rubbed his face. "For God's sake, B, give it a rest. You've barely had a moment to breathe."

"I've wasted half the day already, is what I've done. Christophe must have known something, and he must've had evidence to back it up, otherwise he wouldn't have been killed. More than that, someone was awfully put out that he'd said as much as he did, 'cos of how. . . ."

He trailed off. His hand tightened on his coffee cup, his eyes came unfocused. Dan's heart leapt into his throat.

"Gav," he snapped.

Gav popped back into himself like his mind was on elastics.

"Right. 'Cos of the level of mutilation. It was clearly personal—"

"B, please."

"Oh, let's not, Daniel," Gav sighed. "Could we not, today?"

"We can't keep on ignoring it, it's getting worse."

"It was one bad day. Not enough sleep, too much coffee. That's all it was."

"It's been nothing but bad days, and it's been getting worse. You're killing yourself, B, I can't just sit here and watch you do it."

"Don't be so melodramatic. I'm fine."

"Ten hours!" Dan cried, slamming his hand down on the table. "You were gone for ten bloody hours, Gavin! What if next time you don't come back at all? What am I meant to do then?"

"Call the damn men in white coats and get on with your life," Gav retorted. "I've got work to do, I can't be bothered—"
"Taking care of yourself? Right, 'cos that's what I'm—"

"You can sod right off any time you—"

"You sod off, you'd get nowhere without—"

"Reckon I'd get a hell of a lot farther without you bloody hounding—"

"If you could put your damn pride away and give up this obsession with winning—"

"It's all I've got!"

Dan crashed to a stop. All his thoughts spilled out of their cabinets and shattered like cheap ceramic. Gav stood, trembling and red-faced. For the first time, Dan saw the crack that ran all the way through him.

"It's all I've got," he repeated, hoarse. "This is the only thing I've ever been any good at, it's the only thing I've ever been able to do, and if I can't do it anymore, then—then what good am I?"

"Gav—"

"It's all right for you, 'cos you can do anything! If all this falls apart, you can just—pop off and have a life somewhere, doing anything, but I can't, Daniel, I can't. I don't care if it kills me. I want it to be what kills me. It's all I've got."

Dan rounded the table and swept him into his arms. Gav collapsed against him, clutching his shirt in both hands, wracked with tremors.

"You've got me," Dan said.

"Dan," said Gav, miserable and in pain. Dan squeezed him.

"I love you. I love you more than anything, and I'm not leaving you. D'you understand? No matter how hard it gets. No matter what, you've got me."

Gav shook his head, his face buried in Dan's shoulder.

"And I know that's not enough," Dan went on, "I know that I'm not—"

"Stop that at once."

"Sorry. What I mean to say is, I know you can't build a life around just a person, and I wouldn't ask you to. I just need you to know that—whatever you do, I'll be there. Whether you're any good at it or not."

"Whether I can put food on our table or not?"

"Yeah, I dunno if you heard, but I went on a whole thing yesterday about how I didn't care about that."

"I didn't hear."

"Well, I don't care about that. I managed to keep a household of three on my own, I can keep you if you need me to."

Gav nudged him with his forehead and sniffled.
"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," he said.

"It'd be easier to stave off if you'd take care of yourself. I mean. There's got to be a way to do this job that doesn't hurt quite so much."

"If you find one, let me know."

"You'll be the first one I tell."

Some of the tension eased from Gav's frame. Dan kissed his head and rubbed his shoulder. With a sigh, Gav slipped his arms round Dan's waist and clasped his hands at the small of his back.

"Dan?" he said.

"Yeah, B?"

"How do I go about taking care of myself?"

"Oh, for God's—you're bloody useless, you are."

He felt Gav flinch.

"Wait—no, I didn't mean—me and my big fat stupid mouth, damn it all to hell..."

"It's all right," Gav said miserably.

"No it isn't! Stop saying it's all right when it isn't! I'm an arse and I'm sorry about it."

Gav raised his head and kissed Dan's cheek, then nuzzled into his neck.

"Then I forgive you," he said. "'Cos I love you."

"I love you as well, B."

Outside the window, a cart trundled past. A drizzly fog had turned the view into a square of gray cotton, soft and translucent. Gav's breath was dewy against Dan's neck, his body warm. His hair still smelled faintly of mildew and sawdust.

"Right," Dan said at last. "So what're we meant to do about Christophe?"

With a quick squeeze, Gav pulled away. Dan let him go, reluctantly. Gav clasped his hands behind his own back and took up pacing the room. To get out of his way, Dan returned to his chair.

"Let's see," Gav said, frowning at the walls. "As it stands, we've not narrowed down much of anything. Gabriel might've done, though."

"D'you think we ought to look her up and see what she's got?"

"Hah, no, I doubt she'd tell us anything. Brouillard had the most contact with Christophe, so he ought to be our first priority."

"We could try asking Gabriel, it couldn't hurt."

"It'd be a waste of time. Besides, I've got different questions than she would've had."

"Cards on the table, B? I don't want to talk to him if we haven't got to. I might have a go at him, too, and I don't think he'd be as good-natured about it as Darling Dubois."
Gav made a face. "Don't call him that," he said. "Besides, bothersome as he is, Brouillard's got to be the next step. Either he'll have a good idea of who killed Christophe—"

"Or he did it?"

"Spot on, well done, B."

"Cheers."

"Which is why we've got to talk to him, and as soon as possible. I'm sure Gabriel's done her due diligence, but she hasn't got all the information and wouldn't know the right questions to ask. So, unpleasant as it is, we've got to be cracking on."

Dan shrugged. "If you say so, B."

"I do indeed," said Gav. He snagged his coffee, drained it, then smacked the cup down on the table. "Shall we?"

"We shall. And if you could tie my hands behind my back in the cab—"

Gav snorted. "As though I don't want to see you deck him?"

It was something of a comfort to find that Bones lived in a slum. Gav was rubbing his hands together before the cab even let them off, a glimmer in his eye.

"What's that look for?" Dan asked.

"Nosy neighbours, nosy neighbours everywhere," Gav said. "Places like this, you can't sneeze without someone knowing about it."

"S'pose it's for total lack of anything better to do," said Dan, wrinkling his nose at the shambling houses, crowded together like starving sheep. A group of children ran past, shrieking, chasing after a metal hoop with sticks upraised.

"Is it? Fair play. Right, so we'll see what we can tease out of the neighbours, then—depending on what they say, of course—have a go at Brouillard."

"Yeah, I reckon if they say, came home at half five covered in blood, we'll just skip right to having him arrested."

"Reckon we might do, yeah."

What actually followed was a lot of scornful looks, locked doors, and tight lips. The most they got out of any of Bones' neighbours was when one old woman told them, at great length and with considerable vigour, to go and fuck themselves. She subsequently slammed the door in their faces.

"Well," Gav said, blinking.

"The bastard sons of dog-buggering whores bit was interesting," said Dan. "Efficient, that."

"Colourful."

"Should we just go and see about Bones, then? I doubt we'll get anything better."
"Yeah, all right," Gav sighed, scuffing back down the crumbly steps. "I did have high hopes, though. It's probably 'cos they're foreign, that it hasn't worked."

"B, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but we're foreign," said Dan, slouching along next to him.

"It's a state of mind, B."

"You're a state of mind. If a couple of Frenchies turned up on our doorstep, wanting to know gossip about the neighbours, you'd tell them to piss off as well."

Gav wrinkled his nose. "S'pose I might."

"There, you see? Obviously it's frustrating, from where we're standing, but perfectly understandable."

Gav muttered something under his breath, kicking at a bit of chipped cobble. Dan pretended not to have heard him.

"At any rate, what's the plan with Bones?"

"Well," said Gav, "I've had an idea."

"Oh dear, I don't like the sound of that."

"It's a rather good idea, but it might get messy."

"That doesn't sound good at all."

"It'll more likely get results."

"I do like them. So what is it? Or is this one of those just-play-along sort of plans?"

Gav chewed his lip, scanning the houses across the street. The shutters were nearly all closed. Some of the windows had crude iron bars affixed over them. A few dingy vagrants were dotted here and there, lounging in the lee of stairs or under entryways.

"Well," Gav said again. "Your talk about punching Brouillard in the nose earlier got me thinking."

"Shall I punch him in the nose? I like this plan already."

"All right, steady on, nobody's punching anyone."

"Damn and blast."

"It got me thinking, d'you know, about Dubois, and that fun little game he plays."

Dan's lip curled. "Brilliant."

"And I thought we might have a go."

"At what?"

"Playing that little game, only with Brouillard."

The wheels finally gained traction in Dan's head.

"You mean press Bones' buttons 'til he's the one bothered?"
"He's got a drinking problem and a shouting problem, I reckon he might have a *blurting* problem, as well, if only we can prod him enough."

"Here, wait a moment, I've just had a thought. What if *I* get punched?"

"Ah, well then, you've got license to punch back, haven't you!"

"I'd rather not get punched, thanks."

"Even if it means getting to hit Brouillard?"

Dan considered this, chewing his tongue. He sniffed and shrugged.

"S'pose it depends on how hard he hits. Also: what if he tries to kill me?"

"Nah, that won't happen."

"What if it does, though?"

"I'll protect you, Dan, not to worry!"

Dan burst out laughing. Gav pouted at him.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, just—bloody hell, that's an image."

"I'm being *serious.*"

"I know you are, B, I know," said Dan, clapping him on the shoulder. "But let's not have you throwing yourself on any landmines, yeah? I'll handle myself, if it comes down to it."

"Dan?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you also please try not to let him punch *me*?"

"I dunno, Gav, you get pretty punchable, sometimes."

"Da-an."

"Only joking! Of course I won't let him punch you. Or do anything else to you, either."

"Thanks, B."

"Anytime. Just for reference: what buttons are we going for?"

"All of them, B," said Gav. "All of them."
"Oh, Christ on the fucking Cross," Bones grumbled, rolling his eyes. "It's you two."

"Good afternoon, Mr Brouillard," Gav said brightly. "May we trouble you for a few minutes?"

"No."

He went to slam the door, and Dan caught it. The impact made his hand go numb, but he kept his face stern and grim.

"I'm afraid it's really imperative that we do speak with you," said Gav. "You see, someone murdered Mr Demarais yesterday morning, and no one's been able to confirm your whereabouts. If you'd prefer we came back with the police, of course..."

Bones' bloodshot eyes flicked between the two of them. His jaw was shaded with stubble, his face sunken and sallow. He wore a heavy coat that was much too small for him, draped over his shoulders like a cape. He did not let up on the door, forcing Dan to lean against it to keep it open.

"I already talked to that police woman yesterday," he said.

"Talked to, or told to piss off?" Gav asked.

Bones ground his teeth. "Piss off."

"I think you really had better talk with us, Mr Brouillard, or it could go very poorly for you."

He chewed on it.

"Fine," he said. He let go of the door and Dan almost fell on his face. "You can have ten minutes, and then you're out."

"Thank you very much, sir," said Gav, adjusting his cravat.

The inside of Bones' place was rigidly neat. There was no clutter to speak of, although every cabinet, shelf, box and bag was stuffed to the very brim. The floors were worn down paper-thin, the walls and ceiling sagging under the weight of decades of whitewash. A faint, flowery smell lingered in the air. It was as cold inside as out, and none of the radiators or stoves were lit. Dan settled himself into a rickety wooden chair that creaked alarmingly under his weight. Gav remained standing, hands clasped behind his back.

Bones threw himself into a threadbare armchair, withdrew his flask from an inner pocket of his coat, and took a swig. He wiped his mouth on his hand, and then his hand on his trousers. He brushed a fleck of dust off the fur collar.

"That's, er, a very nice coat," Dan remarked.

Bones grunted. "Nicked it off Dubois a month ago. Damn sight warmer than anything I've ever been able to afford. He never even noticed, the bougie cunt. Probably thought he lost it in whatever gout-ridden molly-house he fucked his way through last."

He slugged back another gulp of liquor.

"Damn good coat, though," he went on. "Damn fucking good coat, even if it smells like a fucking
"Are you in the habit of stealing from Mr Dubois?" Gav asked.

"No. Thought you were here about Christophe."

"And so we are. I assume Officer Gabriel informed you of the circumstances of his death."

"Yeah."

"You don't seem particularly upset about it."

"Why should I be? He was a damn nuisance, the little cretin."

"I'm given to understand that you're the one who hired him. Somewhere in the neighbourhood of one year, nine months, and twenty . . . eight days ago, now. If he was so useless, why was he kept on?"

"Cheap," said Bones. "Didn't have the money to spare on a proper stagehand."

"Is that why he lived in the theatre?"

"No, he lived in the theatre because he was fucked in the head."

"You refer to his delusions about spirits?"

Bones took another swig from his flask. "And every other fucking stupid thing he'd ever heard of."

"Like Mrs Willems' parties?"

"How the fuck did you—"

Bones cut himself off, his hand clenching on his flask. Dan repositioned himself, shifting his centre of balance and pulling his feet back towards the chair. Gav smiled blandly.

"So, evidently, that bit of Christophe's rambling was anything but delusion," he said. "Were you invited to these parties, or was there an entrance fee?"

Bones lurched to his feet. Dan shot up right after him.

"Get the fuck out of here," said Bones. "The both of you, before I rip off your—"

"Do not under any circumstances finish that sentence, Mr Brouillard," said Dan.

Gav stood his ground, although his hands were clenched white-knuckled behind his back.

"Our ten minutes don't seem to be up just yet. I did have one or two more questions, before we let you go."

Bones rounded on him, frothing. "You let me go? You, let me go?"

"Mr Brouillard, I would heavily encourage you to sit back down before I put you on the floor," said Dan. "You may answer Mr Free's questions, or we can arrest you for Christophe's murder right now."

"You've got no fucking proof, no fucking nothing at all on me. I'll skin you both alive in court if you try it."
"Best of luck hiring a lawyer, with your evidently abundant funding," said Gav. "If it upsets you that badly, I'll not ask about the parties. I'm sure I could inquire with Mrs Willems herself. What I do want to know is: what was Christophe's job during the show?"

"Doing whatever the fuck a stagehand always fucking does. What are you, an idiot?"

"Was he responsible for the rigging?"

"That little fuck-up?"

"Costumes, props, set changes?"

"Barely."

"Very well. And where were you yesterday morning?"

"I was in my fucking bed, sleeping off the shit you two put me through."

"And approximately how much liquor, at that time?"

"Enough to kill a little prick like you," Bones sneered.

"All right, and with that, I think we're done here. Thank you very much for your cooperation, Mr Brouillard, we'll see ourselves out. Come along, Gruchy."

Gav turned smartly and strode out. Dan went after him, keeping one eye on Bones the whole way. Once they were back outside, moving back towards safer streets, Dan wiped his forehead.

"Bloody hell, I thought he was going to go for you," he said. "I must've missed something somewhere, though, 'cos I don't remember Willems ever mentioning any parties."

"She didn't. Christophe did, though, when he was having his little moment in the front of house. It was just before Gabriel turned up."

"Completely missed it. Glad you didn't, though, 'cos it's obviously something."

"It could be," Gav allowed. "Could be nothing. At the very least, he didn't want to talk about it, which was the whole point. I thought to myself, I thought: if he's working on covering up one thing, he'll forget to cover up everything else. And he did."

"It's not as though you asked him anything important, though, was it?"

"No, no, B, the last bit was the most important of all."

"Him being drunk?"

"Christophe's job at the theatre."

A light dawned in Dan's head.

"You've worked it out," he said.

"Part of it, I think. I need to ask a few more questions to be sure."

"What've you got so far?"

Gav shook his head, tsing.
"Still much too early for that, B. You'll get it the usual way."

"I bloody hate the usual way. It's going to get you killed one of these days, swear on my life. Why can't you just bring it all to the police and have them handle it whilst we're tucked up somewhere safe?"

"That isn't how it works. We haven't got enough evidence to make a real case, so we need a confession. That's why we do the usual way."

"Do it 'cos of your bloody addiction to dramatics," Dan muttered under his breath.

Gav sniffed and turned his nose up. "I'm going to choose not to have heard that."

"B," Dan said, catching him by the arm. Gav frowned at him. "Look, could we just . . . try some other way? Just to see if it works? On the off-chance it's less likely to get us killed."

It was the us that did it. Two gears that had never touched before clicked together behind Gav's eyes. He touched Dan's hand and faked a smile.

"We'll give it a go," he said, "on the next one."

"On the next one?"

"I don't think there's that much risk, this time round."

"I'm sorry, did you see what happened to—"

"Yes, and I still can, in excruciating detail, so I wish you wouldn't bring it up."

Dan shut his mouth, turned his face away. He patted Gav's arm and withdrew his hand.

"On the next one, then," he said. "Where're we off to now?"

"Let's see . . . well, here's something you could help with. Where would we go to work out the best of the worst places in town?"

Frowning, Dan asked, "How d'you mean?"

"I mean: we need to find the sort of place where a very rich man would go to indulge his very illegal appetites."

"Er . . . that depends on what exactly we're talking about, here."

"Opium."

"Why?"

"'Cos Brouillard said Dubois' coat smelled of it."

Dan snorted. "That's not what opium smells like. That was just perfume."

Gav looked at him sideways. The machinery in his head chattered, turning, turning.

"Then perhaps we're looking for a different sort of establishment," he said. "Although no less illicit."

"D'you really think it's wise to go poking about in the Paris underworld?"
"I think it's our best bet at narrowing down our suspect list. If we can account for Dubois, everything becomes much simpler."

"Does it? I would've thought it'd be the other way round."

"Of course you would," said Gav. "Now. Where in this town does a fellow go to find gentlemen of ill-repute?"

"B?"

"Yes, B?"

"For the love of all that is holy, let me handle the talking on this one."

"You're sure this is the place?" Dan asked, squinting across the street at the pretty little inn, squashed between a florist's and a coffee shop.

"For the millionth time, B, yes, I'm sure. This is the address."

"I don't like the look of it."

"What about it don't you like? It's lovely!"

"That's what I don't like. It feels off."

"What, were you expecting some run-down, windowless hovel?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I'd think this would be much preferable."

"It is, and that's why I don't like it."

Gav nudged his arm. Dan scowled at him.

"It'll be fun," Gav offered, sparkling.

"You're not coming."

"Oh, what? Why not? B, you can't just leave me on the street, B, what if something happens?"

"Then you won't get caught up in it. Look, if I get seen walking into a place like that, by someone who knows what it is, it means nothing. Nobody ever recognizes me, it's why the bait-and-switch works. You, on the other hand—one little indiscretion from anybody with line of sight and we're done for. Or God forbid, the press turn up."

"Nah, come off it, nobody'll know."

"Presumably everyone inside will know. And if we piss them off—which we've got a stellar record of doing—"

"We're done for," Gav sighed. "I still don't like you going in alone. You've been doing every bit of this without me, and now this as well?"
"I always do everything, so I don't know what you're upset about."

"Yeah, but B, I'm always there! And anyway, I do the detectiving bits, and this is obviously detectiving."

"Look, we haven't the time to stand about arguing. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, you can send in the cavalry, all right?"

"B—" Gav started, but Dan was already off, striding across the street with great purpose and not a single backward glance. Before he could second-guess himself, he ducked into the inn.

The Ravin Rouge was as chintzy and non-threatening inside as it was outside, all pastel and eggshell, like stepping into a teacup. The only person about was the concierge, a tall, dark, and handsome woman with a smile like tropical sunshine.

"Good day, dear!" she effused. "I'm so sorry, but we're all full up at the moment, if it's a room you're after. But I could get you a coffee or something so you've not come all this way for nothing?"

"I'm . . . not looking for a room, actually," said Dan. He stuck his hands in his pockets. His face was already heating up, the precursor to a proper blush. "Or a coffee."

She tipped her head to the side. "No? I'm afraid those are all we have, sir!"

"Look, I know that this is a delicate sort of operation, but—"

The woman got to her feet. Her flowery attire could not hide the fact that her biceps were the size of Dan's head. She loomed.

"Are you, sir, attempting to do something stupid?" she asked. "Because, sir, I would not do anything stupid, if I were you, sir."

"No! No, I'm not—it isn't—look, I've mislaid . . . someone, and he—this is the only place I haven't looked yet, and I'm worried he might be in trouble, and I know it isn't proper to mention names at all, but—"

"But I think you'd better, sir, and very very fast."

"Cassie," Dan blurted. It was like biting into a rotten hot pepper. He pressed his fists to keep from gagging.

The woman, however, lit up like Christmas. She gasped, pressing her fingertips to her lips.

"Oh, no, what's he done? Tell me all about it, you must, are you his new—wait wait wait, the ladies will want to hear, come with me. What did you say your name was? Mine's Kaikaina. Come come come, oh, this is delicious, they'll lap it up."

She rounded the desk and grabbed Dan's arm, hauling him off. He couldn't have resisted even if he'd wanted to, and indeed was lucky that his shoulder stayed in its socket. The room she dragged him into was empty, as well, but then she shoved aside a bookcase—which was evidently on rollers—and brought him to a proper sitting room.

There were eight or nine men present, in various states of dishabille and sobriety, several of them wearing dresses. They looked up as Kaikaina dragged Dan in, all conversation crashing to a halt.

"Sis, what are you doing?" one asked. "Didn't we tell you to stay out of here?"
"You won't mind, once I tell you what the cat just dragged in," she said, beaming.

Another man, white-haired and gnawing an unlit cigar, perked up.

"Strategic defences?" he barked. "Armaments. Cannon! By God, woman, spit it out, where's the artillery?"

"He probably has it in his pocket, Sarge," the first man drawled. "A cannon for everybody, whoopee."

"That seems unlikely," a third piped up, adjusting his spectacles. "You can't fit a cannon in your pocket, unless they're very small cannons, and those we usually refer to as guns."

A fourth, platinum blonde and very well suited to the dress he wore, tittered into a lace fan.

"Is that a cannon in his pocket, or is he just happy to see me?" he asked.

"Fran-cine, you will reserve that kind of talk for the wedding rooms only!" the sergeant snapped.

"Oh, pooh, you're not the boss of me."

Kaikaina stomped her foot. Every bit of glassware in the room rattled, as did Dan's teeth.

"I came in here with gossip, ladies!" she said. "If everybody would shut up and hear it!"

"Shit, here we go," the first man muttered. "What is it this time?"

She cleared her throat, smoothed down her skirts, and spoke primly.

"This lovely gentleman here has, you will be very excited to know, come here because he happens to have misplaced Cassie."

Francine squealed at such a pitch it was a wonder the windows didn't shatter. There was an explosion of muttering, all of it excited. The sergeant grinned and chomped his cigar. Only the man with the spectacles seemed at all concerned.

"Wait, but—why are you here?" he asked. "Is he in trouble? He's not in trouble, is he?"

"Of course he's not in trouble, Richelle. It's Cassie, he's fine."

"I know it's Cassie, Désirée, that's why I'm worried!"

"Er," said Dan. A bead of sweat trickled down his face. "I'm not sure if he is or he isn't. I . . . lost track of him around two, night before last."

Another explosion of giggling and mutters. Dan soldiered on, keeping his eyes fixed on the far wall.

"And I haven't seen him since, and I've looked everywhere, and I don't know where else to go."

"Just missed him, son," the sergeant said.

"It's been thirty-six hours," said Richelle.

"Good thinking, coming here, though," the sergeant barrelled on. "Juuuuuuuuuust a little too late. He turned up—two-thirty?"

"Earlier, more like a quarter past," another man piped up from the back of the room. "Laverne said
"So, anyway."

"Sent him off right just after sunrise," the sergeant went on.

"Sunrise yesterday," Richelle muttered.

Dan's heart sank. "And he . . . was here the whole night? Night before last?"

"Mm-hm, pretty much," Kaikaina confirmed.

"My God, doing what?"

"Oh, sweetie-pie, you poor precious thing," Francine said. He fluttered over to Dan and swept up his hands. "It's no wonder Cassie hasn't brought you round, you'd simply die of shock. We all love him terribly, though, he's such a sweetheart. Very generous."

"With his money," Richelle said hurriedly.

"But you really haven't seen him? I hope nothing's wrong. Didn't he tell you where he'd be?"

"No," said Dan.

"You haven't called on him at home? I'll bet he just went home. He gets so silly sometimes, and of course he has his little moods. Such an inconsiderate lover, tsk tsk."

"Mm," said Dan, who felt like he'd just sunk eyebrow-deep in a vat of hot syrup.

"You have? And he wasn't at home?"

"I—I haven't, no, I haven't. I don't . . . know where he . . . lives."

He could've kicked himself.

"Brand-spanking-new," Désirée remarked. "Wow. Guess that explains why we haven't seen the fresh meat yet."

"Do not talk about your fellow men as entrees, soldier!" the sergeant roared.

"That settles it," Francine said. "Désirée, Richelle, come along! We're going directly to Cassie's, and we're going to tell him what an inconsiderate oaf he's been to his poor sweet—what was your name?"

"It's—Dan, but look, this is really totally unnecessary, you haven't got to—"

"Come along, ladies!" Francine sang. "No time to waste!"

"No way, I'm not going," Désirée said.

"If I'm going, you're going," Richelle hissed.

"Dez, you'd better go," Kaikaina warned, folding her formidable arms.

"You can't threaten me, I'm older than you!"

"I'll kick your butt to next week, mister."

"Ugh, I hate all of you."
"Good animosity, soldier! Stay on your toes, trust no one."

"Please, honestly, I'd really rather not—" Dan tried again.

"Nonsense!" Francine cut him off again. "We'll make thrice sure Cassie never abandons you again. Won't we, ladies?"

"Aren't you going to change?" Richelle asked.

"We don't have the time, and anyway, I look amazing. Now: won't we, ladies?"

"Shut up, Francine," Désirée retorted.

But he did get up, and Richelle tagged along, and Francine took Dan's arm and steered him towards the door.

Swept up by the pink tide, he had no choice but to go along.
Cassie

Dubois took one look at the contingent gathered on his doorstep and immediately fought down a smile. The split in his lip was garnet-red, accompanied by a less-than-fetching bruise on his chin. The afternoon was wearing on, and the flat was awash with cloud-gray light. Despite having his gloves on, Dubois was in his shirtsleeves. Dan nearly bolted right then and there.

"Oh dear, am I in trouble?" Dubois asked, eyes alight.

Francine planted a hand on his chest and shoved him back into the flat, making way for the other two to shuttle Dan in behind him.

"So much trouble, Cassie, it's simply unacceptable, we've all had to come in person to tell you just how horrendous you've been."

"Gracious, is it so bad as all that?"

"It's worse! You left this poor dear thing all alone for two whole days, worried sick about you, never even told him where to find you—I would've expected better, Cassie, I'm sorely disappointed!"

Dubois' eyes slid to Dan. The corner of his mouth turned up. Dan went red, or at least red-er.

"Oh, my precious heart, did I worry you?" Dubois exclaimed. He ducked around Francine and skated to Dan, swept up both of his hands and planted a kiss on his cheek. The scab on his lip was rough against Dan's skin. Dan might have burst into flame, if he'd been less sweaty.

"I don't enjoy y—your disappearing act very much," Dan said, only remembering at the last second to use the informal tu. It tasted just as foul as the name Cassie had.

"No one likes Cassie's disappearing act, so I don't know why he insists on doing it so often," Richelle said, scowling at him.

"You can't blame me for a poor memory, ladies, it isn't fair. Come and sit, my sweet, you look dead on your feet."

Dubois tugged Dan to the sofa and sat him down on it, then settled in next to him and slipped an arm round his waist. Dan sat ramrod-straight, his fists clenched on his thighs (one of which had Dubois' thigh pressed up against it). Dubois fixed Dan's hair for him and kissed his cheek again. It took all the strength of Dan's will not to wipe his face. He could only imagine what Gav would think if he walked in on this particular spectacle.

"We'll blame you for anything we want," said Désirée, throwing himself into the armchair. "I know I'm blaming you for dragging us all the way out here."

"I dragged no one and nothing. If anyone dragged you, it was Francine."

"You don't know that!"

"It was, though," Richelle put in.

"Shut up!"

"Why are you yelling? It was you! We all know it was you, of course it was you!"
Francine draped himself over the divan and pouted mightily. Désirée snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Good going, now you've made her dramatic. Here comes the deluge."

"She's always dramatic, don't blame me!"

"I'm not going to cry, either," Francine sniffed. "Anyway, Cassie, we're all so so glad you've finally dumped that ginger bitch. He was such a bore. Did he split your lip for you, as well?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," said Richelle, scowling.

"No no, my lovelies, nothing of the sort. Rest assured, it was earned, not given."

"Ooh, naughty," said Francine, and tittered. "No wonder you like this fellow better."

Dan considered, in a less than abstract sense, how nice it would be to drop dead.

"Don't celebrate yet, he looks like he has an even bigger stick up his arse," Désirée drawled.

"That's because you're embarrassing him," Dubois said, giving Dan a squeeze. "All of you flocking around and gossiping like magpies, anyone would be overwhelmed."

"I don't gossip, it's too much work," said Désirée.

"All you ever do is gossip," Richelle said.

"No, everyone else gossips, and I listen. I just let it flow over me, like waves on the ocean."

"If anyone put you in the ocean, you'd wash over it."

"Good, swimming sounds like work."

"Why don't you two get married already?" Francine cut in, propping his chin on his hand. "It's obvious you're perfect for each other."

"No we're not!" they chorused.

"Would you like me to send them away, Dani?" Dubois asked softly.

"It's fine," Dan said through his teeth. The very last thing he wanted was to be left alone with Dubois, especially since Gav was sure to turn up any minute now.

"If they're upsetting you, we can be rid of them in an instant. I have no qualms injuring their pride."

"Cassie!" Francine gasped, clapping his breast. "How rude! You've known this harlot for how long, and you're already—"

"Don't talk about him that way, or I shall never speak to you again."

"He's besotted," said Richelle, rolling his eyes. "Smitten. Ruined. It's been less than a month and he's falling for it again."

"So too would you be, if you took the time to get to know him," Dubois retorted. "But seeing as you can't be bothered, you instead lounge about in my sitting room making up stories. Anyone would think you were jealous."

"Of course we're jealous," said Francine. "Here we all are, lovely roses swooning on the bush for
"You are, of course, all very sweet and lovely." Dubois leaned against Dan, hot breath against his neck and ear. "But you must take into account that the cactus happens to far exceed the rose, if we're speaking in terms of pricks."

Désirée laughed uproariously. Richelle took off his spectacles and covered his eyes with his hands. Francine pressed a hand to his breast, somewhere between insult and amusement. With a low and throaty chuckle, Dubois kissed Dan's cheek again.

"Stop it," Dan said, then hastily tacked on, "you're embarrassing me, darling."

The room froze solid.

Richelle turned to stone. All the blood drained from Francine's face. Désirée curled up in the chair and whimpered.

The chill radiating off of Dubois could have snowed Paris under in an hour.

Slowly, slowly, his hand tightened on Dan's hip until the fingers threatened to pierce the skin. His teeth were much too close to Dan's throat. When he spoke, his voice was like sleet, driven by a whistling wind.

"Daniel," he said, "what have I told you about using that word?"

It took three tries for Dan's voice to catch.

"I'm—sorry," he said. "Inattentive moment. It won't happen again."

"It certainly will not."

"All right, Cassie," Francine said, walking on eggshells. "It was a simple little slip of the tongue, and he's so so very sorry, please don't be upset."

Dubois took a deep breath and flexed his fingers. When they returned to Dan's hip, they were gentle again.

"Of course," said Dubois. "My sincerest apologies, it's difficult not to let it blow out of proportion. Regardless, I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with Dani in private, if at all possible."

"Right now?" Désirée asked, while Dan's stomach boiled with dread. Where in the hell was Gav? What was taking him so long?

"No time like the present. Dani my sweet, I promise you aren't in trouble, it's only that . . . clearly, certain things require explanation, that's all."

"Clearly," said Dan. His head spun. He couldn't make his eyes focus. His skin burned everywhere that Dubois was touching him.

Dubois got to his feet, all courtesy and charm once again. "All right, come along, my lovelies. Thank you so much for your visit, it's been wonderful seeing you, please don't hesitate to drop by any time. Yes yes, 'til next time, love you dearly, out you go."

While he faffed on, shooing the other three towards the door, Dan eased onto his feet and snuck along behind them. He wasn't sure what he was planning, only that he wanted to be that much closer to a way out. Just outside the door, Francine turned back, fists planted on his hips.
"You'd better take good care of this one, Cassie," he warned. "Or I shall be very upset."

"I'd think you'd be all the more glad that it's not you I'm failing to take good care of."

"But you do that as well, so I'm doubly upset."

Dubois took Francine's chin, ducked in, and kissed him soundly on the mouth. Francine's knees gave out. Désirée and Richelle caught him.

"Shit, why is she so heavy?" Désirée exclaimed.

"Cassie, you're cruel and unusual," Richelle accused.

Dubois twinkled. "Eternally. 'Til next time, my lovelies."

And he shut the door in their faces.

Dan froze. Dubois let out a breath, pinched the bridge of his nose, and shook his head. As though Dan wasn't even there, he went into the kitchen and began rifling through his cupboards. When it became clear that a conversation was not forthcoming, Dan resumed his creep towards the door.

"No, stay put."

Dan's heart skipped a beat. All the joviality was gone from Dubois' voice, leaving it flat and cold. Dan cast about, and decided upon the nearest vase as his impromptu weapon of choice. Dubois, for his part, kept his back turned.

"They'll know something's amiss if they see you leaving right away," he went on. "Do sit down, Mr Gruchy. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Coffee would be lovely," Dan said carefully. Better to play along, better not to make any sudden movements. Gav couldn't be far behind, a matter of minutes at most. Dan just had to wait it out and hope the only threat was his paranoia getting the better of him.

"I'm afraid I don't have any coffee," said Dubois. "Of tea, there is plenty, and a generous selection of wines and liquors if you'd like something stronger—"

"Tea would be fine, thank you."

"Black, green, white, or herbal?"

"Er . . . regular?"

The faintest hint of amusement crept back into Dubois' voice as he said, "Regular tea it is. Please, sit."

While Dubois bustled about in the kitchen, Dan picked his way back to the sitting area and perched in the armchair. He kept one eye on Dubois and cased the room with the other. There was a balcony through a set of French doors that might provide an escape route, if there was something to break his fall. Plenty of objects in the flat could be used as projectiles, but the only actual weapons about were the knives in the kitchen. The door was not obviously locked, but the corridor and stairs made for an awfully narrow escape route. Yes, the balcony was probably his best bet, and the pillows on the couch could be used to defend against a knife. . . .

Dubois drifted over, bearing two cups of tea and no knives. He handed one cup to Dan, then settled on the divan and regarded him more closely than was comfortable.
"So," he said, "the question of the hour: where is Mr Free?"

"Doing his best to catch up, I imagine," said Dan. The tea was hot enough that he could reasonably refrain from taking a sip of it. He cursed himself for not watching while it was prepared.

"Ah, so he was excluded from the proceedings. Sensible, he does have a distinctive face."

"A famous nose, you mean."

Dubois smiled. "I did mean that, but I didn't like to say so directly. Still, all the more reason for you to stay. I'm certain he'll find his way here, and I should hate for you to be missing when he arrives."

"What d'you mean by that?" he snapped, hands clenching. Dubois blinked, baffled.

"I mean simply that it would be a terrible inconvenience for him to have to go looking for you. It's better if you stay put so that he can find you more quickly."

Dan let out a slow breath. Dubois sipped his tea and turned his attention out the window. Dan's pocket watch ticked. Paris bustled on, a low murmur all around them.

"Could I ask you something?" said Dan.

"You could; whether or not I will answer is much less certain."

Dan chewed on it, then said, "In the play, when—what's-his-face, Torrian's character, when he says, And Devil take the loser—"

"Better the Devil than the woman," said Dubois.

"Right, so, that answers my question. You clearly do know the line."

"I should," said Dubois. "Miles stole it from me."

Once again, the conversation stalled. Dan fidgeted. The sense of immediate danger had gone, and a sense of lingering chagrin was rising to replace it. He cleared his throat and rubbed his knuckles and looked at everything in the flat except Dubois.

"Er," Dan said at last. "That's . . . a lovely dress."

Dubois glanced over his shoulder and came back grinning. The expression tugged at the scab on his lip.

"Thank you," he said. "It's in its fifth iteration, and I'm still not happy with it, but it has at least improved."

"You made it?"

"Oh yes, although the first attempts were an insult to the trade. Happily, I seem to be learning. It has been what one might call a labor of love."

"Is it . . . for anything? Sorry, stop me if I'm prying."

Dubois shrugged. "It's for my own amusement. Idle hands tend to make messes, and I have resolved to stop making messes."

"That's a sound enough resolution, I suppose."
"It's daunting, at best, but I thought I'd try," said Dubois, with a wry smile.

"I . . . speaking of messes, you know, I feel I ought to apologize for my conduct, last time I was here. It was rude and unnecessary."

Dubois waved him off. "It was very amusing, and refreshing besides. I so rarely meet anyone willing to tell me no, sometimes I forget what it feels like. Your response was reasonable, under the circumstances, and—if I may say so—richly deserved."

"It's only . . . you could've blown my cover, just now, with your friends. I wanted to thank you for that, as well, but—I suppose I'm having difficulty understanding why you did it."

"Because it was much more amusing to play along," Dubois said, twinkling. He sobered, and added, "Besides, I understand that you and Mr Free occupy a precarious space. The ladies likewise depend upon my ability to keep a secret in order to maintain their livelihoods and, in many cases, their lives; nor am I immune to persecution should a loose tongue let slip the wrong word in the wrong ear. We are all in this boat together. It would be extremely foolish of me to make any waves, not to mention unspeakably cruel."

"I appreciate the sentiment, sir, but I feel I must remind you that you are a suspect in a murder case, and garnering favour with me will not spare you the guillotine."

"Gracious, is that what you think I'm up to?"

"It seems likely."

"Very well; then know that I am well aware that—how did you put it?—garnering favour with detectives does not, will not, and cannot spare one from an execution."

"Prettily put. I'm glad we're on the same page."

"Mr Gruchy, we are so far from the same page, we're not even in the same book," said Dubois.

A thunderous knock came, and Dan startled so badly he spilled tea all over himself.

"Ah, that will be Mr Free," said Dubois, rising like smoke while Dan cursed at the mess. "Excuse me one moment."

Before anything could be done about it, he strode to the door and flung it open. Dan leapt to his feet, sweaty and disheveled and suddenly, acutely aware of how compromising the situation looked. The prints of Dubois' touches glowed red all over him, cheek and hip, hand and thigh, hotter and stickier than the spilled tea.

"Good evening, Mr Free, you're right on time," said Dubois.

"Where the hell is Gruchy?" Gav demanded. His voice shook horribly.

Dubois stood aside. Dan waved.

"Allo, B," he said.

Gav stared. He trembled where he stood, fists clenched at his sides, eyes red.

"Come out from there at once," he ordered. Dan went to him, brushing past Dubois as though he wasn't even there. "What were you thinking, running off without me? It's unacceptable, it's—"
Dubois coughed politely. Gav glared at him.

"Thank you *ever* so much for looking after Mr Gruchy," he said through his teeth. "Good evening, *sir.*"

He turned on his heel and stalked off down the corridor. Dan hurried after him. The door did not click shut until they started down the stairs.

"Are you hurt?" Gav asked. His voice still shook, and he kept his eyes forward.

"I'm all right," said Dan. "Got tea all over me, but none the worse for wear."

"How much trouble are we in?"

"Haven't the foggiest. Are *you* all right?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly all right, I've only been worrying myself sick about you for the past hour."

"Truth to tell, so have I."

They left the building, and Gav beelined for a cab waiting by the curb. He clambered in, and Dan came after him.

"That was quick," the cabbie remarked. "Where next, sir?"

Gav gave him the name of their hotel, then shut the privacy window.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Mostly nonsense. The important bit is, there's a whole load of people who can account for Dubois between the hours of two and six yesterday morning."

"Du—that's not the *important* bit, I meant what happened to *you!*"

Dan let out a breath and ran a hand back through his hair.

"Mostly bloody nonsense," he said again. "Can it wait 'til we're back at the hotel?"

Gav scowled mightily, but he said, "Fine."

The second the room's door closed, Dan threw his arms round Gav and squeezed, burying his face in his shoulder and drowning in the smell of him. Gav squeaked and clutched the back of his jacket.

Thirty seconds passed, ticked away neatly by Dan's watch. Gav leaned his head on Dan's.

"Good grief, B," he said. "What's happened?"

"He—I don't know. I don't know, nothing. It was my fault, anyway, I shouldn't even complain."

"Codswallop, now start whinging."

"It was genuinely all my fault, Gav. I was tremendously stupid, you'll be upset with me."

"Try me."
Dan took a deep breath, lined up all the words in his head, and spat them out in a billowing rush so that he had no time to second-guess himself.

"The people at the inn thought I was involved with him and I played along 'cos it got me in the door but then they all decided to take me to his place and then he played along and—and—Christ alive, Gav, I can't bloody stand to be touched by anyone who isn't you!"

"Oh, is that all? That's not your fault, B, that's just bad luck."

"It was my fault, I started it and I could've backed out at any time but I didn't 'cos I'm a damn fool."

"You are a damn fool, but not because of that. Anyway, what d'you mean by he played along, what'd he do?"

"Got a bit too friendly," Dan mumbled. "It was just . . . unpleasant, is all."

"Shall I kill him?"

"No," said Dan, rolling his eyes.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm bloody sure, you maniac."

"All right, but if you ever change your mind . . . ."

"I can kill him myself, thanks."

"Ooh, hoity-toity, Corporal Artilleryman."

Dan snorted. Gav gave him a hearty squeeze and kissed his head. He leaned back, halfway extracting himself from the embrace.

"Where've you been unpleasant?" he asked. "Un—unp—is that a word? Can I say—?"

Pouting, Dan pointed to his cheek, still slimy and feverish with the touch of Dubois' lips.

"There," he said.

Gav swooped in and peppered his cheek with kisses.

"Have I got it yet?"

"Not quite."

"Desperate measures, then," said Gav, and promptly licked Dan's face.

"Augh, that's dis—why would you do that?"

"Is it fixed, have I fixed it?"

"Yep, cheers, that's done it. You absolute madman."

"Where else?"

"Are you going to lick me again?"
"Not unless you want me to."

"I don't want you to."

"Then I shan't. Where else?"

Dan held up his hands. Gav swept them up and kissed every knuckle, every fingertip, every freckle, palms and wrists. Dan slid his hands round the back of Gav's head and tugged him in to where lips met lips, breath entwined and hearts beat in rhythm.

"Where else?" Gav asked, his nose still poking Dan's cheek.

"Where else, what?"

"Where else has Dubois unpleased you?"

"Who?"

Gav grinned and kissed him again.
Even in his own house, Peake was difficult to see. There was a special sort of camouflage afforded to him by his posture, an aggressive unobtrusiveness that forced him into the background of every scene, whether or not there was anything else there. As they sat in his drawing room, Dan's focus continually slipped to mundane objects in the vicinity—a photograph on the mantelpiece, a cup of pens, the wallpaper, the curtains, the grandfather clock in the corner. Even the watery tea was more titillating.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," said Gav. "Things have been rather hectic."

"Mm," said Peake.

"Out of curiosity, have you got an idea of what you're going to do next, or is it all still up in the air?"

Peake frowned. "Next?"

"With the theatre, specifically. Obviously, the show won't be going on, which I'm certain chalks up to a financial disaster for you. Were you thinking of selling the place, or. . . ?"

"No." He sounded baffled.

"Admirable commitment. I suppose you might get some publicity off it, in the long run. In the short run, though, it seems like mainly debts."

"Yeah."

The clock ticked. Coals crackled in the fireplace. A fine, misty rain had filled the pipes up with rattles and drips.

"It must be an awful shock, this," Dan said. "Sort of a one-two punch. I can't imagine it's been easy."

Peake just shrugged.

"You're not much one for small-talk, are you."

"It's fine."

"Should we get on with the questions?"

"I guess."

Dan gestured to Gav, who got up and started pacing out the room. Peake watched him with all the enthusiasm of a geriatric tortoise.

"If at all possible, I'd like answers of four syllables or more," Gav said. "So, question: what was Mr Willems' name?"

"Jackson? John. Mm, maybe Joseph, or—"

"That's enough, thank you. What happened to him?"

"He died."
"That's only two syllables, could you elaborate?"

Peake shrugged. "Not really."

"Three, that's closer. Very well, we'll move on. How often were you at the Théâtre?"

"Pretty much every day."

"Six whole syllables! Tremendous. Were you in the habit of watching the rehearsals?"

He shook his head, mouth pinched over to one side.

"Zero syllables, Mr Peake, please try again."

"I saw a few."

"Much better, thank you. On a typical rehearsal night, then, what was your habit?"

Peake shrugged. "Did paperwork and stuff 'til Bones got there and then went home."

"Steady on, you'll lose your voice if you go on stringing fourteen whole syllables together! Why Bones, in particular?"

"Had the other set of keys."

"Ah yes, the keys, I'm glad you mentioned them. It's funny, you know, because I distinctly recall telling you to lock the doors, and I also distinctly recall Monsieur Dubois simply tugging on the handle to admit Officer Gabriel. Would you care to explain that?"

"Forgot."

"Could you squeeze out a few extra syllables?"

"You're a dick," said Peake.

Dan snorted and pressed his knuckles to his mouth. Gav glared at him.

"While perhaps accurate, that doesn't explain much," he said through his teeth.

"I forgot, that's all."

"Yes, apparently you have a memory like a wide-mesh sieve. It's becoming very clear why Mrs Willems handles everything. Speaking of which: did any of your employees ever come to you to arbitrate disputes, or was that also her job?"

"Blake and Karine about Miles," said Peake. He chewed his lip, then shrugged. "That's all."

"Of course. Christophe never approached you?"

"No."

"Perhaps he sought out Mrs Willems instead?"

"Maybe, I dunno."

"Did you like Christophe?"
"He was all right."

"Were you aware of how he was being treated?"

Another shrug.

"Please do stop doing that, Mr Peake, it's getting annoying. It's a simple yes or no question."

"No, then."

"Ooh, still less than four syllables."

"Still a dick."

"It's part of my charm."

"It's not charming."

"Four! Well done, Mr Peake, we'll make an orator of you yet!"

Peake sat and stared at him. Dan cleared his throat. Gav raised an expectant eyebrow and rolled up onto his toes, hands clasped behind his back.

"Nothing to say?"

"One thing."

"Do tell."

Without changing his inflection at all, Peake said, "If you were a good detective, you wouldn't need Gruchy."

Dan's jaw dropped. Gav floundered, the cracked edges of him grinding against each other.

"Well!" he coughed. "It's—fascinating to know that you're capable of forming opinions!"

"Facts," said Peake, bored and toneless.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand," Dan butted in. His hands were tight on his coffee cup.

Peake turned to him, the smooth rotation of a single-action revolver.

"He's still too good for you," he said.

Dan missed only a single beat before he cracked up. He shook his head, chortling, and put his feet up on the coffee table.

"All right, got any more?" he asked. "Come along, both barrels, Mr Peake, give me the worst you've got."

Peake said nothing, inscrutable. Behind him, Gav pulled himself together, fixing his face and quelling the tremor in his hands.

"No?" said Dan. "All right, good to know you've got it out of your system. Free, if you'd like to continue now, I think Mr Peake's done being snippy."

"Is he? Brilliant. Regardless, I think we'll keep this brief, since we seem to have worn through his
hospitality."

"You have," Peake mentioned.

"All right, as brief as possible, then. There's one little detail that's been bothering me, something I'd hoped you could clear up. When we first spoke to Monsieur Dubois, he told us he had very little input on the play—indeed, the most involvement he's ever admitted was a stolen line of dialogue. Mrs Willems, on the other hand, said that since Dubois was funding the entire operation, he had enough creative control to rearrange the casting, and Mr Marquis said he contributed significantly to the writing. I'm just curious as to who's telling the truth."

"Elyse and Marquis," said Peake. "Dubois just plays the victim."

Gav's jaw tightened, and his mouth pulled out in something that wasn't quite a smile.

"Thank you, Mr Peake," he said. "That's cleared it up nicely."

Dan got to his feet. Peake followed suit.

"I think we'll see ourselves out," said Dan. "Thank you for your time, Mr Peake."

"Uh-huh," said Peake.

Dan gestured for Gav to lead the way, then followed him out. The skin on the back of his neck crawled, even after they'd left the house. Rain sifted down around them, and Dan hunched into the collar of his overcoat. Gav stuck his hands in his pockets, head down and frowning. He made no move to hail a cab, but neither did he speak.

It had been almost exactly twenty-four hours since they'd left Dubois' flat together. Far less of it had been spent sleeping than Dan would have liked, and the majority had been in total silence. Gav had chewed his fingers and muttered to himself and imbibed more coffee than a body ought to, and Dan had been left to fend for himself. This wasn't an unusual pattern of behaviour, but Dan would have liked it much better if they had just stayed in bed poking fun at each other all day. About an hour ago, Gav had declared that they were going to see Peake and Elyse, and so, despite the lateness of the hour, they had gone.

"Gav," Dan said, when they'd walked several blocks from Peake's house. "What he said back there —"

"Already forgotten it."

"We both know you don't forget things. Don't take it to heart, all right?"

Gav scoffed. "Of course not."

A carriage rattled past, splashing flecks of lamplight onto the pavement. Gav and Dan's breath misted in front of them, joining the thin fog that was crawling through the city. Dan cleared his throat, trying to cough out the lingering ache in his chest.

"So ... are we still going to see Elyse, or have you got everything you needed from Peake?" he asked.

"I don't think there's anything she can tell us that we don't already know," said Gav.

"Have you got it all put together, then?"
"Mostly. There's one or two things I need to check. Right now what we need is to find Gabriel."

"Gabriel? All right, I'm all for that. Have you finally decided to listen to me, then?"

"I need to know if Bones was drunk when she talked to him. And I'd like to have someone about to watch our backs when we go back to the Théâtre."

"Back to—nope, noooo, count me out of that. Not for ten thousand bloody pounds."

"Fine, then I'll go on my own."

"Don't be daft."

"I have to go, and if you won't come, then I'll go alone. It's the last bit of the puzzle and I'm not going to waste time waiting about for you to grow a spine."

Dan stopped in his tracks. Gav went another four steps before he noticed. Dan dug his fingernails into his palms and spoke as calmly as he could.

"You don't talk to me like that, Free," he said. "That's unacceptable."

"Then apparently I'll have to skip waiting about for you to grow a thicker skin, as well," Gav sneered.

Dan took a deep breath.

"I'll give you to the count of ten to apologize to me for that," he said. "Or—"

Gav turned on his heel and walked away.

"Oy, where the hell are you going?"

"I've got a murder to solve, Gruchy," he called over his shoulder. "You can come along or not, as you like."

Cursing under his breath, Dan jogged after him. He caught Gav by the arm and yanked him to a stop.

"Let go of me," Gav snapped, wrenching his arm. Dan did not let go.

"What the bloody hell has got into you?" he demanded.

"Daniel, let go of me!"

"Not until you give me an answer!"

"You're hurting me!"

Dan let go. Gav stumbled back, rubbing his arm where Dan had grabbed him. His face was pale in the lamplight. Dan's stomach filled up with tar.

"I'm sorry," he said, hands raised in surrender. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

Gav sniffed and wiped his nose. He turned his face away. His breath came short, his brow furrowed with pain. Dan had to resist the temptation to bang his own head on the nearest wall until blood came out.
"Look it's—it's honestly not that much of a—I overreacted, just now, and I'm so sorry, Gav, I didn't even realize I was—"

"Just leave me alone," said Gav, choked up and shivering. "Just—leave me alone."

"All—all right," said Dan, while a crank-handled vice crushed his breastbone to his spine. "Should I . . . find some place else to stay tonight, or—"

Once again, Gav stalked off in the middle of his sentence.

This time, Dan did not go after him.

The Ravin Rouge was only a little more crowded than last time.

Dan barged through the sitting room, his vision blurred by tears, and threw himself into an unoccupied armchair at the back. He put a hand over his eyes, bit his lip until he tasted blood, and tried not to hear the murmurs swirling in his wake. The air was thick with perfume and tobacco smoke, the chair lumpy and uncomfortable. With every breath he took, the vice squeezed tighter and tighter until his heart stuttered and his stomach heaved.

Someone edged up and set a drink down on the little table at his elbow. He looked up sharply to see a young Black man in a turquoise dress. The man raised a hand in greeting, and then pointed to the drink.

"Compliments of Cassie," he said. "He says you're on his tab for the night, so . . . go wild. He didn't say the go wild part, that was me. I'm Laverne, by the way."

"I want to be left alone," Dan choked out.

"All right, whatever you say, buddy," said Laverne, backing away. "Later."

Struggling for breath, Dan sized up the drink. It looked to be whiskey, neat, and a generous portion besides.

Before he could think better of it, he slugged back the whole thing.

On about the fourth drink, another of the men hung back to talk to him. This one was at least wearing trousers, and had the courtesy to lean up against the wall and not look directly at him.

"Rough night, huh," he said. He was American, and spoke English.

"Hideous," said Dan.

"Sorry. Somebody need to die?"

Dan snorted. He took a long sip off his whiskey, which—either they were watering it down, or the intervening years hadn't softened his palate much.

"Not that sort of rough."
"Huh."

Dan looked over at the man. He was tall, greying at the temples, and looked like he'd been in at least a couple of knife fights. There was a military air about him, although none of the blustering pomp of yesterday's sergeant.

"What was your name?" Dan asked.

"David."

Dan nodded, then said, "Dan."

David pushed off the wall and gave Dan a quick once-over. "Anybody gives you any trouble, you let me know, and I'll take care of them."


"What?"

"Is... is Dubois still about?"

The look on David's face became significantly more calculating.

"He is," he allowed. "Said you wouldn't want to see him."

Dan scoffed and had another long sip of his drink. "Good. Because I don't."

"I'll pass that along."

"I don't want to see anyone."

"We know."

"Make sure you keep knowing, then."

David rolled his eyes and walked away, and Dan got back to the very important business of drinking himself sick.

He was crying into the twelfth drink when he was next bothered.

"Go away," he moaned. "Can't you see I'm miserable? Leave me alone."

"Will you be staying the night?"

The soft, hoarse voice pulled Dan up out of his miserable slump. Dubois regarded him with something that was either pity or amusement—it was difficult to tell, through the tobacco smoke and the double-vision.

"I'm not speaking to you," said Dan. "I'm not—this isn't any of your business, and I'm not speaking to you. Go away. Go—go away, go be smug someplace else. It's not your business."

"I only wanted to know if I should ask them to prepare a room for you."

"Can't afford one. Go away."
"It's on the house. Do you want to stay the night?"

"Not with you. *Not with you.* You keep away from—don't touch me."

"You will note that my hands are in my pockets."

"They'd better stay there. You keep the *hell* away from me, you."

"I fully intend to. Regardless, I would still like to know if you're planning to stay the night."

"What for? Hm? What for, then?"

"Passing out somewhere more comfortable than that chair?"

"It's not—none of your business where I pass out. Sod off, I'm *distraught.*"

"*En Français, si vous pouvez.*"

"*Casse-toi!*"

"Once you've given me an answer about the room, I promise I shall."

"S'long as you stay the hell away from me."

"I will."

"I don't like you."

"I'm aware."

"Me being here doesn't mean anything."

"Certainly."

"You're laughing at me. Stop laughing at me, I'm miserable, I wish I was dead."

"I'm familiar with the condition. Would you like a room and a bed to be miserable in?"

Dan sniffled.

"Yes," he said.

"Then you shall have one," said Dubois, and left him there. Faintly, Dan heard him say, "*Make sure his next one is water, please.*"

He couldn't remember much of anything after that.
When Dan tumbled out of bed in the morning, once he'd gotten done throwing up and bemoaning the railroad spike driven through his head, he found the note that had been slipped under his door. Since he wasn't nearly prepared to face the world yet, he sat down under the window and read it. The French was immaculate, although the flowery script made it difficult to decipher.

Mr Gruchy,

Since it would not surprise me if your memory had failed you in the later hours of your stay, I decided, for the sake of courtesy, to provide you with a brief reassurance that, of those who banded together to carry you to this room, I was not amongst them (as per your request). Likewise, I will take my leave by sunrise; so if there is light enough to read by, rest assured that I have already gone away and you will not have to see me.

Your bill has been paid in full. The ladies and fellows know better than to ask questions, but if they do, you may feel free to threaten them with my displeasure, which should quiet them expeditiously. There is a back door by which you may escape if you are exceptionally averse to conversation.

Should you have the misfortune to encounter me again, know that I will neither speak of this nor allow it to inform any of my actions. I well understand that it is sometimes necessary to perform a disappearing act; I am only glad that you found somewhere safe to disappear to.

Yours in misery,

—C. L. Dubois

Dan wrinkled his nose and crumpled up the letter. While he would have liked to toss it across the room, he stuffed it in his pocket instead. It wasn't exceptionally incriminating, but he still didn't want it lying about where anyone could find it.

"Bit weak on the concept of keep the hell away from me, aren't we," he muttered.

With a groan, he heaved himself to his feet. There was grime underneath every inch of his skin, rust caked on his bones, like his whole body was as dirty as the clothes he'd slept in. He scratched at the stubble on his jaw, ran a hand back through his mussed and greasy hair. Every slightest movement jostled the iron spike in his head and aggravated his uneasy stomach.

As much as he would've liked to crawl back into bed and stay there until he died, he put his shoes on, double-checked that he had all his possessions, and set out for his and Gav's hotel.

On the threshold of their room, Dan hesitated. He hadn't managed to get his apology fully fleshed out, his scattered brains only providing him with the barest skeleton. I've been an ass, I shouldn't have left you, I didn't mean to stay out all night was about all he had, but it would have to do. Just when he was raising a hand to knock, however, he heard voices from within.
"Fine, a few officers, but not too many," Gav was saying. "We don't want to spook them."

"The presence of any police officers is libel to upset them, so I don't see why you don't just go for broke and send in the cavalry."

"The point, Gabriel, is that they feel comfortable enough to make mistakes. If they're surrounded by police, they'll lock their jaws."

"You're not listening to me. If they see any police, they'll lock up. If they don't see any police, they won't. So, put the police where they won't be seen, and you can have as many as you like."

"If you'd meant that, why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I did, and you wilfully misconstrued what I said so that you'd have something to argue about."

"How dare you, I never!"

Dan knocked.

"Oh, what now?" Gav sighed. "Would you get that?"

"No," said Gabriel.

Gav sputtered. Dan tried the handle and found it unlocked. Cautiously, he slipped into the room.

Gav and Gabriel were sitting across from each other at the breakfast table. There was a pot of coffee between them, half empty. Gav was mussed and gray, jittering from toes to fingertips. Gabriel was not in uniform, although she was wearing her customary professionalism.

"Ah, Mr Gruchy, so good of you to finally join us," Gav said. "Sit down, have a coffee, and do try not to be sick on anything."

Gabriel looked at him like he'd started speaking in tongues. She turned to Dan, confused. Dan shook his head, lowering himself into the armchair.

"Well," Gabriel said, "at least now you won't have to worry about—"

"I wasn't worried," said Gav.

She folded her hands on the table and regarded him coolly.

"Well," she said, as though speaking to a child, "at least now you won't have to worry about finding Mr Gruchy."

"Do you know, it's supremely tiresome, when you do that."

"It's also supremely tiresome being interrupted all the time."

"What've I missed?" Dan asked, before one or the other of them went for the throat.

"If you'd been here an hour ago, you would've known," said Gav. "Keep quiet and try to keep up."

Dan rubbed his face. It was becoming ever more difficult not to throw up.

"Since it's been a bit of an uphill battle, why don't we run through everything we've managed to get done in the past hour?" said Gabriel. "So far—"
"Waste of bloody time," said Gav.

Gabriel put her head to one side with the air of someone waiting. Gav muttered under his breath and drained his cup of coffee, then immediately poured a fresh one.

"Since it's been a bit of an uphill battle, let's run through everything we've gotten done in the past hour," Gabriel repeated. "So far, we've briefly discussed how Mr Gruchy was to be located; the alibis—or lack thereof—for the night of Christophe's murder; Mr Brouillard's extreme lack of sobriety the following morning; the necessity of returning to the Théâtre des Variétés and what needs to be done there; and an ill-advised plan for how to obtain a confession. That's all you've missed, Mr Gruchy."

"Is that all?" Dan mumbled.

"It's been an uphill battle," said Gabriel.

"Have we heard back from the coroner yet about Miles?"

"Indeed we have, but you're the first to ask me about it."

"What was the verdict?"

"About what you'd expect; death by asphyxiation, caused by the rope. His neck was broken by the drop, and his throat was—"

Gav shot to his feet. "Why don't I just leave the two of you to it, since you're getting on so well?"

Gabriel gave him that cool, patronizing look again. Before she could repeat herself, Dan stepped in.

"Maybe we'll save the graphic details for some other time," he said. "Gist is, he was strangled to death, yeah?"

"That is the gist," said Gabriel. "But the salient point is: the reason no one's got any defensive wounds is because he died whilst hanging."

Something in Gav clicked into place, and the juddering disorder of him settled to a smooth whirr.

"How do they know?" he asked, perfunctory.

"To keep it from getting too graphic, blood pooling in the head," said Gabriel. "Plus a certain amount of stretching, indicating that he'd been up there for a while before he dropped."

"That's not right," Gav muttered. He set off pacing, hands clasped behind his back. "Wasn't a hangman's knot, they weren't hanging him. More like—"

He whipped around and pointed at Gabriel. She raised her eyebrows and folded her arms.

"Which bit of the throat?" he said.

"Sorry?"

He clicked his fingers. "The coroner, what—"

"Don't snap your fingers at me," Gabriel ordered, thunderous.

"Fine, but which bit of the throat was crushed? Come on, haven't got all day!"
Gabriel took a deep breath and let it out again while Gav quivered with tension.

"There were two bits," she said.

"Hah-hah!" Gav crowed, leaping into the air. "Slipknot, two bits, all that's left is the murder weapon!"

He darted back to the breakfast table, gulped down the rest of his coffee, and ran out the door.

"Where're you—oh bloody hell," said Dan, clambering to his feet.

"Is he—?"

"Give him a moment, he'll be back."

"Mr Gruchy, don't interrupt me," said Gabriel, heading for the door. "Is he quite all right?"

"Hell if I know, but he'll realize in a moment he's forgotten his hat and coat."

Right on cue, Gav popped back in the door and snatched up the aforementioned items.

"Come along, the both of you; haven't got all day!" he chirped.

"Er . . . sorry," Dan said to Gabriel, holding the door for her.

She picked up her own hat and coat, then turned to him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Something in Dan's chest wound up so tight he couldn't breathe. His nose filled with nettles while his throat constricted.


"Right," said Gabriel, not at all convinced. "I suppose we'd best go and catch Mr Free before someone punches him in the nose."

"It is rather a large target. After you, Officer."

It was only when they got to the Théâtre that Gav finally wound down. He exited the cab with a spring in his step; he was down to a plod by the time he'd reached the curb; and mere inches from the front door he lost all his momentum and came to a grinding halt, one arm outstretched for the handle.

"It's probably locked," Dan said, fighting to keep the tremor out of his voice. "We'll go round the back and take the stage door, yeah?"

Gav didn't answer. He swayed where he stood. His outstretched hand trembled.

"Is this what's known as a moment?" Gabriel asked, hanging back by the curb.

"Not if I can help it," said Dan. He went to Gav, put a hand on his shoulder, and turned him away from the door. "Oy, B, quit standing about, there's work to be done."

Some of the color returned to Gav's cheeks, and he blinked the glaze out of his eyes. He cleared his
throat and shrugged Dan's hand off his shoulder.

"Right," he said. "Stage door, right, that's where all the action was, anyway. Stage door. S'pose that'll be round the back, then?"

"They do generally tend to be located near the stage," said Gabriel. Gav glared at her.

"One would imagine," he said through his teeth.

Gabriel shrugged, smirking.

Together, the three of them went round the back of the Théâtre. This required quite a bit of circumnavigation, since there were buildings squished in on either side. The stage door was decrepit and forbidding, but it eased right open with a turn of the handle.

"Convenient," Dan said, hanging back while Gav peered through the crack.

"Exceptionally, but I suspect not just for us," he said. "Gabriel, have you got a firearm?"

"Not even when I'm on duty."

"Damn. Well, nothing for it."

He went to open the door the rest of the way. Dan caught him by the arm before he could. Once again, Gav shrugged him off.

"Free, wait," Dan said. "Are we expecting a fight, or what?"

"No, not at all; but then again, I was expecting to waste significantly less time waiting for you, and look where that's gotten me."

"Look, I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry about last night and—whatever else has got your knickers in such a twist—so can you please lay off for a bloody second and at least act professional?"

"Says the fellow who still reeks of liquor and perfume," Gav sneered. "Did you think I wouldn't recognize the smell? Sorry, but the nose is connected to the same brain as everything else, and it's very good at what it does."

"You daft idiot, if you'd give me five bloody seconds to explain—"

"I don't want a damn explanation, Gruchy, I want you to get out of my way," Gav snapped. "All you've ever done is hold me back—"

"Oh, all I've ever done? Is that all I've ever done for you, Free? 'Cos I could think of a few bloody things—"

"I can think of a dozen more when—"

"You damn well—"

"Excuse me," Gabriel said, easing past the two of them and tugging the door open. Dan lost his train of thought. Gav did a double-take.

"What—wait, hang on, where're you going?" he demanded.

"Thought I'd get some work done," she said, sidling through the door and peering into the darkness.
Dan sputtered, but she was already gone. Gav brushed past him and darted inside as well.

"Waste of bloody time," he muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Dan to hear.

For slightly more than a moment, Dan considered walking away.

"Useless idiot," he sighed, and followed Gav and Gabriel into the Théâtre.

As the door swung shut behind him, the vague silhouettes of set and curtains were engulfed in darkness. Dan stood with a hand outstretched, blinking, waiting. His own breathing was loud in his ears, drowning out the shuffle and mutter of Gav and Gabriel's movement. The smell of sawdust and mildew rose around him like thick fog, cut through with an unpleasant metallic scent that—regardless of what the feeling in the pit of his stomach told him—was more likely rust than blood.

"Mr Gruchy, could you hold that door open?" Gabriel called. "Can't see a thing in here."

"Oh, er—right," said Dan. He inched backwards until he found the door, then pushed it wide open. Cloud-gray light flooded the backstage area, spilling round the curtains and the rigging and the false plywood walls.

"Thank you," said Gabriel. "Now, there's got to be lights round here somewhere. . . ."

"Over here," said Gav. He fiddled with something on the nearer wall, and presently the stage lights came up. Dan let the door fall closed, although he did not go more than a couple steps from it.

"Are we looking for anything in particular?" Gabriel asked.

"A revolver, or more specifically, two revolvers," said Gav. "One will be easy to find, and the other will be much more difficult. If we split up—"

"No," Dan and Gabriel said together.

"All right, fine," Gav grumbled.

They began behind the set, all the shelves and tables set up at the strutted backs of the false walls. As Gav had predicted, the revolver was a quick find, set with a few other props on a large table near the middle.

"If it's a fake, it's good," said Dan. He popped the chamber open and tipped out two rounds into his palm. "These, though, these are blanks. One's been fired, I'd guess the second was a spare in case the first didn't go off. And—ah, yep, the barrel's blocked completely. I can conclusively say: the only way to kill someone with this weapon would be to hit them over the head with it. Although you could lose a finger or two if you put them in the wrong place."

"Perfect, perfect," said Gav. "I wonder if there's a props closet somewhere about? Or a safe. A safe would be ideal."

"We'll keep an eye out for either or both," said Gabriel. "Out of curiosity, why are we looking for a second weapon?"
"He's not going to tell you," said Dan.

"I might do," Gav said.

"Since when?"

"I'm just going to keep looking," said Gabriel, hitching up her skirts and setting off through the jumble. "You two have fun, don't let me get in the way."

"You're having a laugh," Gav accused.

"No no, just being practical; carry on."

"She's having a laugh!"

"Reckon she might be."

"Don't agree with me, I'm holding a grudge!"

"Oh, sorry. Obviously no one's having a laugh, this is very serious."

Gav scoffed and flounced off after Gabriel. Shaking his head, Dan followed. The space was narrow and crowded, between the struts of lumber that held up the set and the dark curtains that shielded the wings. Even mere feet behind Gav and Gabriel, a sense of profound isolation settled over Dan, a sea of soundless whispers and phantasmal applause. He paused to peer through a gap in the set, to look out over the phalanx rows of empty seats. Ice water trickled into his stomach. He rubbed the back of his neck and shivered.

"It's no wonder they're all mad," he muttered to himself.

Something caught his eye as he moved away from the crack, dark paint smeared on the plywood wall. He frowned and wiped two fingers down it. The paint was dry and crackly, sticking to his fingertips in rusty flakes.

"Odd," he said. The design itself was simple, if inscrutable—the symbol for infinity, cut with a diagonal slash.

"Mr Gruchy, your assistance, please!" Gav called. Dan shook his head and moved off, wiping his fingers on his trousers. He found Gav and Gabriel in a cramped and cluttered closet, hunkered in front of a floor safe. Dan folded his arms and tapped his foot.

"I suppose I'm meant to do something about that," he said.

"Yep, cheers," said Gav, getting to his feet. He winced when his knees crackled. "All yours, B."

"Look, it's not as though I make a habit of breaking into safes, don't make it seem like—I don't do this often."

"Shall I go stand in the corner and pretend I'm not seeing anything?" Gabriel asked.

"You'd be there for a while, I'm not quick."

"Only I am technically a police officer."

"Are you technically on duty?"
"Technically it doesn't matter."

"Then yes, I think perhaps it would be very convenient if you could be distracted for the next half hour or so."

Gabriel got to her feet and dusted off her hands.

"My, what interesting rigging: I think I'll go and have a closer look," she drawled. "I certainly hope no one breaks into this safe whilst I'm gone."

"Hop to it, then," said Gav, as Gabriel ambled off.

"You can clear off, too," Dan grumbled, settling in on the floor. "Last thing I need is you heckling me."

"If you say so. Best of luck, Gruchy."

He, too, walked away. Dan breathed out all the unsaid words, put his ear to the safe, and got to work.

Ninety minutes later, the lock finally sprung.

"Bloody hell," Dan cursed, laying his head down on the floor. "Free, Gabriel! I've got it!"

Rubbing his aching neck, he pulled himself upright and moved back from the safe. Gabriel arrived presently, Gav hot on her heels. He squeezed past her and Dan both to tug the safe open. The look on his face became insufferably smug.

"There you are, my lovely," he said, reaching inside. He came out with a revolver identical to the one on the props table, pinched between his thumb and pointer finger. "Mr Gruchy, could you confirm that this is, in fact, a functioning firearm?"

Dan checked it over. He popped open the chamber and poured out two bullets into his palm.

"Those are real," he said. Further examination led him to conclude, "The whole thing's real. Bloody hell, at least it was in a safe."

"At least," said Gav. "Officer Gabriel, how long are you on probation for?"

"I'm already off it; why?"

"If I went to your superior officer and requested you specifically, do you think I could borrow you for a few days?"

She chewed her lip. "He'd try to talk you out of it, but I don't think he'd dare to refuse."

"Perfect. If you can pick out two or three people who'll listen to you, we'll have them along as well."

"I might be able to dredge up a few, but again: why?"

"Cos I don't trust anyone but you and Gruchy to have my back."

Gabriel blinked. "Oh," she said. "All right, then."
"Right," said Gav, rubbing his hands together. "So here's what we're going to do. . . ."
Theatrics

Of all the abodes they'd visited so far, Elyse's was second only to Dubois'. The dining room was spacious and well-lit, although the décor trended towards garish. There had been supper, which was quite good, and the wine was of a reasonable vintage, although Dan had not partaken. It had been a little less than a week since his ill-advised excursion to the Ravin Rouge, but the smell of alcohol still made him feel ill. They'd spent the intervening days tying up loose ends, obtaining official statements and convincing Gabriel's superior officers to go along with the plan. Outside, the sun had set, and although the little party had started off stilted and chilly, the wine seemed to be lubricating the jaws of the assembled at last.

It had taken some doing, but they'd managed to get the whole catalog of suspects gathered together. Peake and Elyse sat at the head of the table, Chad and Torrian opposite. Dubois was at Elyse's right hand, keeping uncharacteristically quiet and not looking at Dan. Ms Jenzen was sandwiched between Blake and Marquis, and Bones had stationed himself as far from Dubois as he could get. Somewhere, presumably, Gabriel and her four colleagues were lying in wait, having infiltrated the house during supper. They were either impressively stealthy, or they were playing hooky.

Across from Dan, Gav got to his feet and flicked his wine glass. The musical ting reverberated through the room, quieting the idle chatter.

"If I may," Gav began, in French, "and with complements to our most gracious host, I thought now might be an appropriate time to tell you all why you've been called here."

Blake and Karine exchanged a glance. Bones drained his glass of wine, which he'd been periodically spiking with pours from his flask. Dubois sat up straighter and folded his hands on the table, politely attentive.

"You were invited," Marquis said coolly.

"I invited myself," Gav replied, at about the same temperature. "It seemed to me, given the aptitude for performance that you all exhibit, that a performance was due in return. It's a fitting end to such a theatrical case, although perhaps not the one you were all hoping for."

"You've found the culprit, then?" Ms Jenzen asked. "You've caught him?"

"Not quite, but we are very close," said Gav. "And while the police are engaged in their activities, we here will be engaged in ours. Shall we begin, ladies and gentlemen?"

"Another fucking actor," Bones muttered, shaking his head.

"Please, Mr Free, at your convenience," said Dubois. "I'm certain we're all dying to hear it."

Elyse chuckled and elbowed him in the side. He murmured something in her ear that made her blush. Across the table, Blake sneered and folded her arms.

"Get on with it, then," she said.

"Gladly, Ms Belladonna. We will begin where I began: with the body."

He stepped out from his seat, clasped his hands behind his back, and took up pacing round the table, talking at a measured tempo that matched the cadence of his steps.
"As some of you may have surmised, Mr Luna was dead long before he was dropped. There was no chance that his death was an accident, as indicated by the coroner's findings. Mr Luna was strangled—but not to death—and then he was hanged, left to suffocate whilst dangling forty feet above the ground."

Ms Jenzen paled. Marquis made a face and shifted in his seat. Peake watched with a bovine disinterest.

"I also noted the presence of what appeared to be blood under his fingernails, perhaps the result of a futile retaliation against his attacker," Gav went on, pacing behind Chad and Torrian. "Other than that, however, his body provided impressively scarce evidence, and so we had to turn our interrogations to the living. There were some inconsistencies in the initial interviews, but nothing so glaring as to draw my immediate attention—nothing, except for Mr Dubois."

Dubois perked up and waved, smiling.

"Stop that," Chad hissed at him. Dubois' only answer was to wink. Gav either didn't see or ignored him.

"It's very rare that I find someone so averse to answering questions, especially when lives are on the line. Perhaps it was purely the fault of my choice in questions, but the good gentleman's recalcitrance intrigued me nonetheless. Clearly, something was being hidden, and clearly it was of some importance. Had Luna actually managed to wound his attacker, Dubois would have been an easy catch, being the only one amongst you with hands well enough hidden. But it was not, in fact, blood under Mr Luna's fingernails, or at least not real blood; which meant that his attacker was not wounded, and therefore must have been careful, methodical, and prepared."

"Dubois could easily be all of those things," Blake pointed out.

"No one ever said he couldn't, but please don't interrupt, Ms Belladonna," said Gav. "I suspected Dubois, of course, but more than that, his air of candid secrecy during our initial interview attuned me to the performative nature of everyone else's distress. Generally, even when it is completely implausible, everyone's first instinct is to blame some maniac wandering in off the street; and yet, not a single one of you brought it up as possibility. That struck me as exceptionally odd. There had to be a reason for it—the simplest explanation, of course, was that you all knew who had done it and were covering it up, messily and with little forethought."

"That's ludicrous," said Chad, bewildered.

"Yes, that's what I said to myself as well. Therefore, I considered other possibilities. It wasn't until I embarked on the second round on interviews that a plausible alternative presented itself. Everyone knew nobody could have come in through the stage door, because everyone knew that Mr James and Mr Dubois were—to put it delicately—stationed outside it."

"Sometimes against it," said Dubois. Chad turned the color of a boiled lobster and put a hand over his eyes. Bones' lip curled, and everyone else looked supremely uncomfortable.

"Likewise," Gav continued, "Mr Crawford was outside the front door, and there are no other entrances or exits—therefore, the murder must have been committed by someone already in the theatre. A hideous fact, but factual nonetheless."

All eyes remained on Gav as he circled the table. Dan kept his ears pricked for any sound out of place, his eyes peeled for any suspicious movement. Gav was on a roll, and therefore probably only paying attention to himself.
"In most cases, we are presented with an overabundance of alibis, and must discover which are truthful and which are false," he said. "In the case of Mr Luna's murder, this is so, although you all presented me with a much larger crop of false alibis than I usually encounter. In the case of Christophe's murder, however, alibis were remarkably thin on the ground. Mr Crawford and Mr James, of course, account for each other, as do Mr Marquis and Ms Jenzen. Still, murder-by-pair is common enough, and you'd all proven to be excellent liars thus far."

"Excuse me?" Torrian cried, affronted.

"Except Mr Crawford, of course, who is an abysmal liar with an obvious tell—when he is not performing. Something about the spotlight—or perhaps the script—washes it right out of him. Regardless, a thin alibi is better than none. We could not find anyone to account for Mrs Willems, Mr Peake, Ms Belladonna, or Mr Brouillard. Their alibis existed, of course, but could not be confirmed. Which brings us back, again, to Mr Dubois."

All eyes turned to him. Dubois was grinning like a child at Christmas. Gav lost his footing. Dubois twirled a hand, encouraging.

"Please, continue," he said.

Gav cleared his throat, straightening his shirt. He spoke to the space above everyone's heads and continued his circling.

"Mr Dubois' only vague attempt at an alibi was to mention, when we called upon him on the morning after the murder, that he'd had, and I quote, a late night and a late morning. An innocuous comment, when taken on its own, perhaps even a frivolous remark meant to excuse making us wait half an hour to see him. Or at least, that's what it was meant to sound like, on first speaking; taken in context, it becomes something far more intentional."

Dubois tsked and shook his head. "And you were doing so well."

"Don't interrupt, Mr Dubois, I'm not finished. The games that you play, sir, are transparent when viewed through an objective lens, not to mention tiresome. Collecting breadcrumbs ceases to be much fun when they're deliberately dropped in front of one's face. The fact of the matter is, Mr Dubois is the only one amongst you who could not have killed Christophe."

The tip of Dubois' tongue poked out between his teeth. He positively glowed, the only warm spot in a room that was suddenly much colder. Glances darted back and forth. Gav continued his pacing. Nobody else moved.

"Indeed, no fewer than ten people can confirm that Mr Dubois was fully occupied between the hours of two and six a.m. on the night of the second murder. Frankly, sir, I'm astounded you could still stand up by the time we got to you."

"Fucking disgusting," Bones muttered. "Ought to be put down."

"An interesting time for introspection, Mr Brouillard, but I cannot say I disagree," Dubois said, with a mouth full of razors.

"Done pretending, are we? All fucking settled then, only thing left to do is cart his carcass off. I can't wait 'til they lop your filthy head off. Fucking abomination."

"Shut up before I knock your teeth in," Dan snapped.

Bones glared, but he said no more. Dan turned to Dubois.
"And you, Mr Dubois, please refrain from pressing any more buttons."

Shrugging, Dubois said, "I cannot help it. Becoming the centre of attention is detrimental to my better judgement."

"Quiet. Free, you were saying?"

"Yes," said Gav, circling the table round and round. "Very often, we find Mr Dubois at the centre of attention. It was Dubois who was the victim of Luna's blackmail scheme, and Dubois whose companionship was so sought after by petitioners of either sex. It was Dubois who, despite not being a professional actor, was singled out to understudy for Luna's role; Dubois who, and I quote, plays the victim—Dubois, whose money is the crux of this whole evil scheme. Again and again, we return to Mr Dubois, because Luna's murder was part of the rehearsal."

"This is slander!" Marquis snarled, leaping to his feet. Torrian gasped, Bones let out an explosion of invectives, Chad almost toppled out of his chair, and Blake went rigid. Elyse frowned around, as though the room was playing a joke on her that she hadn't gotten yet.

"Everyone be quiet and sit back down," Dan ordered, rising as well.

"This man is mad, he is—"

"One more word, Mr Marquis, and I will personally escort you to the nearest police station."

"Darling, please," Ms Jenzen said, touching his arm. "Please, don't make it go on any longer than it must."

Marquis clenched his jaw. Dan scowled at him. By inches and degrees, he sank back into his chair. Dan stayed on his feet.

"Thank you, Gruchy," Gav said primly. "Now, I know that you are all capable of sitting still and holding your tongues, so if you would continue to do so throughout the next minutes, things will go much more smoothly for you—although the progression of this farcical scheme has been anything but. In order to untangle it, we must return to the original sin, the blind cruelty that damned it all from the cradle: the abysmal abuse of Christophe Demarais."

Dan watched the circle of faces, his hand tight on the space where his firearm should have been. There was Dubois, still enraptured; Marquis and Bones, still fuming; Ms Jenzen, pale and dizzy and hollowed out. Blake sat with her jaw clenched and her spine straight, her eyes blazing with fury. Chad looked like he might be sick at any moment. Torrian had his eyes shut and his head bowed, lips pinched tight together. Peake was mildly interested, and Elyse was baffled.

"Christophe was sixteen years old when he died," said Gav. "He was young, superstitious, perhaps a bit mad but certainly harmless. For these traits, he was bullied mercilessly, and not just by Luna. Mr Brouillard, for instance, was fond of inflicting his frustrations upon the boy, but I doubt any of you were guiltless. At the very least, none of you stopped it. At the very least, none of you helped him. Therefore, it would surprise me very little if Christophe bore no particular grudge against Luna, since his behaviour was not exceptionally different from anyone else's. This, you will soon understand, is key."

Blake started to speak, but changed her mind when Dan glowered at her. The glare she shot back at him could have killed a small horse.

"The plan itself was, admittedly, elegant," Gav went on, round and round, every step measured. "It was only the application that was bungled. For you see, the original intent, the master-plan, was that
Luna should be shot dead—the prop gun replaced with a real one, and a bullet put through his heart to cap off Act I."

"Dear God!" Chad exclaimed.

"Shut up, Mr James, your performance is no longer necessary," Gav snapped.

"I didn't kill him! I swear to God I didn't, I—Casimir can tell you, I couldn't have, I was—"

"And yet you would have, if it had not been for Christophe!"

The silence that rang afterwards was hollow with dread.

"Christophe was not a stupid boy, nor was he deaf. He knew the plot. He knew the wickedness and cruelty of your machinations. Behind the set, during all the hustle and bustle of preparation, while Bones was preoccupied speaking with Luna and Gruchy and myself, Christophe swapped the guns."

Clenching fists, grinding teeth, flinty eyes. Chad gulped. A look passed between Peake and Marquis. Elyse dug a finger into her ear, wincing.

"It was his superstition, I suspect, that drove him to finally take action," said Gav, wandering behind Blake and Jenzen. "He was convinced that Luna's spirit would haunt the theatre, and—it being his only home—could not stomach the thought of being trapped with the vengeful shade of his tormentor for the rest of his life. So he swapped out the intended murder weapon for the customary prop gun, and—because the two were intentionally identical, and because Mr Brouillard is a habitual drunk—nobody noticed until the curtain closed and Luna got up."

"Insane, this whole idiotic tale is the rambling of a madman," Marquis spat. "Who in their right mind would murder one of their lead actors so close to opening night?"

"Someone who had a replacement in mind," Gav retorted. "Which is where the ever-present Mr Dubois finally enters the picture."

"You're doing wonderfully," said Dubois, his eyes full of stars. "I can't wait."

"Thank you for so effortlessly proving my next point. Mr Dubois, bored senseless and itching for the spotlight, was the perfect victim for this particular deception—unsurprising, since it was tailored to him. Once Luna was shot dead, the body would be quietly removed, and Luna's absence excused with something innocuous—food poisoning, perhaps, or a touch of 'flu. But the show could not go on without one of its lead actors, unless someone very keen and very vain stepped up to fill the role. Perhaps he would eventually have caved to Mrs Willems' propositions of marriage, or perhaps in the end the will would simply have been forged. It hardly mattered, so long as the proper disposition of his considerable wealth was ensured. Unaware of Mr Luna's fate, he would, sooner or later, have met the exact same one."

Dubois burst out laughing.

"Excuse me, is something funny?" Gav cried, stamping his foot.

Stuffing his knuckles in his mouth, Dubois put his head down on the table and gestured for Gav to continue. His shoulders shook with stifled mirth.

"Speaking of madmen," Torrian muttered.

"Confronted with the failure of your perfect plan, Mr Crawford, you panicked!" Gav snarled,
rounding on him.

"Me? I didn't do anything, you saw me walk out!"

Gav barrelled on, heedless. "With Luna still alive, the whole thing would fall apart. He had to be disposed of before opening night, or the public would wonder what had happened to him, and your hideous plot be revealed in an instant!"

"You can't—"

"I am not finished!"

Silence came down again. Torrian trembled where he sat. Blake looked ready to strangle someone. Jenzen was crying.

"It required incredibly quick thinking," Gav continued, "of which, from the assembled, only a very select few of you have proven capable. There was one each behind the curtain and in front of it—behind, it was Ms Jenzen."

"Please," she whispered. "I didn't—"

"What you did do, Ms Jenzen, was give out instructions. Had you been in charge of the whole operation, I suspect it would not have been quite so much of a mess. Recognizing that the plan was in jeopardy, you immediately acted to put it right. James was dispensed to keep Dubois occupied, while Crawford was sent out to watch the street, as was the original plan—only you were meant to be dumping Luna's body, not working out how to kill him. Brouillard lit into Christophe the first chance he got, which activity likely kept him preoccupied for the entirety of the intermission. Out of curiosity, sir, did you decide you were going to kill him then, or only once it became clear he wouldn't keep his mouth shut?"

"I didn't kill the little fuck!"

"You did, actually. I know because you have one of the only two sets of keys, and because, after killing him, you went home and drank yourself sick. You remember Officer Gabriel? She confirmed that you were still very drunk at nine o'clock the following morning, and by your own account, you passed out for at least a few hours after returning home—which puts you arriving around, oh, five-thirty in the morning. About half an hour after Christophe was decapitated, dismembered, and disemboweled."

"It wasn't my idea," Bones croaked.

"You drunken idiot," said Blake, every syllable dripping with hatred. "Why couldn't you have drowned yourself already?"

"Steady on, Ms Belladonna, we're nearly there," said Gav. "The issue at intermission, of course, was working out what to do with Luna. I believe you contributed heavily to that bit of the quick thinking. Perhaps you engineered another encounter whereby Luna's lecherous tendencies could be leveraged against him. At Marquis' approach, he fled to the catwalks, as you knew he would. This was a necessary step, as you intended that he should suffer a different tragic accident and fall to his death. Messy, but it would have worked—if only you had been the one calling the shots."

"If only you would burn in Hell," Blake said.

"I shall keep your request in mind. You knew that the murder could not be postponed; you likewise knew that even the tiniest hint of anything amiss would put me onto the case—which is why Luna
could not be pushed from the catwalks, and why the ever-friendly Mrs Willems was so desperately eager to keep me and Gruchy distracted during intermission. Even so, even with all the bungling and Christophe's sabotage, it nearly worked. The killer nearly managed to dispose of Luna in such a way that neither Dubois nor the detectives in your audience would ever know about it, if only he hadn't forgotten to reattach the rope to—"

Peake lunged for him.

Dan cried out. Elyse shot to her feet. Both doors to the room burst open and five police officers tumbled in, shouting. Peake hooked an arm round Gav's throat and jammed a revolver to his head.

Everyone froze.

Gav choked, clutching at Peake's arm. Peake dragged him backwards. His eyes flicked over the assembled, calculating.

"All right," he said mildly. "I think we get it."

"Put him down," Dan said. Gav trembled, his eyes huge, fingers digging into Peake's arm. The officers looked at each other, their billy-sticks clenched useless in their hands.

"He'll do, anyway," said Peake. "You four, c'mon, we're already late."

Marquis, Bones, Blake, and Chad all got to their feet. One of the officers shuffled a half-step forward. Peake cocked the revolver and Gav yelped. All movement stopped at once.

"Elyse," Peake continued, "stay and keep an eye on everybody."

"Yessirree!" Elyse chirped, and leveled another revolver at Dan's head. She winked at him. "Sorry, honey, it ain't nothin' personal."

Gav's feet scuffed at the floor. He wasn't breathing right. His eyes were fixed on Dan, brimming with terror, pleading.

"Everyone put your weapons away, please," one of the officers said. "There is no need for this to escalate to—"

Peake fired a shot into the air. Gav screamed. The smoking barrel pressed to his temple and he screamed again, thrashing. Dust showered him and Peake. The smell of burned hair pervaded the room.

"Could've been you," Peake mentioned to the officer. "But it'll be him next."

"Don't you touch him," Dan said. His voice cracked, his fists clenching at his sides. "Don't you dare lay a hand on him!"

"C'mon, let's go," said Peake. He dragged Gav backwards. Gav squeaked and kicked and choked off abruptly when Peake tightened his grip. Peake backed out of the room with him, Marquis and Blake following, Bones and Chad scurrying after. The officers stood like cattle, useless and stupid.

"We-yull, looks like we might be here for a while," said Elyse, moving away from the table.

Dan went for her.

Ms Jenzen caught him by one arm, Torrian by the other. He struggled. They wrestled him back down into his chair.
"Let go of me! Let go of me, you cowards, you—"

"Mr Gruchy, calm down!"

"You'll get yourself shot, for God's sake!"

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Y'know, maybe I'll just go on and shoot you," Elyse said.

"Please, no," said Ms Jenzen. "Elyse, you can't do this. Please, it isn't worth it anymore, we—"

"Aw, honey, bless your heart," said Elyse, shaking her head. "This's all real far above y'all's pay grade, so why don't you just sit a while, and don't worry your pretty li'l head about it."

Tears slid down Dan's cheeks. He trembled, every muscle pulled taut. Torrian and Jenzen had not loosened their grips. Jenzen looked terrified. Torrian looked guilty.

"Madame, I must ask you to put the weapon away," another of the officers said.

"One more goddamn word outta y'all's mouths, and I'm gonna be eatin' pork tomorrow, y'all understand?" Elyse said. "By which I mean, in case y'all ain't got it: the next damn cop who talks is gettin' a bullet in the head."

All four of them gulped. There was shifting, shuffling, but no one made a move. Dan choked down screams.

"If you kill a policeman, we're all done for," Torrian said. "There's no—"

"Honey, if I can't shoot a pig and get away with it, I deserve to get locked up," she said. "Just like poor li'l Free-bird deserves what he's gettin' for bringin' piggies up in my house. And for fuckin' up our plans, 'cuz it was s'posed to be Cassie."

At the sound of his name, Dubois raised an eyebrow.

"If you touch one fucking hair on his head—" Dan choked out.

Elyse cocked the revolver.

"How 'bout you quiet down?" she said. "It's a real shame, 'cuz we was gonna come into a helluva lot of cash, with Cassie. We're still gonna get away with a few murders, which I guess is almost as good. I'm sure it'll all work out somehow. Like they say: the Lord will provide!"

Dubois rolled his eyes, then got to his feet. Elyse glanced at him, but did not shift her aim.


"My dearest Elyse, please stop talking," Dubois said. "It is too beautiful of a language for you to be massacring it so."

She blinked. The policemen stiffened. Ms Jenzen drew a slow, shuddering breath.

"Dubois, don't," Torrian hissed. Dubois ignored him.

"What you said?" Elyse asked, suspicion tinging every syllable.
"I said you sound like an idiot, and you should shut up," he said. "Even now, I am forced to simplify myself for you."

"Idiot?" she said. Torrian hunched over the table as the barrel of the gun slid sideways. Dan wrenched his arm free and repositioned his feet.

Dubois clucked and shook his head. "And now you are making me repeat myself. Keep up, Elyse. This is why you're always getting left behind."

"Awright, you stuck-up cocksucker," she sneered. The gun trained on his head. "How you like these apples?"

Dubois raised his hands. A smile curled out across his face.

"En Français, Madame Willems, s'il vous plaît."

Her face went hard. "You wanna get made an example of, Cassie? 'Cuz you're fixin' to."

Dan extracted his arm from Jenzen's grip. She put a hand on his back and pushed down. Dan slid out of his chair and into a crouch. Dubois' smile pinched at the corners, although he kept his eyes on Elyse. He shrugged.

"Je peux pas te comprendre quand tu parles comme ça," he said.

"That's it," said Elyse. "Everybody watch real close, now, 'cuz this is what happens when you talk shit to me."

Dubois didn't move.

Gabriel did.

She plowed into Elyse's back shoulder-first. A shot went off. Elyse and Gabriel hit the floor. So did Dubois. Dan rounded the table and snatched up the revolver. Gabriel grabbed a double handful of Elyse's hair and slammed her head on the floor. Elyse went out like a light. Two officers each grabbed Torrian and Jenzen. Dan spun on his heel, breathless and dizzy. Dubois was lying on the floor, hissing pain through his teeth and clutching his arm. Blood soaked through his sleeve. He looked up at Dan, breathless and askew, and the air crackled.

"They will have gone through the basement to the sewers," he said, choked with pain. "If you hurry, you can catch them."

Dan looked to the officers, putting Torrian and Jenzen and the unconscious Elyse in cuffs; to Dubois, bleeding on the floor; to Gabriel, dusting off her hands.

"Please help me," he said to her.

"I'm with you," she said. "Lucas, Perrault, you as well. Let's go."

Together, the four of them sprinted off after Peake, the conspirators, and Gav.
A Little Death (Reprise)

Dan splashed down into frigid water, ankle-deep. The stench was enough to make him gag. Gabriel and the two officers came down the ladder after him, holding their noses. The sewers were black as pitch, only the faintest glimmers of light penetrating the murk. One of the officers carried a hooded lantern; he opened the shutter wide and shone its beam across the slimy walls, the refuse-clogged gratings, the cold and putrid water. The tunnel stretched off in two directions, each as inscrutable as the other.

"Shit," Dan hissed, keeping a hand over his mouth and nose. "Shit, how—?"

"Look here, on the wall," said Gabriel, pointing. "Someone's scraped the gunk off; this way."

The four of them set off, slipping on the slick stone. Dan's feet were numb in seconds, his stomach churning from the smell. He could see nothing outside of the lantern's light. The gurgle and mutter of running water echoed off the walls around them, underscored by the constant rumble of Paris. Freezing water spat down from every drain and grating, soaking through Dan's jacket and shirt and leaving him shivering.

"Mr Gruchy, I assume you can handle that firearm," Gabriel whispered as they slogged through the muck.

Dan glanced down at his hands. One of them was still clutching Elyse's revolver, white-knuckled. When they came to a junction, he popped the chamber open and found it fully loaded, save the one spent round. He snapped it shut again.

"If necessary," he said. "Check the walls, see if there's another—"

"Here, this way," said the officer with the lamp. "Left again."

They set off, down another long corridor that twisted and turned. Dan listened until his ears rang, but he could hear nothing through the slosh and mutter of their progress, the ever-present roar above them. At the next junction, the passage widened out, splitting into three. They shone the light round and checked for more smears or scrapes on the wall.

There were none.

"Shit," Dan muttered under his breath, growing more frantic by the second. "Shit, shit! There's got to be—"

"Gruchy, stay calm," said Gabriel. "Free isn't stupid, he'll have tried to leave a trail. It may just be down the corridor a bit. We'll take them one by one."

"We haven't got the time! We don't know where they're taking him, or what they're going to—"

"What we don't have the time for is arguing! We start on the left, we'll go no more than ten feet down, and we will not panic, is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am!" one of the officers squeaked. The other punched him in the shoulder. Dan ground his teeth and let out a slow breath.

"That's a wise plan," he said. "Let's get to it."
They scoured the lefthand tunnel, looking over every inch of wall for a fleck of mildew out of place. Dan could feel the minutes draining away like blood, leaving him shaky and breathless. The numbness in his feet wrapped round his ankles, crawling up his legs and tripping him up.

"Right, I don't think we're going to find anything here, let's try another," said Gabriel. The words fogged in front of her face, opaque in the lamplight.

"Can't we split up? Hasn't someone got another—"

A blood-curdling scream rang out, coming from behind them. Dan took off running on the instant.

"Gav!" he shouted.

Gabriel caught his arm before he got three steps. "Gruchy, wait!"

"Let go of me! They're killing him, listen to—they're killing him!"

"And if we go dashing in there headlong, they'll finish the job before we can do anything about it!"

There was another scream, reverberating through the tunnels. Dan clenched his teeth so hard he couldn't breathe.

"Listen to me," Gabriel said. "As long as he's still screaming, he's still alive. He'll take us right to them, but we can't split up, and we can't give ourselves away."

"God damn it all," Dan hissed. "God damn it!"

"I know, but we'll get there. Stick close."

Gav screamed again, broken, agonized. Barbed wire wrapped round Dan's heart and pulled in all directions. Gabriel hurried onward, pulling him along. He tripped over his numb feet, caught himself against the slime-slick wall; recovered his balance, carried on.

The next minutes passed in a haze of pain and terror. Gav kept on screaming, growing ever nearer. At times the direction was confused by the echoes and the constant white noise, and every time they had to double back Dan nearly lost his composure. He clutched the revolver so tightly that it bit into his fingers and made his knuckles pop. He could scarcely see through the tears in his eyes, barely breathe past the panic clawing at his chest.

As they grew nearer, more voices rose—not in screams, but in chanting. They were close enough to hear Gav's ragged gasps between his screams, close enough to hear shuffling footsteps on dry stone. Gabriel signalled to the officer with the lantern, and he shuttered it down to a moonlight glow. Only then could Dan see the light spilling from a junction ahead, painting the black water in shades of white and yellow.

"Lights out," Gabriel hissed. "Noises off. Gruchy, you've got the firearm; you lead."

Dan nodded and redoubled his grip on the revolver. With his back against the wall, he crept forward, forced himself to keep his pace slow. The chanting was building, the words unintelligible through the reverberations of the sewers. Gav's screams dissolved into whimpering, broken pleading and blind panic. Dan set his shoulder to the corner, readied the revolver, and bit his tongue.

Before Gabriel could stop him, he peeked round the corner.

There was Gav—stripped naked, bleeding everywhere; there were four people holding him down on
a raised stone dais, a dozen more lurking in the shadows; there was Marquis, standing at his side. In his hands was a long, cruel dagger, wet with blood. His face was white and waxy. As Dan watched, he raised the dagger up, high above his head. The chanting swelled. Gav screamed and thrashed. Candlelight gleamed off the blade like hellfire.

Dan stepped out, took aim, and fired.

The gunshot was concussive, deafening. Marquis' head snapped back. He fell. The room erupted in clamour, swarming like a kicked anthill. Dan cocked the revolver and took aim again.

Another gunshot. Shrapnel peppered Dan's face. Someone yanked him back behind the corner. A bullet smacked into the wall behind him, and another. All he could hear was ringing. He broke from the grip on his arm and came round the corner shooting.

One, two, three, four, at anything that moved, anything that was too near to Gav, and there were dark figures and more gunshots, thudding like drumbeats against his deafened ears. Gabriel and her two officers rounded the corner in a blaze of lantern-light, shouting at the top of their lungs. The remaining figures scattered like cockroaches. Dan saw Peake, blood pouring down the side of his face; saw him speak a word and then bolt into the darkness.

Dan dropped the empty revolver and sprinted across the room, tripping over himself. Gav was seizing violently, his eyes rolled back and foam gathering in his mouth. His chest and abdomen were a mess of cuts, pouring blood. Dan took his face in his hands, desperate and helpless.

"Gav, Gav, it's me," he said. "I'm here, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I've got you, it's going to be all right..."

Gabriel arrived on the other side of the dais. She shucked off her jacket and threw it over Gav. The seizure was subsiding, but he was still breathing all wrong and his eyes were still rolled back and there was so much blood.

"We've got to get him to hospital," said Gabriel. "Can you carry him?"

"I—I can, I've got him," said Dan. He stripped off his own jacket and draped it over Gav's chest, although there was no hope that it would stop the bleeding. He scooped Gav up and clutched him close, even while he continued to spasm.

"Good," said Gabriel. "Perrault, bring the light! Lucas, take the nearest ladder out of here and get to a station, tell them what's happened!"

"Yes ma'am!" the two chorused.

"Come along, Gruchy," she said, putting a hand on his back and urging him forward. "Not a moment to lose."

Gav was taken from him as soon as they got to the hospital. He followed, no matter how they tried to keep him away. At the surgery door, he was physically barred from entering, and Gav was at last swept out of his sight. There was a tremendous pain in his chest, like he'd been shot. He didn't bother to check if he actually had been. He stood for long minutes, paralysed, until a nurse came by and insisted that he be checked, since there was blood all over him and he didn't look well. Dan refused. He wasn't leaving Gav. He couldn't leave Gav. It was only when she promised him that he'd be allowed to return here as soon as he'd been checked out that he agreed to go with her.
A doctor and nurse checked him over thoroughly and found nothing worse than bruises and powder-
burns, a few minor cuts on his face from shrapnel. A police officer turned up, and although Dan
didn't recognize him, he'd brought a change of clothes.

"Gabriel sent me," he explained.

Dan thanked him, and got changed in the washroom. His old clothes were unsalvageable, reeking of
the sewers and crusted with Gav's blood. He did as much washing up as he could, then stuffed the
ruined clothes into the bin and stuffed himself into the fresh ones. He returned to the surgery.

Gabriel was loitering outside when he got there. She got up as he approached, concern etched into
every line of her face.

"How is he?" Dan asked. His voice barely shook.

"Alive," said Gabriel. "They haven't told me much more than that, but . . . alive."

Dan shut his eyes and let out a breath.

"Good," he said. "That's good. And—your people, are they. . . ?"

"Half the police in Paris are down the sewers," she said. "They're not getting away."

The two of them stood, their breathing loud in the quiet space.

"Thank you," said Dan. "You . . . I would've been lost without you, down there. Gav would've been
lost without you. So thank you. Thank you for saving him."

Gabriel bit her lip. She bowed her head. Her breathing grew short and shaky. A pair of tears slipped
down her cheeks, and her composure collapsed. She sank back into her chair, crying and shivering
and struggling for breath. A lump rose into Dan's throat, his eyes prickling. The terrible pain in his
chest swelled to unbearable sizes, until it felt it must burst out between his ribs. He crossed the room
at sat down next to Gabriel.

Hesitantly, he put a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She cracked a smile and scrubbed at her face.

"Apologies are not in order, Mr Gruchy," she said, choked up. Her tears continued to flow unabated.
"I'm just glad we're not all dead, because I was very certain we were going to be."

Dan put his arm round her shoulders. She leaned into him, sniffing and shivering. He couldn't think
of anything to say, so he didn't try. After a minute or so, Gabriel pulled herself together, taking deep
breaths and wiping the tears from her face.

"Sorry," she said. "I generally try to keep more composed."

"I don't mind," said Dan. "You can keep going, if you like. I haven't got anywhere to be."

She shook her head. "I have, though. I should . . . get back to the station and see what needs doing.
Hope to Heaven I've still got a job by the time I get there."

"If you need somebody to vouch for you, just say the word," said Dan. He patted her shoulder,
unsure of what to do with his hands. "Honestly, any time."
"I will, thank you." She got to her feet, straightened her uniform, and blew out a breath. "Be seeing you, Gruchy."

"Be seeing you, Gabriel. And thank you. Again. A hundred times."

"That might almost be sufficient," she said.

Dan managed a smile, and Gabriel managed one in return. With nothing more than that, she took her leave.

Half an hour later, the doctor came out and told Dan that it was going to be some time before Gav could see anyone. He was still breathing, at least, although he had not woken. His wounds were grave, and he had lost a significant amount of blood, but he was, for the moment, stable.

"He . . . he had some sort of fit, whilst we were down there, is there any—do you know what might have caused it?" Dan asked.

The doctor frowned and wiggled his moustache. "Shock, more than likely," he said. "But I shall keep it in mind moving forward. If you would like to return to your hotel, we can send word when he is ready for visitors."

"I think I'd like to stay, if that's all right."

"You would have to remain outside his room."

"I don't mind."

The doctor shrugged. "If that's what you would prefer."

"It is."

"Very well; then I will keep you appraised of the situation."

"Thank you, sir."

The doctor went away, and Dan was left alone again. Head in hands, heart in throat, he settled in to wait.

Somehow, the night passed. Around two in the morning, the press showed up, even more ravenous than usual. Too exhausted to fend them off, Dan caved and told them the whole thing, as best he could and with as little detail as he could get away with. It took the hospital staff escorting the reporters from the building to finally be rid of them. Shortly afterwards, Gav was moved from the surgery to a private room, although this, too, Dan was forbidden from entering. He was shown to a waiting room instead, given a coffee and a promise of regular updates, and left to moulder.

Despite the intermittent coffees brought to him by various nurses and secretaries, Dan eventually fell asleep in his chair. His dreams were haunted by candle-light monsters, faces wet with blood and eyes white as Death. For hours on end, he ran through chest-deep water, frigid currents that beat him back ceaselessly. When at last the sunrise woke him, he was more exhausted than before.
After a fresh cup of coffee, he loitered obtrusively outside Gav's room until the nurse came out. She gave him a brief update that told him nothing new—Gav was still breathing, still unconscious, still stable but precarious. He thanked her and went back to the waiting room.

Not too long after that, another visitor entered.

"Dubois!" Dan exclaimed. Before he could get to his feet, Dubois raised a hand. His other arm was in a sling. There was a sleepless pallor about him, but at the very least, he was hale enough to engage in his customary politesse.

"No no, please, don't get up; I won't be staying long. How is our dear detective?"

Dan settled back into his chair. He rubbed his face.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said.

"Ah, that most unpleasant state. So long as he is still breathing, I suppose there is yet hope."

"I suppose. I hope you're not too badly injured?"

"Oh no, nothing of the sort. It was a scratch, that's all."

"Perhaps a bit more than a scratch."

Dubois twinkled. "Perhaps," he allowed. "And you?"

"What about me?" Dan asked, frowning. Dubois gestured to him.

"Are you all right?"

Before Dan could get a word out, a lump rose into his throat and choked him off. He looked away, blinking back tears. He clenched his teeth and pressed his fists.

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine."

"Mr Gruchy, and I say this with the utmost compassion and regard: no you're not."

Dan swallowed back a sob. He buried his face in his hands, trembling head to toe. His skin burned, red and sweaty and prickling everywhere Dubois' gaze touched it.

"It's my fault," he hissed through his teeth. "It's my fault, this's all my fault. I should never have let this happen, I let this happen to him—"

"Of course you didn't," said Dubois, in a tone of such sincerity that it cracked Dan's heart.

"I did! I did, though, I should have done something, I should have moved faster, I should have—I knew this would happen! It's always the damned dramatics, he's always got to do them, and I've said for years that someday it was going to get him killed and he never listened and I kept on letting him do it anyway, and now look what's happened, now look what I've done!"

"You didn't do this."

"I should have got to him faster, if I'd only got there faster, if I'd only—"

"Mr Gruchy, look at me."
Dan raised his head, taken aback by the steel in Dubois' voice. He caught Dan's gaze and held it with a breathless intensity.

"This is not your fault," he said.

Dan's lip quivered against the pressure of the sobs behind it. He had to turn his face away, squeeze his eyes shut.

"It is, though. It's all my—"

"Sincerely, it is not. Say it back to me."

He shook his head, tasting bile. He dug his fingernails into his palms, splints of pain to keep his composure pinned in place.

"I can't," he whispered.

Dubois let out a long sigh. Dan swallowed and tried to shrink into the hole in his stomach.

"I'm sorry that I cannot be of more help," Dubois said softly. "And I am sorry that this happened. At the very least, I will see to it that you pay no bills for Mr Free's care."

"God, no, you've already done too much."

"I've done very little, in fact."

"You got shot!"

He shrugged. "It's happened before. It will most likely happen again. It was, in some ways, inevitable—considering what Mr Free said about Peake's perfect plan."

Dan shuddered. "I don't know how you can be so cavalier about it."

"Chalk it up to faith," said Dubois. "Or to blatant and blissful stupidity, if you would prefer. In many cases, they are indistinguishable."

Despite himself, Dan cracked a smile.

"Still," he said. "You don't have to do anything for us. Least of all pay off our bills."

"I'm aware; and yet I think I will do it anyway. It's all I can do, Mr Gruchy. Indulge me."

"You're much too kind," said Dan. "I don't know how we can ever repay you."

"You won't, because you don't have to. I have my own debts to repay. This, I consider a worthy step in the right direction."

Dan looked up at him again. His hand was in his pocket, a smile on his face. There was something of pain in the expression, something fragile in the way he held himself.

"I'm sorry," Dan said. "Whatever it was. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Dubois. His smile cracked open. "Please. Don't be."

Dan wiped his face. He rested his elbows on his knees and laced his hands together. Dubois bounced on his toes, gazing out the window.
"Well," he said. "At any rate, please do pass along my well-wishes to Mr Free when he wakes up."

"I will," said Dan. "Thank you."

Dubois smiled at him. "You are very welcome," he said. He turned to go, then hesitated. "Let me give you my card, while I'm here. In case you ever need me."

"I'm not sure what you could do, but I'll take it," said Dan. Dubois handed him a neat card from his neat wallet, and Dan stuck it in his breast pocket.

"In case you encounter any further expenses," said Dubois, halfway to a joke. "Or, perhaps, simply in the event that you find yourselves at your wit's end. I find that my wits tend to extend just slightly farther than most."

He winked. Dan rolled his eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, Dubois. For everything."

Dubois touched his forelock in a lazy salute. He ambled to the door, but again hesitated on the threshold.

"By the by . . . it's Casimir," he said. "To you and Mr Free. If you would like it to be."

"Casimir," said Dan. The name was not unpleasant on his tongue. "I . . . think that would be all right. It's Daniel to you. Or Dan, if you like."

Dubois—Casimir—gave him another smile, eyes a-sparkle.

"I might," he said. "Someday. Good morning, Daniel. I hope all your other lions are as kind."

"My . . . ?"

But Casimir was already gone.

"What bloody lions?" Dan muttered.
In the late afternoon, Dan was finally allowed into Gav's room. He came along quietly, not daring to speak in case the wrong word could revoke his visitation privileges. Having scarcely been able to eat all day, he was dizzy and sick and exhausted, his whole body aching as though from a hangover.

He forgot about all of it the moment he came into the room.

He'd never seen Gav so pale, so hollow. His chest was swathed in bandages up to his neck. There were thick, ugly bruises on his wrists, patches of his hair torn out from his struggling. He was breathing, but only shallowly, and much too fast for a man unconscious.

"If you notice any changes, call out," the nurse instructed. "Someone will always be within earshot, and we'll check in every half hour. I'm afraid you've caught us at a very busy time, or else we would keep a nurse in the room with him at all times."

"It's—it's fine," said Dan. "I'll keep an eye on him."

"Has he any family?"

"He does. If there's . . . he's got a brother who ought to—if there's a telegraph office, I should send him something. He ought to know."

"I'll have someone bring along pen and paper, and we'll get it sent off first thing."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." She hesitated, then added in a much softer voice, "He's very lucky to have such a devoted friend."

The most Dan could do was fake a smile and shrug. If he opened his mouth, it would only be to scream, to shout at the top of his voice, I love him, he is my heart and my soul, the air in my lungs and the blood in my veins; I love him, can't you see it, isn't it obvious?

He somehow doubted it would go over well.

The nurse patted his arm and took her leave. Dan swallowed down the words like a mouthful of nails. He moved to the bedside and pulled up a chair. Gav did not stir. His skin was waxen, his breath hoarse in his throat. Dan clasped his hands in his lap and squeezed until his fingers went numb.

"I've been thinking," he said softly, wary of drawing attention, wary of waking Gav. "Now that it's all over with. I've been thinking, about—about America. About . . . building a house, and having a couple of cats, and a garden, and—and that. I've been thinking . . . how unhappy that'd make you. How much you'd hate being stuck in one place, with nothing to do, no—no mysteries to unravel, no puzzles to put together. And I've been thinking—d'you know, I don't think I'd actually like it much, either?"

Gav's eyes moved beneath their lids. The tips of his fingers twitched. Dan held his breath. When it became obvious that no real change was forthcoming, he carried on.
"I think, honestly, I'd be bored. I don't mean to say that it's this or nothing, I'm not saying that at all. It's only—somewhere along the way, somebody sold me a dream of a perfect life. And in it, there's a house, and a steady job, and some cats, and—a wife, and children. Pretty obvious the wife and children bit wasn't for me, considering they never want to see me again, but—I s'pose I never thought about the rest of it. I think—honestly, Gav, I think for me, home is wherever you are, and the only perfect life is one where you're happy, and—and—I don't know, I don't know what I'm saying and you can't even hear me and this is all pointless, but. . . ."

Dan rubbed his face, choking on the mess of words in his throat. They backed up into his chest, swelling up into an aching pain. He clenched his jaw and breathed deeply through his nose, trembling with the effort of holding his composure together. Any minute now, someone would walk in and see him like this, any minute someone would put two and two together and they'd be out on the street—if they were lucky—and even if Gav somehow survived they'd never work again, they'd never be safe no matter where they went, probably hanged within the year, but maybe that would be fortunate because outside of hospital Gav wouldn't last an hour and without Gav Dan wouldn't last, and. . . .

From the bed there came a small noise, like a dog barking in its sleep. Dan raised his head just in time to see Gav's eyelids flutter open. It was all Dan could do to resist sweeping up his hand, covering his face in kisses.

"Hello, there," Dan said. His voice shook horribly. "Good morning, welcome back to the land of the living."

Gav's eyes swam in and out of focus. His lips twitched and his throat worked as he tried to form a word.

"Wh . . . where . . ."

"You're in hospital," Dan assured him. "You've been hurt, but you're going to be all right."

"No," Gav slurred, shaking his head. "Where—I can't—Dan . . . where's Dan?"

All the air went out of Dan's lungs. His hands turned to ice as his heart collapsed on itself like a sinkhole.

"Gav, I . . . I'm Dan," he said. "I'm right here, Dan's here."

"I—I need—I've made a mistake, I've—terrible mistake, I never meant—where's Dan, please, I can't—I don't want it, I—I don't—please, please, you said it wouldn't—it hurts—"

Feeble fingers clawed at the bandages on his chest. Dan caught his wrists and he struggled, whimpering. His skin was burning hot, his face reddening as he hyperventilated.

"Nurse!" Dan shouted. Panic cracked his voice clean through. Gav wailed and fought and babbled incoherently, tears slipping from his eyes.

A nurse ran into the room, cursed, and shouted over her shoulder. She shoved Dan away from Gav, and Gav instantly started trying to pull his bandages off again. Two more nurses ran into the room, tight-jawed and grim.

"What's wrong with him?" Dan said, as they swarmed Gav. "What's happening, why is he—"

"Get him out of here!" the first nurse snapped.
"But—no, please, you don't understand, he's—"

Another nurse grabbed Dan by the arms and hauled him from the room. She dumped him outside with a curt *we'll handle this* and slammed the door. He mashed his face against the window, terrified out of his mind.

He watched as the nurses wrestled Gav down onto the bed, watched as Gav's panic escalated until he fainted. A tincture was prepared and given dropwise through unresisting lips. They peeled back his bandages to examine his wounds. A salve was applied, a second tincture given, a wet cloth laid across his forehead. At last, one of the nurses headed for the door.

Dan stepped back to let her through. She slipped out and shut the door behind her, keeping her back against it.

"Is he all right?" Dan asked. His voice was thready, his hands shaking.

The nurse's lips pinched. "I'm afraid he is not. The wounds are badly infected, and his fever has become serious enough to induce delirium. We've given him salicylic acid to reduce the fever and laudanum to keep him calm, but there's little else to be done but wait for it to run its course."

"Oh, God," he said, putting his face in his hands. He couldn't breathe. His stomach was full of tar, his bones full of lead. He took a steadying breath and bit his tongue to keep from screaming aloud. "What's . . . what's to be done?"

She shrugged. "We will try to keep his temperature down and his wounds clean, and we will pray that the fever breaks soon. If, Heaven forbid, he does succumb, we can recommend a very good mortician who should be able to return him to his family in presentable condition for a reasonable price."

Dan turned away, eyes squeezed shut, lip pinned so tight between his teeth that he could taste blood. There was no air. His heart would not beat.

"We'll hope it doesn't come to that," he croaked.

"As I said: we will pray."

"Thank you. Is it . . . all right if I stay?"

"It may be several days," she said, frowning.

"I don't mind."

The nurse thought, then made a face. "Speak to the secretary. She may be able to find you appropriate accommodations nearby."

A hollowness opened up in Dan's chest, lined with plucked-off butterfly wings. "I can't stay with him? I—it's only—all his family is quite far away, and they may not get here in—before he wakes up, and I should hate for him to be alone when he . . . if he. . . ."

Her face softened.

"I will speak to the doctor," she said. "We will see what can be done."
Eighteen agonizing hours later, Gav's fever finally broke.

Dan was with him when it happened, when the constant tossing and turning finally settled, when the laboured breathing grew deep and slow. He was there when Gav's eyes fluttered open again, as a nurse attended to his wounds. He was there when the cracked lips parted and the dry voice croaked out.

"Dan?"

If he hadn't already been sitting, he would have collapsed. He pressed his knuckles to his mouth, stifling the sobs that threatened to break through his teeth.

"Morning, B," he said. "How're you feeling?"

Gav's brow furrowed as he thought about it. The nurse was paying close attention, watching his every move.

"Feels . . . bad," he said.

"I'm not a bit surprised. But it's going to get better. You'll be all right."

"Have they . . . ?"

"What?"

He made a weak, impatient gesture. "Peake, and them. Caught?"

"Not just yet, I'm afraid. I'm sure they will, though. It's only a matter of time."

"Got the . . . the timing all wrong," Gav mumbled. "S Dubois. Miscounted. . . ."

"I know. It's all right. There's no accounting for Dubois."

Gav didn't answer. He frowned, and wrinkled his nose, and coughed.

"Dan?"

"Yes, B, I'm here."

"M sorry. I've been . . . awful. Awful to you. And I'm sorry."

"All's forgiven," said Dan, aching right down to his core. "You just focus on getting well, all right?"

"Mm," said Gav. His eyes drifted closed, and in seconds he was asleep again.

"Did that sound lucid to you?" the nurse inquired.

"Lucid enough," said Dan. "Not . . . obviously not at full steam, yet, but—it's very like him to think of the case first. Though maybe not as much like him to apologize for anything."

"Still, it seems like good tidings," she said. "Hopefully, the worst has passed."

"Hopefully," Dan sighed.
That evening, Gav's brother turned up. He was tallish, and scruffy; temperate and disinterested where Gav was keen and snappy, but bearing a nose that left no question about their shared parentage. Dan met him outside Gav's hospital room when the nurses brought him up.

"Thomas," said Dan.

"Daniel," said Thomas. "How is he?"

"He's . . . very ill."

A flicker of genuine concern crossed Thomas' face before it was stuffed down again.

"That bad?" he said.

"Worse."

His jaw tightened, his lips pinched. He glanced at the door and huffed out a breath.

"Well," he said.

"I'm sorry I haven't got better news for you."

Thomas shrugged. "Cheers, anyway. Will you be about?"

"I'll be about."

"Right then. Shall I?"

"Please do," said Dan, presenting the door to him.

Thomas nodded and ducked inside. To his credit, he missed only a single step upon seeing Gav. A strong contender for the stiffest upper lip in Europe, he went to Gav's bedside and settled into the chair there. Dan hovered in the doorway, just in case he was wanted.

Gav pried his eyes open. His brows pulled together.

"Tom?" he said, thready and faint.

"Allo," said Thomas, waving. "Bit of a situation, this, innit."

"When'd you get here?"

"Only just now. Gruchy sent a telegram."

"'S he—" Gav tried to sit up. Thomas put a hand on his forehead and pushed him back down.

"He's gone on. Reckon he'll be back once he's slept. 'Til then, I'm looking after you."

"Oh," said Gav, subsiding.

"Our Mum'll have your head for this, d'you know," Thomas said.

"Sod off . . . you prick."

Thomas shot a look at Dan, wrinkled his nose, and made a shooing motion. Dan took the hint, and quietly excused himself from the room.
Dan was in the middle of breakfast, alone in his new hotel room next to the hospital, when a knock came at the door. Joints creaking with every movement, he got up to answer it, praying it wasn't the press again.

In fact, it was Gabriel.

"Morning," she said. "Holding up all right?"

"Much as I can be," he said. "You?"

"As much as I can be. I hope I've not caught you at an inconvenient time."

"No more inconvenient than any other time. Honestly I'm just glad you're not a reporter."

"Yes, they have been making themselves busy with you lately."

"You sound . . . less than pleased about that."

She held up a newspaper. The headline read, in French: ANGELS AND DEVILS: DARING RESCUE LEADS POLICE TO SEWER CULT.

"Nice of you to give me a name-drop," she said.

"Oh," said Dan. "Well, you know, seemed only fair. You did do a good bit of the . . . everything."

"Mm," said Gabriel. "And I've also been fired, so thanks for that, as well."

"What?" Dan cried. "That's absolute—I'm so sorry. I never meant—"

She waved him off. "Of course you meant well. How's Free?"

"He's . . . convalescing," said Dan. "It's going to be a while before he's back on his feet, I think."

"One would think. He's not seeing anyone, I suppose?"

"Not in so many words, but no, he's not seeing anyone. His brother's with him now, but I don't think . . . I think it's essentially just me and him, for the moment."

"That's fine. I just wanted to check in."

"It is good to see you, though," Dan said. "I mean, good to see a . . . friendly face. Feel free to drop by anytime, really, I'm sure Free will want to thank you personally, when he's up for it."

Gabriel shrugged. "It's not as though I have anything else to do. Other than looking for housing—my sister's kicking me out, only partially related to all this—and of course I'll have to find work again, as well."

Tonguing his cheek, Dan bounced on his toes.

"Here," he said, "if you're in the market. . . ."

"I will starve on the street before I'll be your secretary," said Gabriel.

"No! No no, that's not it at all," he assured her. "No, it's only—well, Free's going to be laid up for a while, we've still got to pay the bills, you did a tremendous job back there, and . . . you know, if you
didn't mind relocating, and all that, I suppose we could use a backup detective. Not—I didn't mean it like that, that came out all wrong, I—"

"We can negotiate a contract," said Gabriel, halfway to relief. "I don't expect to be made a full partner on my first day. I do expect appropriate compensation."

"Fair play," said Dan, sagging. "You could come by—Thursday, let's say? Thursday afternoon. I'll have to check with Gav, of course, but—"

"I'll turn up on Thursday, and we'll take it from there," said Gabriel. She stuck out a hand, and Dan shook it. "Pleasure doing business with you, Mr Gruchy."

"And you as well, Off—er. . . ."

"Detective," she said, and smiled. "It's Detective Gabriel."

END OF ACT I

Chapter End Notes

And so, we come to the end of the first act of A Little Death in Paris! There will be a brief intermission while I defend my thesis, with regular updates to resume on the 22nd of May. Take a breather, adjust your corkboards, and perhaps make some conjectures~

For those of you reading after completion, this is a mandatory rest stop. Go pee. Have a snack and stretch your back. Drink something!

While we set the stage for the next act, enjoy this musical interlude: [link]
The letter came with the morning post.

Dan spotted it amongst the pile—the cream-coloured stationary and flourished handwriting were distinctive, and if he crinkled his nose and concentrated he fancied he could detect a whiff of perfume. He bit his lip and, as was his custom, perused the morning paper whilst Gav started in on the letters.


"Oh dear. What is it this time?"

"A diamond the size of a hen's egg that's gone missing from her safe. Eighty-four carat, she says. Oh, but of course she hasn't got any paperwork for it, 'cos it's a family heirloom. Nor insurance, tsk tsk, careless."

"Do diamonds go by carat?"

"They do. For reference, eighty-four carat is a little over half an ounce. Whereas an actual hen's egg is double that at least. Perhaps it's a hollow diamond."

He tossed the letter in the bin and picked up the next one.

"It's a shame, really," said Dan. "One day I'm sure she'll actually have some massively valuable jewel go missing, and she'll be out of luck for crying wolf."

"Serve her right," said Gav. "And here we've another cheating husband. Dull as dirt."

That one went right in the bin, too.

"D'you know, you might find these more interesting if you actually read them," Dan remarked.

"And you might get more use out of the paper if you actually read it, instead of bothering me."

Dan pursed his lips, chewed his cheek, and slouched down in his chair. He shook out the paper and skimmed the first page. Gav continued churning through the pile of letters, discarding each petition for assistance out of hand and growing ever more annoyed with them. Dan's hands started to sweat.

"Oy, here's something you'll like," he said, on only the third page of the paper. "New story about that Jones bloke."

Gav perked up and set down his letter opener. "Oh? Has he hanged another mass-murderer?"

"Not quite that exciting. Looks like this time he's recovered a missing Western Union car. How d'you lose an entire railroad car?"

"Presumably, if you did, it wouldn't be that hard to find again."

"Apparently, it was. Good lord, says here it was carrying over ten thousand dollars in silver bullion, no wonder he's made it back into the papers."

"Does it say anything about the dog?"
"Let's see, da-da-da, give us a moment—ah! They do make mention of a certain trusty canine companion."

"Aw, bless. Sounds like he's doing well for himself, anyway."

"Maybe not all that well. The Central Pacific's awfully upset with him, since it came out that it was their own people who did it—explains how it went missing. And nearly six hundred dollars' worth of silver has yet to be recovered."

Gav clucked and shook his head. "Amateur. Five pounds says it's buried less than a mile from wherever they had the car hidden. Nest egg, in case the rest got found."

"I'm not going to take you up on that, 'cos there's not a doubt in my mind you're right."

"Cheers."

"Maybe we ought to write him. We could send a return-addressed envelope, as well."

"What for?"

"For your five pounds, if he finds the six hundred."

"Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

"'Cos if I'm wrong, we'll get a letter back saying where's my bloody fiver and then we'll have to pay up."

"Yeah, but you're not wrong, are you."

Gav made a face, his cheeks going pink.

"Well, all right then. Although I don't expect we'll hear anything back at all, honestly."

"I reckon we might. Shall I write it, or will you?"

"Of course I'm writing it, it's my idea."

Quite of its own accord, Gav's hand wandered up to rub at his chest. First one finger, then another tucked under the collar of his shirt to dig fingernails into his skin.

"Don't scratch," said Dan.

Gav flicked an annoyed look at him, although he did stop. His eye twitched, his nose wrinkled, and he rolled his shoulder. Rather than whining about it, he muttered something unprintable under his breath and opened the next letter.

"Ah, at last, a bill. That's for you."

When Gav tossed it over to his side of the table, Dan risked a glance over the top of the paper. The next letter on the stack was the letter. Gav made a face as soon as he saw it.

"Good grief, what's this little number?"

"Looks fancy," said Dan. He kept his voice level, disinterested.
"Frivolous at best, foppish at worst," said Gav, slitting the letter open. Dan watched him covertly as he read through it; watched his expression shift from bored to puzzled to interested.

"What's it say?"

"Have a look yourself," said Gav, pushing it across to him. Dan set the paper aside and bent over the letter, heart in his throat. The handwriting was flowery, the French even more so.

Messrs. Free and Gruchy, or whom it may concern,

I hope the intervening month has found you both well, or at the very least significantly less unwell than you were at our last meeting. Likewise, I hope the reporters in London have been less ravenous than those in Paris, else you should both have been eaten alive. For my own part, I, unfortunately, have been forced to relocate from the Champs Elysées to my summer home near Marseille, simply for the sake of peace and quiet—peace of mind, at least, and quieted nerves.

There has been an unconfirmed rumour floating about on the ocean of gossip to which I am privy that you have taken on the illustrious Oluwaseyi Gabriel, formerly of the Paris police. I must say that I sincerely hope this rumour is correct, as I, too, was exceptionally impressed with her performance in peril. If it is, I hope that she has proven as much an asset to you as she seemed—and I send all my best wishes to her, for her well-being as well as for her courage. Personally, I could not relocate outside of France, although I suppose that knowing the language is a significant advantage. Still, there is no accounting for Englishmen; please send my condolences for her being trapped amongst them, even if it is of her own volition.

I must admit, I have been watching the papers out of London somewhat closely, in hopes of seeing your names in them. It is an unfortunate habit of mine, attempting to keep up with acquaintances as indirectly as possible, but I could not help but notice that, if you have been working, things have been quiet for you. This, I'm certain, is a pleasant change of pace; for my own part, it gives me a measure of hope that you are not too busy to engage in a favour for, if not a friend, then at least a friendly acquaintance who is, I regret to inform you, in dire straits.

A most peculiar problem has arisen, of some urgency and requiring the utmost discretion. Secrecy is, unfortunately, of such paramount importance that I cannot discuss the details with you via post. A very dear friend of mine has found himself in a great deal of trouble, from which—though I have tried my very best—I have been and continue to be unable to extract him. If the situation were less delicate, I would have asked someone else; if the problem were less dire, I would have asked someone else; if the friend were less dear, I would have asked someone else. Suffice it to say: I would not be calling upon you, and certainly not so soon, if I had anywhere else to turn. I am sincerely at the end of my rope, dear sirs, and as we all know too well, that is a most unpleasant place to hang.

Although I hate to ask you to return to France, I'm afraid that, under the circumstances, I must. Rest assured, I am fully prepared to provide handsome recompense for this unusual service, and as penance for making a great Gallic nuisance of myself, I have already arranged your accommodations. There is a room prepared for you at the Grand Hotel Noailles-Métropole, and it will remain reserved for as long as you should require it. You are, of course, under no obligation whatsoever to attend; yet I thought, for courtesy's sake and the sake of expediency, it would be best to have everything arranged before I wrote you, such that we would waste as little time as possible (I know how virulently you detest wasted time).

I know, as well, that I have perhaps not made myself as good a friend to you as the situation might
necessitate; but more lives than mine are in peril, and if you will not move for me, I hope that you can at least be moved for them.

I remain, ever faithfully, yours in desperation,

—C. L. Dubois

"Good grief," said Dan, scooting the letter back over to Gav. The perfumed stationery left a thin film on his fingertips. "Kind of him to arrange the room for us, though."

"Kind, I don't know about. He's certainly falling all over himself to get in our good graces." Gav paused, frowning at the letter, then asked, "What's the L stand for?"

" Haven't the foggiest, but I suspect there are more urgent problems to solve."

"He's certainly made it sound that way. We may find the situation less pressing if we go."

"After a letter like that? I'd say we've got to."

"Dramatics."

"There you go, rolling your eyes at people in distress again."

"There is a vast amount of precedent for Dubois putting on unnecessary dramatics for attention."

"There's also a precedent for people attempting to kill him."

Gav made a face. "You'd think he'd be a bit less vague about it, if that were the case."

"Would you, though?"

"Fair play. I don't s'pose he'll leave us alone about it 'til he's heard back, either."

Dan's heart sank. "Shall I write him back, then? Sorry, but no?"

"What're you on about? Of course we're going, if only so I've not got to read another bloody novel."

"We really haven't got to, if you don't want to."

"I never said I didn't want to."

"So you do want to?"

"I never said that, either. I just said he'd never leave us alone 'til he's heard back, so we may as well go. It ought to be good for laugh, if nothing else. Someone should tell Gabriel, of course, before we leave."

"I should think so. D'you want me to see about travel?"

"If you could. It'll take me most of the day to get us properly packed, I reckon."

"Are you packing for me?"

"Of course I am, otherwise it'll be an extra two hours to go through everything you've probably forgotten. Besides which, I'll not have you dressing like a toerag whilst we're staying at the bloody
"Grand Noailles."

"Glad to know you've got such a high opinion of me."

"It's evidence-based, B."

"Grand, cheers, thanks. Would've thought I'd got away from being dressed up once the wife was out of the picture."

"I am practically your wife, though."

Dan snorted. "God forbid. A practical husband I'll take, but wives are off. D'you want anything else whilst I'm out and about? Actually, on that thought, d'you want to come with?"

Between the first word and the last, the fire in Gav died out. His shoulders slumped, his skin paled like cooling wax, his eyelids drooped. He fiddled with the scalloped edges of Casimir's letter and stared through the table.

"No," he said dully. "I'll stay in."

Dan ran a hand down his face and sighed. The old pain was back in his chest, come home to roost. He folded up the newspaper, drained the last of his tea, and got to his feet.

"All right," he said. "I should be back round noon, unless traffic's much worse than usual. Shall I bring something for lunch?"

"If you like."

"Then I will." He cupped Gav's face and leaned down to kiss his cheek. Gav took it patiently. "Love you, B."

"You as well."

For good measure, Dan kissed his cheek again, then his lips.

"And don't worry too much over the packing," he said. "There'll be plenty of time for me to help out after lunch."

Gav just nodded. Dan gave him one final kiss before heading out.

It was a short walk from their flat to the office, weaving through the noise and bustle of Hoxton. The morning was cool, but the sun was bright enough to promise a warm afternoon. Blinking purple afterimages from his eyes, Dan stepped inside the office and hung up his hat and coat. Once he could see again, he mounted the creaking stairs and rapped on the workroom door. From within, there came the familiar call of, "It's open!"

He slipped inside and shut the door behind him. The workroom was tidier than it had ever been before, although a perpetual air of messiness had soaked into the wallpaper and the floorboards. Crammed into the corner behind a tiny third-hand desk, Gabriel regarded him over the rims of her reading spectacles.

"Morning, Gruchy," she said, setting aside her paperwork.
"Morning, Gabriel. How goes it?"

"Well enough. You've got that look about you, though, so I suspect it may shortly get more complex. What's happened now?"

"No bad news," Dan promised. "It's only—well, how have you been getting on? I know Gav and I haven't really been as much help as we should, but..."

"Well enough," Gabriel said again, suspicious.

"Right. Good. Well, because, the thing of it is, er... a friend of ours has asked us to come and help with a rather—with a somewhat delicate personal matter, and—I wanted to ask if you'd be comfortable sort of holding down the fort here whilst we were gone. That's—that's not to say, of course, that you couldn't come along if you wanted, that would be fine, as well, but I wanted to give you the choice."

"I appreciate that. Which friend, if I may ask?"

"Casimir Dubois," said Dan.

"I'm staying. How long are you planning on being gone, and at what point should I come looking for you?"

"Hang on, wait, what've you got against Dubois?"

"How much time have you got?" she asked dryly.

"We could start with the short version."

"I don't like him, and he makes me uneasy."

"Well... same for me, honestly, but he's never been anything but courteous and decent—except, I s'pose, one or two instances of—but really, overall, he isn't so bad."

Gabriel stared him down. "I don't like him," she repeated, "and he makes me uneasy, and therefore I will gladly take every opportunity to be as far away from him as possible."

"I s'pose that's reason enough," Dan conceded. "D'you need anything before we go? To help with... work, and everything?"

"Will I get full commission for all the cases I solve while the two of you are gone?"

"I don't know about full, I mean, there's plenty of them that're mostly done already."

"Seventy-five percent, then."

"Forty at most, come off it."

"Eighty percent," Gabriel said pointedly.

Rubbing his face, Dan took a deep breath and let it out again.

"Could you do sixty?"

"I can do sixty-five."
"Sixty-five . . . seems very fair and reasonable, yes," Dan said through his teeth.

"Thank you. Do you have an address where I'll be able to reach you if something comes up?"


"He's got a summer home out there."

"It's not even May."

"I'm given to understand Paris ceased agreeing with him after the whole conspiracy-to-murder bit, especially since half of them are still running round loose. I know I'll be damned glad not to be going back there, it's bad enough having to go back to France."

"Then don't go."

"It's—all right, look, cards on the table? It's fake."

Gabriel raised her eyebrows. Dan steamed onward, his cheeks burning.

"It's a fake case Dubois cooked up 'cos I've been . . . with the way Gav's been, and nothing's been working, I reached out to him on the thread of a chance that maybe he could come up with something that'd help."

Gabriel took off her spectacles and set them on the desk, folded her hands and pinched her lips. Dan shoved a hand back through his hair, blathering.

"And I know it's stupid, it's a stupid idea, but nothing else has helped and I'm worried sick. Thomas and the rest of his family think he's just being dramatic, and so they've been no help at all, but he's not been eating properly and he sleeps eighteen hours a day and he won't see a doctor even though it's obvious the damned cuts aren't healing right and—and I don't know what to do! I've got nothing, he won't even admit there's anything wrong!"

"I see," said Gabriel. "Why Dubois, then?"

Dan threw up his hands. "He offered. That's it. He said if ever we found ourselves at our wits' end, he'd help, and I am bloody well out of wits."

"And his solution was to make up a fake case."

"It seems to be working so far."

"For which," Gabriel went on, "you must both travel over seven hundred miles, on Dubois' dime, to a place where you have neither friends nor colleagues, where you will be contracted to do essentially whatever he fancies in service of solving a crime he himself has fabricated."

Dan opened his mouth. He closed it again.

"Well . . . when you put it like that, it does sound rather . . . uneasy."

"Cards on the table, Gruchy? You're being put on. Dubois' sniffed another chance at the spotlight, with you and Free as his captive audience. The only reason he's cooked up this scheme is to feed his own ego. May I give you a piece of advice on the matter?"
"If you've got any," said Dan, while his stomach bunched up near his heart.

"Don't go."

"I—well," he said, floundering. "Well, you know, that's all very well and good to say, but he's already paid for our room and everything."

"Of course he has, all the better to manipulate you into showing up."

"No—no, it's just so that Gav'll be less likely to turn him down, that's all."

"Yes, exactly: manipulating you into showing up. Don't go."

Dan squirmed. "Gav . . . wants to, though. He wants to go. It's the first time I've seen him want anything in weeks."

"All right," Gabriel sighed. "I recognize that you didn't come here asking for my advice, so I won't berate you for ignoring it. If you need my help, you'll have it; otherwise, enjoy the show."

"Admittedly, it is seeming like a much worse idea now," said Dan. "And I'll be a good bit more careful going into it than I otherwise would've been."

"Much good it'll do you once Dubois' got his teeth in you."

"Gabriel?"

"Yes?"

"Have you got any advice for how to make this whole idea slightly less stupid?"

"This, Gruchy, this is why I ask for seventy-five percent," said Gabriel, tapping the desk. "It's because, in addition to being your backup detective, I'm also contracted to be your secretary, your maid, and your counsellor. My opinions are completely disregarded unless they have factual, concrete evidence to back them up, at which point they are no longer opinions and are just more detective work. You don't listen to my advice and then insist that I come up with different advice that you like better. It's exhausting, Gruchy. It's tiresome to put so much effort into being ignored."

Dan clenched his jaw and took deep breaths. There were a thousand retorts queued up on his tongue; he swallowed them all back down. When the temper of his thoughts had cooled to something less than a seethe, he finally allowed himself to speak.

"I am sorry to have put you in such an unpleasant position," he said. "Since my mind's made up already, I won't trouble you about it further."

"If that's the solution you've decided upon, I won't press the issue. When are the two of you leaving?"

"This evening, I think, barring extenuating circumstances."

"And at what point should I come looking for you?"

Dan wrinkled his nose and fiddled with the lint in his pockets, blew out a breath, bounced on his toes.

"If a week goes by when you don't hear from me, start getting suspicious," he said.
"I'm already suspicious. If I don't hear from you for a week, I'll start working on Missing Persons reports."

"Bit extreme."

"Not from where I'm sitting."

Once again, Dan took a moment to wrangle himself back under control.

"Thank you for looking out for us so diligently," he said through his teeth.

"You're welcome," she said. "And Gruchy?"

"Yes?"

"Please be careful."

The sincerity of her tone punctured Dan's frustration and deflated it around him. He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel a headache coming on, and it promised to be a scorcher. His throat was sore. He could have used a drink.

"I'll try," he said. "Wouldn't want you losing your salary 'cos we've gone and got ourselves kidnapped or killed."

"Regardless of salaries. I am actually somewhat fond of you, as people."

Dan nearly managed a smile. "You're too bloody good for us, d'you know that?"

Fixing her reading glasses back on her nose, Gabriel said, "I do, and I'm glad you've finally acknowledged it. Take care, Gruchy. Don't forget to write."

"I won't," he promised. "Er... you won't mention to Gav, will you, about the case being fake?"

"I doubt I would have the opportunity."

"But if it arose?"

"I'm not going to lie to him."

Dan pursed his lips. "Fair play. Thanks anyway."

"Be seeing you, Gruchy. Let me know if you need something."

"I will. Be seeing you, Gabriel."

As he left, he just heard her mutter, "I certainly hope so."
"I've got to admit," said Dan, "this isn't quite what I was expecting."

It was smaller, for one thing, closer to cottage than manor house. It had a homey, doting feel to it, with cream-coloured walls and a wide porch and wind-chimes. The place was a short, pleasant cab ride from the hotel, and the level of light spilling out through the thin curtains indicated that the place was equipped with gas lamps.

"What *were* you expecting?" Gav asked, eyeing him sidelong.

Dan blew out a breath and shrugged. "I dunno. Castle on a mountainside?"

"He's new money. Not even titled."

"Manor on a cliff, then."

"Precarious place for real estate."

"*Something* dramatic. Some old mansion or something, all gloomy and—and dramatic, I don't know. Not this. It looks like someone's nan's house."

"Hm."

Gav mounted the front steps and rapped on the door. Dan pinched his lips and followed.

"Least the weather's nice this time of year," he said. Gav raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's all right," he allowed.

A moment later, the door opened, and Casimir Dubois himself stood gleaming on the threshold—gleaming, quite literally, between the velvet smoking jacket and the gold-brocade vest, the purple silk gloves and, of course, the mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"My good fellows, I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you again," he said. "Even more delightful than receiving your telegram this morning. Please, come in. I'm afraid there's no one to take your coats, but do feel free to set them down anywhere. How was your trip? Not too taxing, I hope."

Thus faffing, he ushered them inside and shut the door behind them. Dan found a convenient stand and hung up his hat and coat. The interior of the house was closer to what he'd imagined—fancy rugs, tasteful art, shiny and expensive-looking bric-a-brac.

"It was all right," Dan said. His French was rustier than he would have liked, slippery on the tongue. "A little bumpy on the way over, but not as bad as it could've been."

Casimir tsked and shook his head. "A shame. Have you eaten? I anticipate this particular meeting may take some time, and I should hate—"

"Then perhaps we'd better get to it," Gav said.

Casimir inclined his head with a fond smile. "Of course; best to waste as little time as possible. In that case, if you'll follow me, gentlemen, our client is in the sitting room."
"Client?" said Dan, his heart crawling up into his throat. "I wasn't aware there was a client involved."

Casimir shrugged, already starting off. "Your client, my friend; I'm sure I mentioned him. I wasn't intending for you to meet in person, but you are earlier than I expected, so you might as well. Come, come."

He beckoned and wafted down the corridor. Gav set off after him, scowling, hands in pockets. Dan could only follow.

"Apologies, kitten," Casimir said, as he entered the sitting room. "I'm afraid your visit may be extended ever so slightly. Introductions, I'm sure, are unnecessary; you remember Detective Free and Mr Gruchy?"

Gav went through the doorway and stopped so suddenly that Dan cannoned into him. The room was as plush and bright as the foyer, as full of gleam and glitter, with one notable exception.

Sitting in a chintz armchair, haggard and pale and jittering, was Chad.

Dan stared. Chad stared back. Casimir rolled up onto his toes, exceptionally pleased with himself. Gav stood stock-still, his breath coming short and choppy, his hands trembling at his sides.

Chad bolted.

Casimir caught him before he'd gotten two steps, an arm across his chest and a hand resting ever so lightly on his shoulder. Chad locked up rigid. Casimir spoke into his ear, his voice as soft as nettles.

"Don't do anything foolish, kitten," he murmured.

"You lied to me," said Chad, trembling.

"I told you I would bring help, and help I have brought."

"You're trying to get me killed!"

"Rest assured, if I wanted you dead, I'd do it myself," said Casimir. "Sit back down, kitten. Don't make this more difficult than it has to be."

Still, Chad stood, drawn taut with indecision. Dan cleared his throat. Gav still hadn't moved, except to keep his eyes on Chad—huge eyes, terrified eyes, the eyes of a cornered animal.

"I think perhaps you'd better do what he says, Mr James," said Dan. "The last thing we want is for this to escalate."

Chad gulped, eyes darting. Casimir gave him the lightest of pushes, little more than a tap on his shoulder. He sank back into his chair, trembling head to toe.

"Very good," said Casimir. He ruffled Chad's hair, then sauntered across the room and deposited himself on the back of an overstuffed couch. "Go ahead and tell them what you told me."

"I—I don't know if. . . ." Chad croaked. His darting eyes settled on Gav. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"They aren't going to hurt you, kitten," Casimir said. "I will see to it."

Chad took a deep, shuddering breath. He rubbed his mouth and gulped. Slowly, slowly, Gav's hands
curled into fists.

"I haven't . . . been home," said Chad. "Since—since that night. Peake—he has everyone, all of us, all . . . cramped into this house out in the middle of nowhere, he said—he said it was safest, said it'd keep us from getting arrested, said we'd go back for—for Torrian and Karine and Elyse, but I have no idea if that's true, except that everyone else—everybody else believes him. And I want to believe him, it—I shouldn't even be here, I'm an idiot for coming, but. . . ."

He buried his face in his hands, muffling a sickened moan.

"But I asked him, I asked if I could—could see my family," he whispered. "And he said . . . he looked me dead in the eye and he said: what family."

Dan's stomach filled up with ice water. Chad went on, the words tumbling through his lips like blood.

"And—I thought maybe he just forgot, so I said, My wife and daughters, and he—he goes you don't have those anymore. And I didn't—what do you even say to that? I just stood there, and he says, We're you're family now, and so—I don't—he knows where they live. He knows where my children live, and I haven't seen them, and I don't—I don't dare to go back, and I don't know what to do, and I have to get out, I have to get out of there but I have nowhere to go. . . ."

He choked off, shivering. His face was blotchy and red, his eyes full of tears.

"You didn't go to the police?" Dan asked.

"Of course I didn't go to the police, I'm—wanted for conspiracy to murder!"

"So instead you elected to turn up at the doorstep of the man you conspired to murder?" Gav asked, sharp and too loud.

"I don't hold it against him," said Casimir. "Especially considering current circumstances. I think it's a perfectly logical thing to do."

"Certainly; you may the only person he knows whom he wouldn't mind seeing gruesomely murdered if—the others come after him."

The catch in Gav's voice was almost imperceptible, but it sent a pang through Dan's heart. From the way Casimir smiled, he certainly hadn't perceived it.

"Yes, that's just what I thought," he said.

"That's not why! That's—you have it all wrong, it isn't like that," Chad protested.

"Come now, kitten, let's not give ourselves delusions."

"I'm not, and it isn't!"

"All right, I'll bite: why did you come to me?"

"Because I trust you," said Chad, raw and frightened and hopeless.

Casimir scoffed. "No you don't."

"I do," he insisted. "That's why I'm here, that's why—that's why any of this!"
"Chad, my kitten," said Casimir, pitying, "you do understand that you aren't special at all, don't you? One of a dozen, at least."

"I do understand that, and it hurts like hell, and I don't care. I trust you, Cas. I trust you, and I—I'm in love with you."

The smile drained off of Casimir's face. He pushed off the couch, shoulders tight, jaw clenched, eyes hard and flinty.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a voice so cold it made Dan's teeth ache. "I leave him in your tender care."

When he left, he slammed the door behind him. Chad flinched, then buried his face in his hands again.

"Bastard," said Dan, glaring at the closed door.

"Oh, I don't know," said Gav. He clasped his hands behind his back and paced across the room, measuring it out with his steps. "I think that's a fairly lenient way to treat someone who's attempted to murder you."

"I never did anything!"

"Somehow, Mr James, that fails to sway my opinion a single inch." Gav reached the couch, where he took up Casimir's vacated post. "You haven't checked in on your family, correct? Not even from a distance?"

"I—no. No, it's bad enough me being gone, if Peake found out. . . ."

"So you have got a couple wits left in there. Where's this house?"

Chad's eyes darted. "I don't know if I should tell you."

"Of course. How many of you are there?"

"Two dozen or so."

"Or so. Names?"

"I don't know if I should tell you that, either."

"Then you're useless to me, and you can piss off," said Gav.

"Mr Free!" Dan exclaimed.

"It isn't like I asked you to come here, it isn't like this—fine, O. K., you hate me and that's totally reasonable, but please, for the love God, help me keep my children safe."

"I'll tell you how to keep your children safe: tell me where the house is, and we'll have the police take the lot of you."

"But they'd arrest me!"

"That's the idea, yes."

"Mr James," Dan cut in, "has Peake ever threatened your family before?"
Chad glanced between Gav and Dan, as though he wasn’t sure who he should keep an eye on. He settled on Dan.

"Not in so many words, but . . . he didn't do most of the threatening, anyway. Bones is his—his enforcer. Handles all the dirty work. He made—he made a whole hell of a lot of threats."

"You would say they had a fair bit of leverage?"

"Yes, oh, yes, absolutely. Everything was always . . . arranged. Still is. They—"

"Who arranged for you to come here?" Gav asked.

"Me, I did. But—"

"And you were allowed to go, just like that?"

"No, not just like that, I had to plan for two weeks to make it here! A-and even then, if any of them find out I'm not where I said I'd be—"

"Where did you say you'd be?"

Chad's chest fluttered with rabbity breaths. He looked to the door, the windows. Dan shifted his weight, preparing to make a grab for him if he ran.

"Paris," he said. "Getting—retrieving some things from the Théâtre. That got left."

"Idiot," said Gav.

"What?"

"Paris, where your wife and children live?"

Chad turned the colour of sour milk. His hands clenched in his lap. He gulped.

"Oh," he said.

"Gruchy, go and see if there's a telephone," said Gav.

Leaping to his feet, Chad cried, "You can't! You don't understand, you don't get it, if I don't come back—it doesn't matter if you arrest everyone there, someone will—it'll be—"

"Let me guess: it's been arranged that your family will be murdered?" Gav asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yes! That's why I need help, that's why I don't just go to the police!"

"Really? I thought it was an aversion to prison."

"I'm already in a prison, don't you see that?"

"Then perhaps you ought to go back. Provided you don't do anything else stupid, it seems like your family will be just fine. Unless, of course, your current bout of stupidity has already gotten them killed, in which case, if you hurry, you should be able to catch up with them in Hell."

"For God's sake, Free, the children have never done anything to you," said Dan, sickened. "They're children."
Gav shrugged. "Sins of the father."

"Should be visited on the father! If you're going to send him off, fine, can't blame you for not wanting to get involved, but—"

"Oh no, Gruchy, we're well involved."

"You—you are?" Chad stammered. "But you said—"

"Not on your behalf, don't go putting on airs. You may as well run along, in fact, and when you get back, kindly inform your co-conspirators that I am going to burn you all to the ground."

Dan's jaw dropped. Chad recoiled. Gav carried on in a voice as cold and cruel as February.

"Ashes to bloody ashes, Mr James," he said. "And dust to fucking dust."

"Good lord," Dan said faintly.

"Detective Free, please," Chad croaked. "My—my children—"

"Get out," said Gav.

Head down, shoulders hunched, Chad fled. In the wake of him, the distant clamour of Marseille seeped through the windows like a thick fog.

"Gav, are you . . . all right?" Dan asked.

Gav blinked at him. "Perfectly all right; why?"

"Are you? Only this is all—all rather upsetting!"

"Only for you. Would you see if you could dredge up Dubois? I've got a couple questions for him."

At a complete loss, Dan said, "I'll see what I can do."

---

Dan found him in the dining room, sipping white wine with his feet propped on a chair. The wine bottle was on the table, half full. Casimir made no move to get up as Dan stalked in, merely raised an eyebrow and smiled.

"Has Chad departed, then?" he inquired. "Tsk, and without even saying goodbye."

"What the hell are you playing at, Dubois?" Dan hissed.

Casimir regarded him coolly. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know damn well what I mean. What could possibly have possessed you to believe this was a good idea?"

"I was under the impression that this was precisely what I was asked for."

"I was expecting—I don't know, something else! A stolen diamond, or—a cheating husband, something!"

"You will note that there is, indeed, a cheating husband involved."
"Don't laugh at me, this isn't funny!"

Casimir rolled his eyes and shook his head. Dan pressed his fists, his knuckles aching for the sweet sensation of punching Casimir in the mouth.

"Mr Free is a detective, Daniel," Casimir said. "It is his sole calling in life to root out falsehoods and see through performances. Likewise, Chad is sincerely in dire need of assistance. Fortune happened to align your needs, and I merely facilitated the meeting."

"And if it hadn't, what would have become of James?"

"Oh, I would have thrown him to the dogs," said Casimir, swirling the wine in his glass.

"My God," said Dan, disgusted. "And I used to think Gav was a cold-hearted bastard. What about his children?"

"There's excellent reason to suspect that they are in no danger whatsoever, and were simply a catspaw with which to ply my pity. Needless to say, it hasn't worked."

"What if they are in danger?"

"Then it's a good thing I called you, isn't it?" he said, twinkling.

"And I suppose you would've thrown us over if James hadn't been convenient?"

"Gracious, no; of course not. Neither of you have conspired to kill me—to my knowledge, that is; I never hold it out of the question anymore. No, I dare say I would have invented some clever Easter-egg hunt to occupy Mr Free's time. In this case, however, there was a better option."

"I am having, sir, an incredibly difficult time reconciling your apparent intelligence with the blatant and brutish stupidity of this arrangement."

"It seems to be working, regardless. Mr Free is engaged in the problem, and working towards a solution. Not the problem you had anticipated, and not the solution Chad desired, but the important factors are unchanged. That is what you wanted, isn't it? For him to find something worth doing?"

"He was abducted and tortured," Dan hissed, so furious he couldn't see straight. "By the same damn people you're tangling him up with again, and if you don't think there's anything wrong with that idea, you're a damn fool!"

"When I was tortured, Daniel, I was afforded the sublime pleasure of subsequently killing one of my tormentors. I don't expect to provide this exact experience for Mr Free, but speaking as someone who's been there: the best cure for both fear and despair is direct action against the ones who have harmed you."

Dan stared at him. Casimir's mouth twisted into something like a smile. He held up his right hand and tapped his thumb against the glove's false fingers.

"Though certain wounds do not heal," he said.

"Good lord," said Dan. "I . . . I'm so sorry."

"Don't be; unlike Free, I deserved it. The main—"

"No you didn't."
Although Casimir smiled, his jaw clenched under it.

"Thank you, but I assure you, I did. It isn't relevant at the moment, anyway."

"You didn't," Dan insisted. "It's impossible to deserve torture."

"Your conviction is inspiring. Regardless, I don't intend that Mr Free should ever encounter any of Peake's following face to face. I allowed Chad because I was confident he was too much of a snivelling coward to do any harm."

Dan pulled himself back on track, although he resolved not to let this particular stone go unturned for too long. His eyes drifted to the wine bottle, sitting open and inviting on the table. He pinched himself, hard.

"It doesn't particularly matter what you intend, I'm afraid," he said. "Gav's dead-set on hunting them down."

"Certainly he could be persuaded to delegate that task."

"There's nothing certain about it."

"Then we shall simply have to try our best." Casimir drained his glass and got to his feet. "Now. Am I to assume he wants to see me?"

"Apparently," Dan sighed. "Though your guess is as good as mine about what for."

"I doubt that's true; you know him much better than I do, after all."

"The way this evening's been going, I'm starting to question how well I know him."

Casimir smiled. "In that case: why don't we go and find out?"
Gav was peering out the sitting room window when Dan and Casimir came in. He let the curtain fall back into place and clasped his hands behind his back. His face was unreadable.

"I've been informed I was wanted," Casimir said.

"I had a few questions, yes," said Gav.

"Oh dear, I'm not very good at those. Could I offer either of you a drink? I've been failing miserably at hospitality."

"No, thank you," said Gav.

Dan struggled with himself before deciding, "I'd better not."

"As you like." Casimir deposited himself in the armchair and waved a magnanimous hand. "Have a seat anywhere—or don't, if you prefer. What can I do for you, Mr Free?"

Gav took up pacing, slow and measured. Dan settled on the couch, wary of being swallowed by the cushions. He kept a close eye on Gav—the set of his shoulders, the tightness of his grip, the cadence of his steps.

"How long have you been in Marseille?" Gav asked.

"About twenty-seven days."

"So you left immediately after the fiasco at the Théâtre."

"I wouldn't say immediately. I did stop by while you were in hospital. Did Daniel not tell you?"

Gav's eyes narrowed. Dan went hot from his toes to his scalp.

"Daniel did," Gav said. "Although one gets the feeling Daniel might have neglected to mention a few key points. Since when are you on a first-name basis?"

Casimir shrugged. "Since I told him that both he and you were welcome to call me Casimir, and he returned the favour. Purely out of hapless tact, I suspect."

"Purely, I'm sure," Gav sneered. "How long has this house been in your possession?"

"That's a difficult question to answer."

"Because it isn't yours."

"Correct."

"Your sponsor's?"

He grinned. "Who else?"

"And the—for lack of a better word—collection; is it his, as well?"

"Parts are, parts aren't."
"Are any parts yours?"

"One or two."

"Which?"

"They're upstairs; I would have to go and get them."

"Fine, we'll save that for later. When did James first contact you about this—" He waved a hand.

"Situation? Two weeks ago I received a plaintive letter, begging my assistance."

"Sent here?"

"No; sent to my flat in Paris. I left a forwarding address with the concierge."

"Curious. Mr James stated that he had to plan for two weeks in order to get here, and yet, he must have sent the letter before that, if it had to make it all the way through Paris and then be rerouted here."

"Certainly that doesn't add up to more than a few extra days."

"It doesn't, but it still gives the lie to Mr James' claims."

Casimir sat up straighter, a light kindling in his eye. "Because of course, by the time he got to writing me, he must already have had a plan in mind."

"Correct," said Gav, with something dangerously close to approval. "In the intervening weeks, have you taken it upon yourself to check on his family?"

"No."

"Why not? It would be easy enough to do."

"Easy, yes; wise, less so. Mrs James made it quite clear that if I ever showed my face to her, she'd bash it in."

"She knew about the affair?"

"Of course she knew. I can't be bothered with discretion and Chad—bless his poor soul—hasn't the first idea of how to pretend to be in love with a woman."

"Presumably some," said Dan, fidgeting. "Considering the children."

Casimir twinkled at him. "Remarkably little love is required for that particular act. Besides, women rank as fairly tame in the catalogue of atrocious things desperate men have stuck their—"

"Yes, all right, I think you've made your point," Dan interrupted, red as a beet.

Casimir grinned, leaned forward, and said with great delight, "Cocks."

"That's quite enough of that," said Gav, while Dan boiled alive. "Have you had contact with Mrs James?"

Subsiding, Casimir said, "Only once, when she arrived on my doorstep at four o'clock in the morning with a fire-poker."
"How did that play out?"

"She threatened to kill me, I told her she was welcome to try, and she lost her nerve."

Gav made a face. His pace was still measured, although it had grown livelier. "Was this before, or after Luna's death?"

"Well before."

"And you kept on with the man anyway?" Dan exclaimed.

"I was paying very handsomely for my passions, and I was determined to get my money's worth," said Casimir. "Which, unfortunately, seems to have given poor Chad some delusions about the nature of our relationship."

"Yet you still agreed to help him in his hour of need," said Gav. "Why?"

Casimir shrugged again. "I was bored."

"Truthfully, why did you agree to help him?"

"That was completely true."

"And completely dishonest."

"Half dishonest, at the very worst. You must understand that I have very little to do, other than get myself into other people's trouble."

"You're still avoiding the question."

"If you already know the answer, why are you demanding it from me?"

"Do I already know the answer, Casimir? What makes you think I would already know the answer? Could it perhaps be that you know the walls of this house are very thin? Could it be, perhaps, that you've just now figured out that eavesdropping works both ways? Or maybe, just maybe, you've finally remembered that I'm a damn detective, and this whole damn scheme you've cooked up between the two of you is horse shit, Daniel Gruchy!"

Dan flinched as Gav rounded on him. He raised his hands, surrendering. The sheer heat of the fury coming off of Gav could have cooked a goose.

"In my defence—"

"Don't even try it."

"It wasn't meant to be—this!"

"I don't give one single shit what it was meant to be, Gruchy, it's an insult. What were you thinking?"

"Stupid things, I don't know! It's gotten completely out of hand and I—"

"Gotten? It was out of hand to begin with! Going behind my back, lying to me—could you have been any stupider?"

"It wasn't his idea."
Gav whipped round like he'd forgotten Casimir was there. Casimir made a helpless gesture, offered a sheepish smile.

"All Daniel asked me for was help," he went on. "I'm afraid the rest of this little disaster is entirely on my shoulders. It's been, as Daniel pointed out to me in no uncertain terms, less than helpful, and I do apologize for it."

Gav sucked in a breath as though to retort, but all that came out was a defeated sigh. He wound down and sagged into himself like a toy soldier that had slipped a gear. With bones that weighed a hundred tons, he shuffled to the nearest chair and collapsed into it.

"Why've you done this?" he mumbled, rubbing at his face.

Dan and Casimir shared a glance. Dan gestured for Casimir to answer.

"I suppose because I'm a fool isn't an acceptable answer," said Casimir.

Gav didn't respond. Casimir steepled his fingers and rested them against his lips.

"I like you," he said. "Both of you. I like you and it distresses me to think of you in pain."

Still, Gav said nothing. Dan cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck.

"'Cos I love you, B," he said, in English. "I didn't know what else to do. I knew it wasn't . . . the brightest idea, but I thought—I know how much your work means to you, and you've not been working at all, and I thought maybe it'd help to just . . . have something to do. I didn't know it'd be this. If I'd known, I never would've even considered it."

Gav laughed to himself, a hoarse and despondent sound.

"D'you know, it almost worked," he said. "For a moment there, it was almost. . . ."

"Normal?" Dan guessed.

Gav shook his head. "Almost like it never happened," he said.

Outside the window, a cricket took up its fiddle, playing to no one but the moon. A clock somewhere nearby kept time, adagio. Dan chewed his nails. Casimir fiddled with his gloves.

"It seems," he said at last, "that I am, perhaps, no longer needed."

Gav shook his head.

"We should probably be getting back to the hotel," Dan said. "I'm sure a night's sleep would do us all a world of good."

"Worth trying, at least," Gav sighed. He made no move to get up, his eyes still closed, his face lined with pain. The hand that wasn't propping up his head snuck to his stomach and started scratching.

"I'm sorry to have kept you both so late," said Casimir, rising. "I don't suppose you'll be staying, after this."

Dan looked to Gav, but found no hint of an answer.

"We'll . . . figure that out in the morning, I suppose," he said. He stood and adjusted his shirt. "Gav? Shall we go?"
Creaking and rusted, Gav heaved himself to his feet. Dan offered his arm. With something that was nearly a smile, Gav accepted it.

"Merci beaucoup, Sir Lancelot," he said.

Dan shrugged, nearly smiling himself. "De rien, chéri."

The word slipped out of his mouth before he could catch it. He held his breath. Every hair on his body stood on end. Just as unwisely, and just as inevitably, he glanced at Casimir.

For one frozen, snow-blind instant, their eyes met, and Dan's heart stuttered in his chest—but then Casimir turned away, meandered to the window and tugged the curtains aside to gaze out at the rising moon.

"I presume the two of you can see yourselves out," he said. A chill raced up Dan's spine. He wrapped his fingers round Gav's wrist.

"Yes," he said, before Gav could answer. "I think that would be fine. Good night, Mr Dubois."

"Goodbye, Mr Gruchy," said Casimir.

Engulfed by a profound unease, Dan shuttled Gav from the room.

The hotel bed was soft, and warm, and far too large. Dan claimed the lefthand side while Gav washed off the grit and grime of the journey from London. It was going on midnight, and though Dan was exhausted, there was not an ounce of sleep in him. He lay still, ears attuned for any sound out of place, the hairs on his arms and neck still stood on end. The night was quiet, but that only served to make every slightest bump or rustle set Dan's heart to pounding.

At long last, Gav emerged from the washroom, wrapped up tight in a cotton bathrobe. He went directly to the opposite side of the huge bed, slipped under the covers, and curled up with his back to Dan.

"G'night, Dan," he said, thumping the pillow into shape with his head.

"Oh. Good night, I s'pose," Dan said. "Shall I put out the light?"

"Do."

Dan blew out the lamp on the bedside table. Darkness descended, velvet-soft and warm as breath. There was a rustling and a jostling as Gav wriggled out of the bathrobe and shunted it onto the floor. Dan tucked himself up with his back to Gav, hands folded beneath his pillow.

"Love you, B," he said. Tonight, even more than most, the words left his chest aching and raw.

Gav yawned. "You as well. G'night."

A handful of crickets sawed their fiddles into the night outside, the band playing on after the revelries had all run out. Around them, Marseille shifted in its sleep, unsettled by quiet dreamings. Dan's pocket watch ticked on the bedside table, sharp and metallic, measuring out empty seconds, hollow minutes, sleepless hours.

Dan rolled over. Gav's breathing was slow and steady, so quiet he could barely hear it at all. He
watched the rise and fall of his shoulders, the swell of his ribs, the silver lace of the moonlight that draped his skin.

Carefully, he reached out and touched Gav's arm.

Gav stiffened. His breath stopped. Dan laid his hand over his biceps, stroked the skin with his thumb. By inches, he shifted closer, until he could kiss the back of Gav's neck, until he could feel the warmth of his living body.

"I'm cold, Gav," he said softly.

"You're not," said Gav.

"I feel cold."

"There's plenty of blankets."

"Not enough."

"There's a radiator, then."

"Gav."

Gav let out a shuddering breath. His skin twitched under Dan's hand, minute tremors racing through him. Dan kissed his neck again, tugged on his arm until he rolled back against Dan's chest. Dan draped an arm round him.

Bundling his own elbows to his chest, Gav caught his wrist.

"Please, no," he whispered.

"I just want to hold you. I wouldn't ask anything else."

"I don't want you to touch them. I can't bear for you to touch them."

"Then I won't touch them."

"You will. Whether you mean to or not, you will, and I can't bear it."

"Do they hurt?" Dan asked, pushing himself up to look at Gav's chest.

Gav crumpled into himself. "Don't, don't look at me!"

"Sorry, sorry," said Dan. He lay back down, kissed the protruding bone at the base of Gav's neck, stroked his arm. "I'm not looking. I'm not touching."

"You are."

Dan gritted his teeth, held his breath, and retreated. It was like pulling off his own fingernails. As he went, the trembling tension wound out of Gav, and his breath came easier, and his limbs uncurled.

"I'm sorry, Gav," Dan said again. "I shouldn't have pushed."

Gav shook his head. For a long time, he didn't speak; when he did, his voice was choked with tears.

"Perhaps we ought to get separate rooms."
"I—no, surely not, B. It won't happen again, honestly, I just—"

"It isn't fair to you. To either of us. I think we ought to get separate rooms. Or separate beds, or—or—"

He was crying. Dan could hear it in every syllable, and it fell like freezing rain upon his heart.

"Should I sleep in the chair tonight?" he asked, on the verge of tears himself.

"No, no, I don't . . . just—just—"

"Gav, please tell me what you want," Dan begged.

"Just—stay on your side, and don't touch me. Don't look at me. Please."

"All right," said Dan. The cold seeped into his bones, aching. "I will. I'm sorry."

Gav sniffled, pulled the blankets up to his throat and held them there.

"Good night, Dan," he said.

With his heart clutched in a fist of nettles, Dan rolled back over.

"Good night, Gav," he said.

In the silence that followed, he wrapped his arms round himself and pretended he could feel any warmth.

He really could have used a drink.

---

Dan was woken in the morning by a kiss.

He let out a pleased hum, keeping his eyes closed, his hands on the pillow. Gav's beard tickled his chin and tugged on his moustache. A warm hand cupped his cheek, and he responded in kind, fooling with the hair at the back of Gav's neck. The smell of a bakery filled the room like sunlight, wafting in with the sound of birdsong and the distant surf. Dan took a long, slow breath, luxuriating. Gav drew back, pecked him on the lips three times, kissed his nose and the center of his forehead.

"Good morning," he said.

"A very good morning," said Dan.

"There's breakfast."

"Hot breakfast?"

"Mm."

"How averse are you to letting it get cold?"

"I've already had mine. It's up to you."

"Then I'd quite like to waste an hour." He tugged on Gav's head. Obligingly, Gav kissed him, climbed into the bed and snuggled up to him, fully clothed.
"You get half an hour," said Gav.

"Why only half?"

"Work to do."

"What work?"

"I'll tell you in half an hour."

Dan made a face. He kissed Gav again, lips and temple. Gav pillowed his head on Dan's chest, and Dan wrapped an arm round him.

"Fair play," he said, petting Gav's hair. "Gav? Thanks."

Gav shrugged and pinched Dan's ear. "Still upset with you."

"Couldn't possibly blame you. I'm upset with me. I am sorry, Gav. I shouldn't have gone behind your back, even for . . . what I thought were good intentions. It won't happen again."

"Thanks."

A soft breeze flowed through the room, brushing the curtains. Somewhere distant, a dog barked exuberantly. Two birds took up a dispute, whistling and chattering at each other.

"'M sorry as well," Gav mumbled into Dan's chest. "For . . . yelling."

Dan blinked. "Well—thank you," he said. "I forgive you. In fact, I think the yelling was perfectly apropos, in this circumstance, but . . . yes, not-yelling is always preferable."

"Oh, Dan," Gav sighed.

Dan kept petting Gav's hair, fiddled with the sleeve of his shirt. He rolled his words around on his tongue, tasting them, gauging their sagacity.

"Gav?" he said at last.

"Mm-hm?"

"Would . . . d'you think . . . pyjamas?"

Gav lifted his head. "What?"

"For sleeping. D'you think that would be more comfortable, for you?"

He frowned. He wrinkled his nose. He propped his chin on Dan's sternum and pinched his ear again.

"I reckon it might," he said.

"Yeah? Shall we get you some silk pyjamas?"

"Silk, what're you on about?"

"I'm serious. Only the best for you, B."

"We'll see what we can find whilst we're in town."
"Are we going to town?"

"Mm."

"Mind telling me what for?"

"In twenty-five minutes, I will."

Dan sighed, shaking his head. "All right, have it your way."

"Oy, B?"

"Yes, B?"

"Love you."

All the ice in Dan's bones melted. He lifted his head and kissed Gav's hair again, gave his shoulders a gentle squeeze.

"I love you as well, Gav," he said.
"All right," said Dan, setting aside his napkin and his empty plate. "So what's the plan?"

Gav, halfway through a sip of coffee, waved a hand and went *mm*. He put the cup aside and blotted his beard with a napkin, then sat forward and clasped his hands on the table.

"I got to thinking, about Peake and them, and the . . . disappointing number of arrests made, *id est*, three. The police haven't made any significant headway—that business with James proved it—so I reckon it's time to take matters into our own hands."

Dan chewed his lip. His breakfast wasn't sitting so well, a headache rising behind his eyes. He shifted in his seat and coughed.

"Is that . . . the wisest idea?" he asked.

Gav frowned. "What d'you mean?"

"I just mean in terms of—of psychological . . . distress. It was bad enough last night, and James wasn't even actively malicious."

"No no no, you've got me all wrong. I don't mean to encounter any of them; God forbid. I just want to work out where they've all run off to and have them rounded up and shot like the animals they are."

"Oh," Dan said faintly. "Is that all."

"Why're you looking at me like that?"

"It—well, it's only that all of that seems a bit, er. . . ."

"Extreme? I hardly think so."

"I was going to say off-brand."

Gav ground his teeth, his face hard and angry. He scoffed and took a gulp of coffee.

"Either way," he said. "Step one is finding where they've holed up, and I've got just the thing for it."

"Should I even ask?"

"It's very simple. All we've got to do is follow James."

"You're not serious? He'll be *miles* away by now!"

"Yes, Dan, that's the idea," said Gav, with strained patience. "We want to stay a couple steps behind him so we don't actually run into the bastard."

"Oh. Well . . . right, fair play. Must say, it's something of a relief to hear you say so—I was going to be worrying about his poor children 'til we went and saw them."

"Of course you were," said Gav, rolling his eyes.

"B? Don't roll your eyes at me. Not about this."
Gav made a face, but it faded as he took in Dan's expression.

"Maggie?" he asked softly.

"Probably has something to do with it," Dan mumbled, scratching his ear. "At any rate—following James. Is that what we're going into town for?"

Gav watched him for just slightly too long before clicking back into his professionalism. "That'd be it."

"Assuming anyone there will talk to us."

"I don't expect them to talk to us; I expect they'll tell Dubois just about anything."

Dan frowned. "Wait, really? I would've thought you'd want nothing to do with him, after last night."

"Quite the contrary. Anyone whose behaviour is that confidently erratic is either mad or hiding something. He's a fascinated little puzzle—but more importantly, he's charismatic, extremely rich, and probably even French."

"More the sort of fellow people round here would want to talk to, rather than us fat lumps of Englishmen."

"Speak for yourself, I'm a svelte lump of Englishman."

"You're a twig and you know it."

"Fine, a svelte twig of Englishman. I'm sure Dubois will find it an amusing little diversion, as well. With as much time in the spotlight as he'll be getting, I reckon I can have him singing like a canary in four days."

"He certainly—hang on, what?"

Gav flicked a hand, annoyed. "He's hiding something, B. I want to know what it is."

"I thought you were set on Peake and them."

"I am."

"So why're you after Dubois now?"

Gav chewed his cheek, drank his coffee and fiddled with the cup. He got up and closed the window, drew the curtains tight. Dusk engulfed the room. Cold water pooled in Dan's stomach. Gav returned to his seat, leaned over the table, and spoke in a hushed voice.

"I don't think they meant to kill him," he said.

Dan stared. The cold in his stomach oozed out through his body and seeped into his bones. Gav kept talking, intent and urgent.

"Before you and I got separated, Peake said they were late. Whatever happened down there, whatever that was, it was prearranged to happen. There wasn't enough time to get a will in order, even a forgery, and Mrs Willems wasn't anywhere close to getting Dubois to marry her. James said there were two dozen or so people holed up with them; I count twenty in the chamber that I could see. It doesn't take twenty people to kill one man, nor does it require a whole bloody production like the one we saw—and as you've told me, they meant to take Dubois that night. It was all meant for
him. No, I don't think they intended to kill him at all."

"Then—good God, what was all of it for?"

Gav pinched his lips and drummed his fingers on the table, his eyes flicking over some invisible picture painted on his memory.

"That's what we've got to find out," he said.

It took over three minutes of concerted knocking to get Casimir to answer the door. His face was sallow, his eyes bloodshot and carrying heavy bags. He was still wearing last night's clothes, considerably rumpled. He winced as the spring sunshine splashed across his face.

"Ah," he said, hoarser than usual. "Forgive me, I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon. How can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Er," said Dan, a wave of vicarious illness washing over him. "Morning. Sorry, we really ought to have called ahead, or . . . something."

Casimir waved him off, languid. "It wouldn't have mattered."

"Have you been drinking?" Gav asked.

The corner of Casimir's mouth twitched. "Not in the last six hours. Would you like to come in, or is this a briefer visit?"

"If you're not well, we can come back later," Dan said, before Gav could ask any more questions.

"I'm never well. Come in."

He drifted back into the curtained gloom of the house, leaving the door open behind him.

"Fantastic, so this has already gone to shit," Dan muttered, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"Come off it, B, it's a hiccup, at worst. Not like you've never got drunk on a work-night."

"Not in the last—or at least, not more than a couple of times in the past four years. Anyways, he's not going to be much good to us when he's too hungover to step outside, is he."

Gav shrugged. "He will or he won't, it's too late now."

"I s'pose so. After you."

Once again, they followed Casimir into his sitting room. The whole house was curtained off, all the gleaming clutter transformed into twisted bramble silhouettes. Casimir collapsed in the armchair and gestured for the two of them to sit. Dan settled on the couch, and Gav perched on the arm next to him.

"So, to what do I owe the honour?" Casimir asked.

"I've been thinking, about that little problem Mr James presented us with, and I've decided we could use your help," said Gav. "I want to know where he's run off to, and that'll be much easier with someone along who the locals will actually talk to."
"I see. Is Miss Gabriel no longer in your employ, then?"

"Detective Gabriel, and she is, she's just in London at the moment."

Dan made a face. "Besides, people like talking to her even less than they like talking to us."

"Can't imagine why," Casimir intoned. "You couldn't find an errand-boy?"

"Considering that you dragged us all the way down here for your own amusement, I think it's only fair we drag you along on our business," said Gav.

Casimir gave him an unpleasingly long look. His mouth twisted in something that was nearly a smile.

"Very well," he said. "I am at your service."

"Good. First order of business: how did Mr James travel here?"

"He didn't mention it. I assume by train."

"Did you meet him at the station?"

"I met him here, when he turned up on my doorstep. I was also under the impression that this was not going to be another interrogation, or I would not have let you in."

"Yes, I thought you might not, which is why I didn't tell you."

"You are a singularly tiresome person, Mr Free."

"Takes one to know one, Mr Dubois. Do you still have the letter he sent you? Perhaps I could puzzle something out of it."

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

Casimir pressed two fingers to his temple and shut his eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched again, and he scoffed.

"It isn't your business," he said.

"And at last, we've run up against the backboard," said Gav, sitting back and propping his ankle on his knee. "You don't seem particularly talkative this morning, so I'll do all the untangling for you, if you don't mind."

"I'll try not to fall asleep," Casimir said nastily.

"Last night, you said, and I quote, two weeks ago I received a plaintive letter, begging my assistance. Perhaps you thought I wouldn't notice the lack of detail in that statement—a letter from whom, begging assistance with what? Context would indicate that you meant Mr James, and you certainly played along when I speculated on that assumption, but in truth, you meant something entirely different. It only took you admitting that Dan asked your help for me to work that one out: a letter from Dan, begging your assistance with me."

"Bravo," said Casimir, twirling a hand. "Will there be an encore?"

"Don't patronize me when I am exposing your lies, Mr Dubois," Gav snapped.
Casimir's eyes cracked open, gleaming in the half-light.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Detective," he said, in a voice that dripped condescension. "Do please continue with your scathing exposition of my crimes. I'm on the edge of my seat."

Gav's fists clenched until his knuckles turned white. Grinding his teeth, he let out a slow breath through his nose.

"Just now," he went on, "you said James turned up on your doorstep, indicating that you didn't know he was going to be there. When, exactly, did he turn up?"

"Oh dear, hit a stumbling block already? Tsk tsk, and you were doing so well."

"Your recalcitrance in this matter, Mr Dubois, indicates complicity."

Casimir let out a low whistle. "And a university vocabulary, to boot. Certainly no one could doubt your intellect with such cultured gemstones spilling from your mouth."

"You are avoiding the question," Gav hissed.

"A brilliant deduction, dear detective!"

"What are you hiding, Dubois?"

Dan wiped his hand on his trousers, leaning away slowly. A bead of sweat trickled down his face. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth, dry as cotton. Whatever energy was pouring out of Gav, Casimir seemed immune to it, or perhaps just too hungover to notice it.

"Call me Casimir," he said glibly, "and maybe I'll tell you."

"I'm going to take you apart like a cheap watch," Gav spat.

Casimir grinned. "God, please."

"All right, I think that's just about enough of this little game," Dan cut in. "You're both very clever and very annoyed about it. Could we move on, now? Perhaps to the actual business, where children's lives are at stake?"

Casimir turned a glittering look on him. Dan held resolute. Before Casimir could quip any further, the hangover caught up with him, and he subsided.

"Very well," he sighed. "If we must."

"I sincerely feel we must. Free, in the absence of leads, shall we start at the train station?"

Gav's jaw worked. He let out a breath like a gasket releasing steam.

"That seems reasonable," he said, begrudging.

"Good. Casimir, will you survive a walk into town?"

"It won't kill me," he said, although he didn't sound pleased about it.

Dan slapped his knees and heaved himself to his feet. "Right, then let's go."
The station bustled, an orderly chaos that babbled and flowed like a mountain stream. Gav wove through the crowd towards the ticket booths, single-minded and sprightly. Dan hung back with Casimir, who looked even worse in the light of day. The walk into town hadn't done him any favors, and he'd been singularly uncommunicative the whole way.

"Er, listen," Dan said, as the two of them wended their way through the station. "If you're not feeling up to this, I'm sure we can handle it on our own."

"Your concern is touching, but unnecessary," said Casimir. "I should hate to wind up even further on Mr Free's bad side by abandoning my duties in such an important matter."

"I'm not completely convinced either of us know what he's actually up to—but I'm sure you don't."

Casimir paused, a flicker of interest kindling in his expression. "Oh?"

"Yes. He seems to think—well, I don't want to put it out in public, but the long and short of it is, he's got some very strange ideas about all that business that happened after Willems' little party."

"I see. You'll have to tell me about it later, then."

"Well, maybe," Dan said, squirming. "For now, we'd better catch him up."

"And play along?"

"I wouldn't call it that."

"Then make no waves."

"Yes, that's more along the lines I was thinking."

Casimir nodded and gestured for Dan to lead the way. They made their way to the ticket booths, where Gav was standing with his arms folded and his foot tapping.

"Took your time, didn't you," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Forgive me; I had to take a moment to get my stomach in order," said Casimir, smooth as silk. "The crowd can be dizzying."

"I suppose I can't fault you for that," Gav said begrudgingly. "Are you well enough to figure out where James went off to, or has your hangover robbed you of your charisma?"

Casimir's face hardened with determination. He drew himself up, a flame kindling in his eyes.

"Mr Free, the day I am too ill to employ my charms is the day I finally meet God," he said. "Sit back, watch closely, and enjoy the show."

He cast a baleful eye across the ticket booth, spotted whatever he was looking for, and steamed away. In his wake, Gav grinned.

"Dan, Dan," he said, nudging him.

"What? What's that face for?"

The grin got even wider. "I've found a button."

"In your pocket, or...?"
"On Dubois, you pillock."

"Ohhhh, that sort of button."

Meanwhile, Casimir had insinuated himself into one of the lines for the ticket booth and was working up to a jitter. As soon as the couple in front of him moved away, he darted up to the attendant, a fresh-faced young man sporting a pencil-thin moustache and pomade-glossed hair.

"Good morning, sir," the attendant said. "How may I help you?"

"Ah, my dear sir, that is the matter of my concern," said Casimir, plaintive and nervous. "It is a somewhat unusual request, but likewise somewhat urgent, and—I should waste as little of your time as possible, my apologies, I will be as brief as I can. It is a request of three parts, the first: what time does the last train leave this station in the evenings?"

"Midnight, sir," said the attendant, wary. Casimir crumpled against the booth, casting his eyes heavenward.

"Oh, no, it's just as I feared," he said. "I have a friend, a visitor from America, he speaks very poor French, and—well, as perhaps you had guessed, a few drinks passed between us last night. He intended to return to Paris, but—fool that I am—I can't remember if I told him which train to take! I can only imagine the poor thing, wandering lost in some strange city, betrayed by his only friend—and I know that this is immensely unorthodox, I certainly would not ask if I had any other way of knowing, but of course I don't want to call in the police if he isn't lost, wasting everyone's time on a wild goose chase and making a wretched fool of myself in the process—"

"What was your friend's name?" the attendant asked. "I can check the books to see if we sold him a ticket."

"Could you? Oh, bless you, sir, bless you and all your family, thank you, a thousand times," Casimir effused, falling all over himself. "It's James, sir, Mr Chad James."

"Of course. If you'll wait here just a moment."

"For you, my kindest and most brilliant attendant, for you I would wait a lifetime."

The faintest pink tinge rose to the attendant's cheeks. He said something unintelligible and turned away quickly. Casimir kept his full and unwavering attention on the man, never breaking character for a second.

"He's got this down to a science, hasn't he," Dan said to Gav, sticking his hands in his pockets and rolling up onto his toes.

"Didn't I say, that people would talk to him?" said Gav.

Dan sighed and rolled his eyes. "You did."

"And I convinced him to do it."

"Yes yes, well done you."

Gav made a smug face at him. Dan elbowed him. At the ticket booth, Casimir perked up as the attendant returned.

"I have excellent news for you, sir," he said. "Your Mr James boarded the eleven o'clock train to
Paris last night. He should be there safe and sound by now."

Casimir pressed a hand to his heart and smiled a thousand-watt smile. "My dear sir, you are a miracle, truly. You have saved my life and my poor heart. Is there any way I can repay you for this tremendous kindness?"

"I—well, no, that's all right," said the attendant, turning pink again. "It's only my job."

"Nonsense, you have gone so far above and beyond. At least let me put in a good word about you to your manager. What was your name, again? So that I may properly recommend you."

"It's—it's Pelletier, but really none of this is necessary, and please don’t tell my manager, I'm not technically supposed to do—any of what I've just done!"

Casimir hit himself in the head, despairing.

"Of course! I continue to be a damnable fool. It is always exacerbated in the presence of handsome men. Let me give you my card, then, and perhaps I can repay you in an . . . unofficial capacity? When you are through with work for the day, perhaps?"

"Oh," said the attendant. "Well, if you insist, I—I don't think anyone would object, if it's . . . outside of work, of course. Unofficial."

Casimir loosed that thousand-watt grin again. He passed his card through to the attendant and winked.

"I very much look forward to repaying your kindness, Mr Pelletier," he said. "In whatever capacity is most agreeable to you."

The attendant sputtered, going tomato-red, and Casimir swanned off. He barely slowed as he passed Dan and Gav, radiating triumph.

"That is how it's done," he spat.

With nothing more than that, he swept from the building like a king exiting his court.

Gav and Dan shared a look.

"Five quid says he's gone out to be sick," said Dan.
They found Casimir in an alley behind the train station, his forehead and forearm pressed to the brick wall, his skin the color of sea-foam and his breath coming short and choppy. He pulled himself together as they approached, swallowing several times and staying braced against the wall.

"Gentlemen," he said, by way of greeting. "I presume you will be continuing on to Paris, then?"

"Not . . . right away," said Dan. "Or at least—"

"Not right away," Gav confirmed.

"Right. Wouldn't want to actually catch him up."

"That, and I doubt Mr Dubois is well enough to travel."

"Am I coming with you?" said Casimir, startled.

"Is he coming with us?" Dan asked, dismayed.

"Of course. He's much too useful to leave behind."

"Hoist with my own petard," Casimir muttered, wincing.

"After you dragged us across the entirety of France, I feel it's only fair that we drag you halfway back. Justice is a cruel mistress, isn't she."

"I wouldn't know; neither mistresses nor justice are among my hobbies. You will, I hope, at least give me the day to get my affairs in order?"

"To recover from your splitting hangover, you mean? In the interests of not having you throw up on the train, I'll allow it."

"Your generosity knows no bounds," Casimir intoned. "May I return home to recover, or are my duties not yet fulfilled?"

"I'd say you've done more than enough for one day," said Dan.

"More than enough? He's hardly done anything."

"He's done something in five minutes that would've taken us an hour, at least."

"Right, so that's only five minutes' worth of work, which is hardly any."

"What else do we need him for?"

"I'm sure I'll think of something."

Casimir held up a finger. "Excuse me; while this discussion continues, I was in the middle—"

He cut himself off, wincing. With a hiccup and a heave, he turned aside and vomited down the wall. Gav gagged and spun on his heel, hurrying out of the alleyway. Dan hesitated only a moment before going after him.

"Look, I really don't think—"
Gav flapped at him. "Go and keep an eye on him so he doesn't run off!" he ordered, strangled. Dan tossed up his hands and about-faced. Shaking his head, he sidled back into the alleyway, where Casimir had not quite finished being sick.

"Good grief," Dan muttered under his breath, his nose wrinkling.

Within a couple minutes, Casimir straightened up, wiped his face and his eyes, and rinsed his mouth out with something from a flask. He approached Dan, although he stayed a respectable distance away.

"My sincerest apologies," he said, sheepish. His voice was so hoarse that it barely rose above a whisper. "I hate to make a spectacle of myself."

Dan rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you do."

"Where has Mr Free gone?"

"Just out that way," said Dan, cocking a thumb at the mouth of the alley. "If you want to make a run for it, I'll cover for you."

"That's very kind of you, but no. I presume from your offering that he is out of earshot?"

"Almost certainly, otherwise he'd be being sick as well."

"I see. While we have a moment to ourselves, then: what were those strange ideas you mentioned earlier?"

Dan stiffened. "It's not something to be talked about in public."

Gesturing to the empty alleyway, Casimir said, "We seem to have the place to ourselves."

"No. Some other time."

"Very well. Then let us collect Mr Free and be on our way."

"Dubois—"

"It's Casimir."

"Whatever. I really think it might be for the best if you went home. I don't want to encourage Free being so—so—"

"Draconian?" Casimir suggested, cocking an eyebrow.

"I was aiming more for unsympathetic. He does it to me, as well, if I ever turn up hungover."

"And therefore you would like to train him out of it. I understand."

"No, and therefore I know how unpleasant it is."

A strange look crossed Casimir's face, one that was almost pained. It was quickly quashed beneath his customary self-deprecating smile.

"I should hate for there to be unnecessary unpleasantness," he said. "When should I expect the two of you tomorrow?"
"Call it nine. Go on, he'll be getting suspicious by now."

Right on cue, there came a call of "Gruchy?" from the end of the alleyway. Dan glanced towards it, and by the time he looked back, Casimir was gone. Uneased, he tromped out to meet Gav.

"You were right," he said. " Took my eyes off him for a second and—poof! Bloody disappearing act."

Gav tsked and shook his head. "That's why you don't take your eyes off him, B. Reckon he'll skip town to avoid us, or will we catch up with him tomorrow for Paris?"

The two of them started off by a concerted meander, neither one leading, neither one following. The sun blazed bright and warm, and a sprightly breeze wicked up the street, smelling of the sea. They wound their way through the gaily dressed crowds, elbow-to-elbow and not quite touching.

"I reckon he'll at least hang about long enough to have drinks with that ticket-boy in there," said Dan, nodding at the station as they passed it.

"No, you reckon?"

"I think so."

"Just for that?"

"He put in the effort, he'll want to get something for it."

"Sensible enough, although one would think all he'd want in his current state is a prairie oyster and a nap."

"Nobody ever wants a prairie oyster, B, it's only when it's a matter of life and death."

"Come off it. By the time you get to the hangover, you're in the clear."

"You've never had a proper hangover, then. I've wished I was dead."

"Haven't we all," Gav muttered. The sudden weight of the exhaustion in his voice drove all the breath from Dan's lungs.

"Well—ideally not," he said.

Gav slowed like the air had turned to treacle. His shoulders slumped, his face fell, the light in his eyes snuffed out. It was all Dan could do not to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, beg him not to go.

"Ideally," Gav said, flat and dull.

Desperate to halt the downward spiral, Dan cast about for inspiration. Across the way, he spotted a post office, doing a brisk business. He elbowed Gav and pointed.

"Here, did we ever get that letter sent off to Jones? About the missing gold?"

"Never bothered," said Gav.

"No time like the present, then! I assume we're not in too much of a hurry to spare five minutes."

Gav shrugged. Clenching his teeth and breathing deep through his nose, Dan took Gav's elbow and
tugged him aside, out of the flow of pedestrian traffic.

"What's wrong?" he asked, keeping his voice down.

Gav didn't look at him. "Nothing."

"B, honestly, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's fine."

"Look, if you don't want to talk about it, I won't push, but—for God's sake, at least admit there's something going on! I want to help, Gav. I can't, if you won't talk to me."

Gav shut his eyes and drooped like a dying flower. Dan propped him upright, flashed what he hoped was a reassuring smile at staring passers-by.

"D'you want to go back to the hotel?" Dan asked. "We can just—take some time to regroup, if that's what you need. There's no—I mean, there is a bit of a rush, but only as regards James's family, and we've already decided to wait the day."

"I don't care," said Gav. "Whatever's easiest for you."

"What would make things easier, Gav, would be a bit of communication," said Dan, strained. "Honestly, anything. Just give me—anything."

Gav just shrugged again. Dan bit his tongue and focused on keeping his grip on Gav's arm gentle.

"All right," he said. "Since the post office is right there, we're going to go and write that letter. D'you think you can manage that?"

Another shrug.

"Gav, please, just a word. Any word."

"Fine," Gav said dismally.

Dan counted backwards from ten, breathing out the red heat beneath his skin. He kissed his fingers and patted Gav's cheek, only slightly harder than was necessary.

"Thank you, for that," he said. "I'll need your help with the address, as well. Have you—"

"Michael Jones, Achievement City, Nevada."

"Right, that's the one. While we're writing letters, I think I'll drop Gabriel a line as well, let her know how everything's shaken out—looks like we've got a break in traffic, let's go on across. . . ."

He led Gav to the post office, continuing to talk aimlessly. When it became clear that Gav wasn't going to liven up any time soon, Dan set him in a corner and took up the letter writing himself. The one to Jones was easy—a brief introduction, the tip about the missing gold, a cheeky mention of the five-pound wager and a return envelope.

The letter to Gabriel, however, was a trial. It took almost half an hour, and he still wasn't happy with it at the end. He read it over, wincing at every line.
Dear Gabriel,

I hope things have been going well without us, and that you're not too terribly swamped. We've made it here safe and sound, and found Mr Dubois in much the same state.

Unfortunately, it seems you were right about him, and his affinity for the spotlight. The whole thing's been a fiasco already, and it's barely been a day. Free bounces between clamping down like a bulldog on this case—and yes, there's a real case, of a sort, although I wish there weren't—and his bouts of apathy, so really there's nothing to be done but keep going along with it. One never knows, moment to moment, whether he'll come along quietly or go for the throat if you try and pull him off. Still, it's a minor improvement over constant, total apathy, so perhaps not all is doom and gloom.

Or perhaps it is, I don't know. It's all very odd and I don't like to put it down on paper. We may be going to Paris in the near future; if we stay there long, I may become desperate enough to take a day trip to meet you somewhere, just to borrow your ear for an hour or two.

(If, of course, you were amenable to such a thing; I'd understand if you weren't. It seems like even when we're not around, we continue to make more work for you. Perhaps I should focus my efforts instead on growing my own common sense. Ideally it won't come to a point where your assistance is necessary.)

Regardless. You should be able to direct any return correspondence to Dubois' flat in Paris. It'll either reach us there, or it will be forwarded on to him here, and we'll get it anyway.

All my best,

—D. Gruchy

P.S. Having just recalled how little you like Mr Dubois, I'll send you another letter—perhaps telegram—with the address of whatever hotel we stay at in Paris, so neither you nor we must rely on Dubois to play postmaster.

Before he could second-guess himself enough to rip the thing up and start over, he stuffed it in an envelope and sealed it. Fortunately, the line moved quickly, and he managed to get both letters stamped and taken away without doing them any harm. It wasn't precisely a relief, but at the very least there was no use worrying about it anymore. Dusting off his hands, he went to collect Gav.

Who was not there anymore.

Dan locked up like the brakes on a runaway train. His head filled with the screech of metal on metal. Gav was not in the corner where he'd been put. He wasn't in line, or at the counters, or anywhere amongst the milling crowd. Dan shoved out onto the street and cast about, but there was no sign of him there, either. His heartbeat kicked up to a thunder. His stomach churned. The air was too thin, too hot, too hazy. The world spun. Dan caught himself against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Breathe," he muttered to himself. "Breathe, Dan. He's probably . . . just gone back to the hotel. That's it. Probably just gone on back, for lack of anything better to do. Having—having a kip. That's all. Breathe."
Still, his lungs would not fill all the way. It took an eternity to flag down a cab. While he waited, he searched the crowds, looking round until he had a crick in his neck, all of it in vain. He spent the cab ride with his face glued to the window, ready to jump out at the slightest hint of Gav. By the time he got to the Grand Noailles, he was so jittery that he dropped the fare all over the ground and had to waste another minute picking it back up again. He hurried inside, waited ten seconds for the lift and then ran up the stairs instead. The key rattled in the lock to their room, his breath roared in his ears as he pushed the door open, his vision blurred and smeared as he stepped inside to see. . . .

Gav, sitting on the bed, whole and healthy and slightly bemused.

Dan's knees gave out. He caught himself on the wall, flooded with such tremendous relief that he couldn't speak. Gav looked him over with a vague curiosity.

"Allo, B," he said.

Dan's voice boiled back up, scalding.

"Christ alive, don't *scare* me like that!" he cried. "You're a fine bloody one to talk about Dubois' disappearing act, I take my eyes off you for one second and you've gone up in a puff of bloody smoke! It's not fair and it's not at all endearing and I swear on my life I'll box your damn ears if you start taking after him, and his bloody stupid misbehaviour. What were you thinking, anyway, just wandering off without saying anything? Nearly gave me a bloody heart attack!"

Gav's brows pulled together. His breathing turned short and choppy. He wrinkled his nose, shook his head as though beset by unpleasant odours.

"I don't . . . know," he said. "I—I don't know. I was sitting there, and then. . . ."

"Did you have a moment, or something?" said Dan, his heart sinking like a lead weight.

"No, no, it wasn't that, or—maybe it was, I don't know, I just . . . I don't—Dan, I just don't *remember.*"

"All right, yeah, so it was a bit of a moment, that's . . . not all right, but—"

"It wasn't, though. If it'd been a moment, I would've stayed put. It's like—it's like a dream, all blurred and foggy. I know I got up and left. I know I came back here, but I don't *remember* it. D'you understand? I know it happened, but I can't—the—the pictures stop, it's like someone else just *told* me about it, I can't *remember*—"

"Easy, B, steady on," said Dan. He crossed the room and settled on the bed next to Gav, put an arm round his shoulders. "I know it must be terribly frightening, but you're all right."

"I'm *not,*" Gav insisted, his voice breaking. "You're not *listening* to me, you don't understand, I can't remember!"

"I'm hearing you! I am, honestly, I promise. You're terrified that your memory's going to stop working completely, but it's not, and if you can calm down enough to listen, I'll tell you how I know."

"You can't, you *don't* know, it's all wrong, it's all going wrong—"

"*Gav,*" Dan interrupted, catching one of his hands as it fluttered. "What's the back of my hand look like?"
"I don't know, I don't know, I can't—I can't—"

"Yes, you can. You've done it a hundred times."

"No, give—give me something else, give me something different, I have to—I need—"

Dan seized upon the first thing that popped into his head.

"Read me Dubois' letter," he said.

Gav squeezed his eyes shut, sucked in a breath through his teeth and held it—and held it, and held it, until his face turned red and his whole body shuddered like a machine with a slipped gear, and then he was gasping, tears spilling down his face and hands clinging to anything they could reach.

"I can't," he whimpered. "I can't, it's not there, I can't see anything, I can't—Dan, I can't—it's gone!"

"It's not gone, B, it's still there. You're panicking. You can't focus when you're panicking. Take deep breaths, it's all right."

"Stop saying that! It's not all right, nothing's all right, I've lost it, I'm—I'm ruined, I'm broken!"

It struck through Dan's heart like a lance, knocked all the breath and all the words from him. Gav dissolved into gasping sobs, curling in on himself as though from terrible pain. All Dan could do was hold him. He didn't dare to speak a word of comfort, for fear of making it worse.

His pocket watch ticked away a minute, then two, then five. Gav's sobbing drained down to trembling, like the tide going out. Dan rubbed his shoulder and held his hand. There was some small comfort in the warmth of him. There was some hope in the fact that he was still breathing.

"Au Messieurs Free et Gruchy," Gav mumbled out at last, "ou à tout personne concernée. . . ."

Line by line, halting and choppy, he read out the entirety of Casimir's letter. If it wasn't word-perfect, Dan had no way of knowing, but it certainly sounded right. By the time he got to the end, he'd stopped shivering, although he hadn't uncurled at all.

"There you are," said Dan, giving him a squeeze. "So that's still working, at least."

Gav shook his head and sniffled. "Something's wrong with me," he said, choked.

"Yes. Yes, something is, and though it's horrible, you've no idea what a relief it is to hear you say so. I'm sorry it's fallen out this way, but now that we've found our way to Square One, you can start getting better."

"You don't know that."

"I do, actually. Seen it a dozen times."

Gav raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot, full of tears. He didn't so much look curious as accusatory.

"When?"

"Well . . . army days," Dan admitted. "I had a few—I wouldn't call them mates, but—thing about war, B, is that sooner or later, on both sides, somebody gets the bright idea to start torturing people. And . . . I knew a few blokes who came out the other side of it. Ugly business, horrific business. Few of them were on my ship home, actually. Boatload of us blokes too mad to serve anymore."
"You aren't mad."

"I was. Reckon I still am, somewhere under all the fluff, otherwise I wouldn't have those bloody moments. But the thing is, B, all those blokes who went through—well, much worse than I did—d'you know what they all had in common?"

Gav shook his head.

"To a man, they all started having trouble with their memory," said Dan. "Some more than others. Some couldn't function at all, others just got a bit absent-minded. After what you've been through, I'm not the least bit surprised that you're having issues now."

"Does it go away? Did they—are they back to normal, now?"

Dan couldn't look at him. He made a face and shrugged.

"I've lost contact with most of them, to be honest," he said. "And some of them have died—usually opium, or suicide, or . . . drink."

"The others?"

It was like chewing a mouthful of thorns, but he said, "No. No, Gav, none of them are back to normal. Some things you really can't come all the way back from."

Gav stared at him, sallow and cold and in pain.

"How could you say something like that?" he said softly.

"I wish I didn't have to, but I can't lie to you about this. It'd only make it worse in the long run."

Gav didn't respond. Dan kissed his head and squeezed him.

"Just hang in there, B," he said. "Just give it time. It won't always be this bad."

"No," said Gav, bitter and hollow. "I reckon sometimes it'll be worse."
By morning, the chill between Dan and Gav had eased, although breakfast was still a much quieter affair than usual. They'd barely spoken to each other through the preceding afternoon and evening, even when they'd ventured out again to purchase pyjamas. Dan had taken it upon himself to sleep in the chair. As a result, he was sore and groggy, but it was worth it to have Gav back on speaking terms.

"So," Dan said carefully, once Gav was through his first cup of coffee. "Paris today?"

"Reckon so."

"Are we collecting Dubois first?"

"If he's not run off."

"And once we're in Paris, are we checking on Mrs James and the children?"

"S'pose we could," said Gav, shrugging. "The wife might be useful for working out where they've all gone, anyway."

"Certainly a possibility."

Gav refilled his coffee cup. Dan picked at his breakfast. The sun shone bright and harsh outside, casting blinding squares of light on the bedsheets. With a polite cough, Dan took up the morning paper and browsed through it. There was nothing of particular interest, but it at least kept him occupied while Gav finished his second cup of coffee.

"We'd best be cracking on," Gav said, setting his cup down. "Long way to go."

"It is, at that," said Dan. He folded up the paper and tossed it aside. "Shall we split up? One of us collects Dubois whilst the other gets the tickets?"

Gav shook his head and creaked to his feet. "I don't trust him alone with you."

"You—what?" Dan sputtered, blindsided.

"Nor you alone with him, for that matter," Gav went on. "No, I'm not having the two of you colluding behind my back again. We'll stick together, wherever Dubois' involved."

"Gav, honestly, it was one stupid mistake—"

"It was two," said Gav. "Once was asking him for help. Twice was accepting it. It's your dirty bathwater, B. Soak in it."

Dan shut his mouth, and soaked in it.

"Don't see why we couldn't have just met him at the station," Gav grumbled, as the two of them hiked up the drive to Casimir's cottage. "We'll wind up waiting an hour and paying that bloody cabbie through the nose."
"We'll just make Dubois pay the fare, then."

"Bold of you to assume you can make Dubois do anything."

"You found a button, didn't you? Just use that."

"If he's not in, Dan, I'll kill you."

"Me? What? What've I done?"

"Made me come all this bloody way, and wasted half the morning doing it."

"I never made you do anything. We could just as easily have gone on without him, you're the one who wanted to take him with us."

"And you're the one who's so bloody sure he's not run off."

"You're just making up excuses to be upset with me, at this point."

"I am not."

"It's fine if you're upset with me, I understand, but honestly, this was your idea."

"Predicated on your—"

The front door opened, and Gav's jaw snapped shut. A slender man in a rumpled suit stepped out and jammed a hat over his mussed hair. He caught sight of Dan and Gav and went red as a beet. He put his head down and hurried down the drive, his pencil moustache twitching as he brushed past the two of them. They both turned to watch him as he ducked round the cab at the end of the drive and scuttled off towards town.

"Was that...?" said Dan.

"Yes indeed," said Gav.

"And was he—?"

"Yesterday's clothes."

"So..."

"Presumably we will find Monsieur Dubois in a much better mood this morning."

Dan nudged Gav, who frowned at him. Dan waggled his eyebrows.

"Come on," he said. "Out with it, come on."

Rolling his eyes, Gav grumbled, "You were right."

"Thank you," said Dan. "Though honestly. One wonders when the man ever sleeps."

"One suspects it's whenever he happens to pass out," said Gav. He stepped up to the front door and knocked. "Monsieur Dubois? Vous êtes là?"

After only a moment's pause, he called out, "Une minute, je vous prie!"

"Not dressed, I reckon," Dan said aside to Gav.
"D'you reckon he can get dressed in a minute?"

"Not all the way dressed, then, or else he's overestimating himself."

"That wouldn't surprise me one bit. How long are we meant to wait out here, then?"

"Last time he made us wait, it was half an hour, so I reckon if we haven't seen him in fifteen minutes, we go on without him."

They spent the next ten minutes enumerating Casimir's various crimes against good manners, until at last he emerged, dressed like a peacock and toting a valise. He flashed a grin at the two of them as he locked the door behind him, although its brightness could not mask the exhaustion laying heavy over his bones.

(Nor, for that matter, could the tall collar of his shirt hide the dark, round bruises on his neck; or his flowery perfume hide the lingering smell of gin on his breath.)

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said. "I do apologize for keeping you waiting yet again; I wasn't fully packed."

"No, no, perfectly understandable," Gav sneered. "Apparently you were otherwise occupied."

"Oh, thoroughly," said Casimir, completely unabashed. "Occasionally I'm lucky enough to be someone's first foray into my second-favourite sin, and, while considerable education is required, it's more than made up for by enthusiasm."

"Good lord," Dan muttered, going red and sticky all over.

"It's a wonder I'm even able to stand this morning; sometimes, I impress even myself."

"Your shameless hedonism is truly inspiring," Gav said, distasteful. "Shall we go, before you get tangled up in somebody else's bedsheets?"

"I guarantee you, Mr Free, I will do that regardless of where we go."

"Delightful." He started back down the drive. "Come along, Gruchy."

"After you," Dan said to Casimir.

"Why thank you," he said, twinkling.

The ride to the station was cramped, sweaty, and uncomfortable. Casimir spent most of it staring out the window, his head turned at such an angle as to blatantly expose the marks on his neck. Dan preoccupied himself with staring out the other window, and Gav stared at nothing.

When they got into town, traffic became so abysmal that eventually they had the cabbie pull up to the curb and let them out, a few blocks from the station. Casimir paid the cabbie unprompted while Dan and Gav unloaded their suitcases. The three of them set off together, sticking close to the shop windows to stay out of the heaviest pedestrian traffic.

"So," said Gav. "Once we've arrived, we ought to get our things squared away and then go straight on to Mrs James. That's more than likely what Mr James will have done."

Dan winced. "I hope not. The way he was talking, they might not still be alive by the time we get there."
"I doubt he would have," said Casimir. "Perhaps he would peer in the windows, or loiter across the street, but he is not quite so stupid as to actually enter."

"Did he mention his plans to you, while he was here?" Gav asked.

"No. I was under the impression he didn't have any."

"How long was he here? Before we arrived."

"Oh, dear, back to the interrogation," Casimir sighed.

"If you'd give me straight answers the first time through, we wouldn't have to keep coming back to it."

"I'm afraid straight answers are completely outside my repertoire. Smoothly curved is the best I can manage."

"Purely out of curiosity, how many drinks have you had this morning?"

"Four. Usually I keep to only one or two, but Matthias made himself a nuisance."

Gav's eye caught on something in a shop window, and his pace faltered. Casimir continued on blithely until he noticed Dan hanging back, as well. Dan tried to pull Gav onward before Casimir had the chance to see what he was staring at, but it was already far too late.

With a pensive expression on his face, Casimir stepped up next to Gav and considered the dress in the window. Gav didn't notice, enraptured as though by a choir of angels.

"How lovely," he murmured.

Casimir clicked his teeth and sighed, shaking his head. Gav started like someone had prodded him with a red-hot brand.

"What?" he squeaked.

Casimir gestured to the dress. "I am consumed," he said, "by an intense professional jealousy. Look at it! It's beautiful, I'm disgusted."

Some switch inside of Gav flipped, and all his gears started turning the other way.

"That dress, in your flat," he said. "You made it?"

"I did," said Casimir, regarding him sidelong. "Although by comparison, I'm not certain one could even call it a dress. A disgrace, perhaps."

"I thought it was very pretty."

"Very pretty? Are you trying to insult me?"

"All right, don't get your knickers in a twist."

"If you want to know about the state of my knickers, Mr Free, you're going to have to start being a good deal nicer to me," said Casimir, twinkling.

"I don't think so," said Gav.
"No?"

"No."

"I'm sorry to say that you have somewhere acquired a false impression."

"And I'm sorry to say that I saw quite clearly your expression after Dan hit you in the mouth, and I am, in fact, completely correct."

Casimir looked him over, said, "We're going to miss our train," and walked off.

"That means I win!" Gav called, puffed up like a jaybird.

"The game isn't over," Casimir tossed back.

"Shall I leave the two of you alone?" Dan said to Gav, in English. "Bloody third wheel all of sudden, aren't I."

Gav rolled his eyes, trailing after Casimir. "Don't be ridiculous, B. He's only doing it to annoy you."

"Yeah? Then what're you doing it for?"

"To annoy you, obviously."

"Grand, cheers, thanks. It's worked, by the way, I'm annoyed."

Gav made his smuggest face, which Dan rewarded with a friendly smack on the cheek. Gav pouted, rubbing his face.

"Ow," he said.

"See how annoyed I am?"

"That's not very nice!"

"No, it isn't, and neither is you flirting with bloody Casanova Dubois."

"Vous parlez de quoi là bas, les amoureux?" Casimir said, casting a baleful look over his shoulder.

"Rien de rien, casse-toi," said Dan.

"Cas-imir," he corrected.

Gav snorted. Dan glared at him.

"Can't believe I'm going to be stuck on a bloody train with this for six bloody hours," he muttered.

Gav clapped him on the shoulder. "Chin up, B. If he gets too annoying, you might get away with punching him in the mouth again!"

That, Dan thought, was a heartening idea indeed.

The train ride was only slightly less unbearable than Dan had anticipated. Gav and Casimir spent about the first two hours chattering like magpies, tip-toeing round the edge of flirting with only
occasional interruptions from Dan keeping them from plunging in headfirst. Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately), Casimir's sleepless night and morning gin caught up with him before it came to fisticuffs, and he slept for most of the rest of the trip. Too annoyed to trust himself with conversation, Dan pretended to sleep, as well—although after a couple more hours, he dozed off in earnest.

Whenever he was nudged awake by the jostling of the train, he found Gav fidgeting or reading the paper or, towards the end, simply staring out the window as France trundled by.

They arrived at Lyon Station in good time, stiff and sore but none the worse for wear. The station clock tower was just striking four as they collected up their bags and forged out into the crowd.

"Dubois, I assume you'll not be coming with us to see Mrs James," Dan said, once they were settled on the curb awaiting a cab.

"You would be correct in that assumption, Daniel," he said, and yawned. "Regardless even of the woman's murderous dislike for me, I have some affairs of my own to attend to. Certain friends would skin me alive if they found out I'd come back to Paris without seeing them."

"What a tragedy that would be," Dan drawled.

"You have no idea," said Casimir.

"I hope they can spare you for an evening," Gav said. "I'm not terribly keen on seeing Mrs James, either."


"Perhaps an hour or two could be spared," said Casimir, calculating. "If it were needed."

"Needed, I don't know about, but it's certainly wanted."

"Oh, is it?"

"Is it?" Dan hissed. His fist clenched on the handle of his luggage. Gav surreptitiously kicked him in the shin.

"Yes," he said. "If we're going to be working together, I think we ought to be better friends."

"To that, I would not object—although I may not have the only say in the matter."

"Dan's all right with it, aren't you, Dan?"

"I damn well—"

Gav kicked him again, a warning in his expression.

"...Am," Dan finished lamely.

"With such an enthusiastic endorsement, how could I refuse?" said Casimir, gleaming like silver.

"Could you excuse us for just one moment?" said Dan, taking Gav's arm and pulling him aside.

"Have fun, don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Casimir sang after them.

"Dan—stop it, come on, we'll never get a cab at this rate, would you—oy, stop it."

Gav wrenched his arm out of Dan's grip. Nowhere in Lyon Station could be called private, but Dan
had at least managed to get them out of Casimir's earshot.

"Would you mind telling me what the bloody hell you're playing at?" Dan said.

"What's got into you all of a sudden?"

"What's got into me? When you're talking about wandering off alone with Dubois, after you said we'd stick together—when you're batting your bloody eyelashes at him like a damn—"

"Don't finish that sentence."

"I won't! But I swear on my life, you'd better have a good bloody reason for all this."

"I have, thanks. I've got a lot of ground to cover, and Dubois' simply too good at pressing your buttons, as evidenced by the tantrum you're throwing right now."

"Come again?"

Gav made a frustrated gesture. "He's playing you like a damn fiddle, B, and it's starting to get in the way. Every time I ask him questions, he flirts with me, you get upset and derail the conversation, and then I've got to start all bloody over again! I can't get anything out of him with you about."

"Get anything out of him, or get anything into him?"

"Daniel Charles Gruchy," Gav snapped, offended. "That isn't funny. It's entirely business and you damn well know it."

"I damn well don't. What's happened in the last six hours, that you've suddenly gone all buddy-buddy with him?"

"First of all, it wasn't in the last six hours, and second of all, I haven't gone all buddy-buddy. I'm working. His vanity's already got him in more trouble than he could get himself out of. I'm not too proud to play to it if I've got to, but I can't have you getting in the way anymore. So you go and check in with Mrs James, set your mind at ease on that, and I'll meet you at the hotel afterwards."

"At the hotel?"

"I don't know how long Dubois' going to take circumnavigating his answers, and it wouldn't do to have you come barging in before I'm finished—and it certainly wouldn't do to have you turn up after I've already gone, 'cos I'm planning on getting him as drunk as I possibly can. I'll meet you at the hotel. We'll use the same one as last time, for simplicity's sake. Oh, and if you could take my bags along with you to get checked in and tell the concierge to expect me, that'd be grand."

"Gav, I really don't bloody like this."

"I had noticed! I really don't bloody like you going behind my back, but that didn't stop you, now did it?"

"You can't keep on using that as an excuse to stamp all over my feelings! I get, all right, that it was upsetting, and a breach of your trust, and I get that you want to get back at me for it, but for God's sake, Gav, at least pretend to give a shit about our bloody relationship!"

Gav blinked. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Two gears met in his head, turning his machinery onto a different track.

"Dan," he said, wounded. "Have you really got that little faith in me?"
A fist squeezed round Dan's heart. He rubbed his face, taking deep breaths in a vain attempt to calm
down.

"I haven't got much faith to spare on anything at the moment, B," he said. "But—you're right, of
course. I'm . . . blowing this out of all proportion. I s'pose I'm just a bit wound up, that's all."

"I'll say. Honestly. I get halfway chatty with a bloke and suddenly you're off your head."

"It's not just a bloke, it's—no, never mind, drop it. Just be careful, B, all right? Be careful."

"I'll do my best not to accidentally sleep with him," Gav drawled.

"That's not what I meant!"

"Isn't it?"

It absolutely had been, but he wasn't about to let Gav know that.

"Look," he said, leaning in and lowering his voice, "Back when I got stuck with him, yeah, with
those chaps from the molly-house? I put one word wrong, and he—well, let's just say I'm damn
lucky there were three other people in the room, or else I don't know what would've happened."

A light kindled in Gav's eyes. "What word?"

"I . . . don't know if I should tell you," said Dan, drawing back.

"Dan, come off it. I've got to know what not to say, haven't I? Otherwise I might say it by accident."

"You'd damn well better not."

"What? B, why're you yelling at me, B? I don't even know what the word is!"

"Hang on," said Gav, his eyes narrowing. "You've said it in front of him, since."

"Oh yes, now I remember, and I nearly pissed myself, and if you'd seen the look on his face, you
would've, too."

"What I saw was him turn up the next morning with—"

Gav cut himself off. He looked back over his shoulder at Casimir, who had managed to flag down a
cab and was chatting amicably with the driver. Another gear clicked into place in Gav's head,
spinning him up to a glittering whirr.

"Dan?" he said. "If I promise I won't call him chéri at all, will that set your mind at ease?"

"It would have, except now you've got that look on your face."
"Grand, then I'll meet you back at the hotel. Don't wait up for me."

"I reckon I will, though. Oy, Gav, I love you."

"Yep, you as well. Best of luck with Mrs James, let me know what you find out!"

He spun on his heel and coasted away, waving over his shoulder. Dan stood, immobilized by the ever-growing pain in his chest, and watched him climb up into the cab with Casimir.

Oozing out from the cracks in his heart came the certainty that, someday soon, one way or another, Gav wasn't going to come back.
Samantha James was a slip of a woman, but with such a leathery toughness to her that she more reminded Dan of a whip than a waif. She carried a toddler on one hip, and another little girl—five or six, by Dan's estimate—peaked out from behind her skirts.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked. Her French was hard-edged. Dan took a gander and responded in English.

"I hope so," he said. "Are you Mrs James?"

Her eyes narrowed, her delicate chin lifted.

"I am," she said. She was, as he had suspected, American.

"I'm Tiffany," the little girl said. Mrs James glared at her, but Dan smiled.

"Hallo, Miss Tiffany," he said. "I'm Mr Gruchy. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"You're really tall."

"D'you know, you're absolutely right! I'm so tall, sometimes I bang my head on things, and it hurts a lot." He rubbed his forehead, wincing. "Then I wish I was shorter."

"How did you get so tall? Did they stretch you out on the rack?"

"Er . . . no," said Dan. "I just grew this way."

"You look like you got all stretched out. Did they put your—to get you tall, did they tie your feet to one horse, and then your hands to a different horse, and then—"

"Tiffany, don't bother the man," said Mrs James. "I'm sorry, I don't know where she gets it from."

"I don't mind. A child's got a right to be curious. Miss Tiffany, I can categorically say that neither horses nor racks were involved in my getting tall. When I was your age, I ate lots of beans and it turned all my bones into beans. So then, once summer came about, I sprouted! Just like a beanstalk, and that's why I'm so tall."

Tiffany nodded solemnly. "Oh, I see," she said. "Are you here about Daddy? Lots and lots of men come to see about Daddy."

"Tiffany, go and finish the dishes," Mrs James snapped.

"Mama, what? What did I do?"

"Right now, or it'll be a spanking!"

The toddler's face twisted at the sharpness of her tone. Brandishing an ugly wooden doll, she hollered, "No! No!"

"Hush, Alice," Mrs James said, bouncing the child on her hip. "Tiffany, right now."

Tiffany stamped her foot, then stormed off into the house. The toddler continued wailing. Mrs James paid her no mind, beyond continuing to bounce her.
"Who are you and what do you want?" she said to Dan.

"Well, madam, as I said, my name is Mr Gruchy, I—I work with Mr Gavin Free, the detective?"

"Who? Alice, hush, for God's sake."

The toddler screamed louder and kicked out. She threw the wooden doll against the lintel with splintering force.

"Whoops, that won't do," said Dan, stooping to retrieve it. He handed it back to Alice. "There you are, wouldn't want you to lose that."

Alice stopped her bawling instantly, adopting an expression of such scorching distrust that it singed Dan's moustache. He smiled.

"Don't worry," he said. "I know a look a bit scary, but I don't bite."

Alice remained unamused. Mrs James plucked the doll from Dan's hand and gave it back to Alice.

"What do you want, Mr Gruchy?" she said again.

"It—well, it is actually to do with your husband," he said. "Perhaps we ought to discuss it inside."

"He isn't here, and I haven't seen him in more than a month," she said. "I talked to the police a dozen times already. Good evening, sir."

"Wait wait wait, Mrs James, please, we have reason to believe—look, I've seen him, two days ago!"

Mrs James stopped halfway through closing the door. She eyed Dan up. She put Alice down and shooed her away.

"Go and help your sister," she said. Alice toddled off, and Mrs James straightened up. "Who did you say you worked with again, Mr Gruchy?"

"Mr Gavin Free. He was . . . er, you might've heard of him from that bad business at the theatre. That your husband was also involved in. About a month ago?"

"I'm familiar with it. Is Mr Free here, at the moment?"

"Not at the moment, no, but he is in town."

"If he can be bothered to pay a personal visit, I will gladly talk to him. But I don't talk to flunkies, Mr Gruchy, and you can tell him that. Especially not about my husband."

"I'm not a—flunky, I'm his partner," said Dan, stung. "Mrs James, we think you and your daughters might be in danger."

"Because of something Chad said to you?"

"Yes."

"If it's about our financial situation, then it's taken care of."

"It's nothing to do with that whatsoever."

Chewing her lip, Mrs James glanced back into the flat. She sized Dan up a second time.
"What kind of danger?" she asked.

Dan also glanced over his shoulder. He kept his voice low and conspiratorial.

"He had reason to believe that the other . . . er . . . that the people he's fallen in with might wish to do you harm."

"Which people?"

"Specifically one Monsieur Brouillard."

She frowned. Her shoulders tensed, her eyes flicking over Dan's face as though searching for some sign of deceit. In the middle of a breath, she pulled up short, blinking. She shook her head. Her face smoothed, and when she spoke, all the concern had dropped from her voice.

"I see. Did Chad send you here, or did you come on your own?"

"He . . . he seemed terribly frightened for your safety, so I—we took it upon ourselves to check," said Dan. "Are you feeling all right, Mrs James?"

"I'm exhausted from keeping a household on my own on a disgracefully small maintenance, not that you care. What was he trying to get from you?"

"Sorry?"

She waved a hand. "My husband, Mr Gruchy, is an actor, and he's perfected the skill of dragging people around by their pity. He did it to me, he did it to that rich faggot, and it looks like you fell for it, too."

Dan clenched his jaw so hard his ears rang. He dug his fingernails into his palms until they bruised the bones. His whole body trembled with the effort of keeping himself in check.

"Regardless, Mr Free and I felt it warranted investigation," he said through his teeth. "Since children's lives were on the line."

"My children are fine and so am I. Whatever Chad wanted from you, it had nothing to do with us, I guarantee it. If you're not satisfied with that, you can come back with Mr Free in the morning. Good evening, Mr Gruchy."

"Good evening, Mrs James."

She shut the door in his face. He stood for another half minute just fighting down the insensate rage boiling in his veins.

"Why're you surprised, Dan?" he muttered to himself, rubbing his face. "Why're you ever surprised?"

Since himself didn't have an articulated answer, the both of them headed back to the hotel.

---

It was ten o'clock before Gav got back. In the intervening hours, Dan had sent a telegram to Gabriel informing her of their new hotel, and then, lacking anything else to distract him, run the gamut from furious to exhausted to anxious, ramping up towards a full-blown panic. When the hotel room door finally opened and Gav shuffled in, Dan was seized by such a profound relief that it made his knees
"There you are," he said, wobbling to his feet. "How'd your interview with Dubois go?"

"Good, good, it was good," said Gav, placing his hat on the stand by the door. He struggled to get his coat off, then took great care hanging it up. "Job done, all's well, could really do with a sleep."

"Right? At least there's some good news, then. I didn't get much at all out of Mrs James, other than the fact that she and her daughters are still alive and well. She said we could come back in the morning, if you want to have a go."

"Oh? Brilliant. Well done, Dan, spiffing job."

He yawned, blinked, shook his head. Unsteady, he wandered a few feet into the room and stopped again. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright. Something heavy wrapped round Dan's heart.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked. "You look a bit feverish."

"No no, nothing of the sort, 's just a warm night out, 's all," said Gav, waving a hand. "And—very tired. 'S been such a long day, can't blame me for being—being a bit tired."

His voice caught on a hiccup. He pressed his knuckles to his lips, swaying. Recognition burst through Dan's head like a blaze of sunlight through clouds.

"Are you drunk?"

"Might've had one or two," Gav admitted. "Or . . . p'raps closer to five." He paused, then said in a sly voice, "It was seven."

"Good God, are you all right?"

"Fine fine fine, I'm fine, Dan, I'm fantastic. All took place over the course of three and half hours, I'm not even tipsy."

He hiccuped again and steadied himself against the wall.

"So, let me see if I'm reading this situation correctly," said Dan, folding his arms. "You went home with Dubois, for the express purpose of getting him drunk so he'd talk to you; but instead, he got you drunk."

Gav held up a finger. "Erm, first of all, I got me drunk, and second: I'm not drunk."

"Come here, you bell-end," Dan sighed, smiling despite himself. Gav weaved across the room and into Dan's arms, where he promptly buried his face in Dan's shoulder. He was hearth-warm, sunshine-warm, solid and breathing.

"You smell like my nan," Dan told him.

Gav giggled. "I fell in a sofa."

"I remember that sofa. You're lucky to have escaped alive. Out of curiosity, what exactly were you drinking?"

"Wine," he said. "'S very good wine. And then p'raps a bit of gin."

"How much gin, p'raps?"
Gav held up his thumb and forefinger about three inches apart.

"All at once?"

"Two of them," Gav mumbled. "Last hour or so."

"Gav, one of them is three drinks at least, you pillock."

"Is it?" He giggled again. "Oh, whoops."

"Why on earth would you drink that much in one go?"

"Seen you do it. 'S how much Casimir was having. Thought it was, d'you know, normal and all."

"Bloody hell. Was he breathing when you left?"

"Wasn't even tipsy. 'M not either. Dan, I'm not drunk, I'm just very very tired."

"You are, in fact, very drunk, Mr Free."

"Naaahhhhh."

"Say she sells sea shells by the seashore."

"She sells she shh . . . shit. You're a prick. Why would you do that to me?"

"I'm detecting, and what I've detected is: you're drunk, B."

Gav nuzzled into his shoulder and sighed.

"B?" he mumbled. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you as well, B," said Dan. The ache in his chest swelled out again, sharper with each beat of his heart.

Gav lifted his head, pressed a kiss to Dan's neck. A shock ran through him, lighting his blood afire. His arms tightened on Gav, who pressed against him and kissed his neck again. Warmth flooded him. He ducked his head and caught Gav's lips with his. Gav collapsed against him, clinging, his kisses growing hungrier with every passing second. Dan clung right back, drowning in the heat of him, one arm round his waist and a hand tangled in his hair. Clumsy fingers fumbled with the button on Dan's trousers. Though it pained him, he pulled back.

"Gav, no," he said.

Gav whined, went in for another kiss, and was summarily stopped.

"I mean it," Dan insisted. "Not when you're drunk. We've got rules about this."

"They're your bloody rules, though. I meant—they're rules for you, they don't apply to me."

"Yes, they do, you've just . . . never come home drunk before."

"Dan, come off it, it's been so long, I miss you desperately."

"I know, B, and if you were sober, I would in a heartbeat, but—you're drunk, and I can't be sure if this is . . . something you'll regret, come morning."
"Morning-Gav can go to Hell for all I care."

"Don't talk about Morning-Gav that way, I love him just as much as I love you. When you're sober, if you still want to, then God, yes, I'm all yours, but... not 'til you're sober."

"Dan, but Dan, I can't when I'm sober, I—I think too much, I can't stop thinking, about me and about my—and it's all a mess, I just—I just—I can't, B, I can't."

Dan caught his chin—and his wrist, because his hand was even more impatient than the rest of him.

"Gav?" he said sternly. "If you can't do it sober, you can't do it at all. Trust me. That way, madness lies."

"Yeah, but that was you," Gav said. "That was you, this is me, it's different."

"That isn't a chance I'm willing to take, B."

"It's not even your bloody chance!"

"The answer's no, B. Come morning, we'll take a rain-check."

"It'll be gone in the morning, I'll be broken again. Damn it all, Dan, why won't you—why won't—I just want you to fuck me, Dan, is that so damn much to ask?"

Arousal landed a solid gut-punch on Dan, winding him. He bit his cheek and shut his eyes, breathed deep, stayed resolute.

"When you're drunk, it is," he said. "I'm sorry, Gav. The answer is no. I'll very happily come to bed with you, and kiss you 'til you pass out, but fucking's off."

"Wretched tease," Gav accused, forlorn.

"I know, I'm horrendous. Have you had any water? You look like you could do with a drink of water."

"Don't want any."

"Have some anyway. And an aspirin, while you're at it. You'll thank me in the morning."

"If I drink water, will you let me suck you off?"

"Good grief, B, give it a rest," said Dan, going pink from toe to tip.

"Aww, there it is," Gav cooed, draping himself on Dan. "Gone all pink and lovely for me."

"Why must you be like this?"

"I've told you, I miss you terribly. Dan, lovely Daniel, it's just a wee little sucky-do, I've never minded them before, have I? Morning-Gav won't mind."

"Morning-Gav can decide that when I see him. And also, don't ever call it a sucky-do again, for God's sake. Come and have some water."

"You're so cruel to me," Gav moaned. His knees buckled, and Dan caught him round the waist to keep him off the floor. "What've I ever done to you, hm? When've I ever been so cruel?"
"If I started now, I might just get through the list by morning. Here, sit on the bed—there you are, now stay there whilst I go and get you your water, there's a lad—"

The moment he tried to straighten up, Gav dug his fingernails into the back of his neck.

"Dan, Dan, wait, don't go, please, don't go," he begged, his eyes filling with tears. "I can't—I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I know I'm awful and I don't deserve you, please don't leave, please."

"What're you on about? I'm coming right back, B, don't fret."

"I just—I just—I never do anything for you, and I want to, I want you to be happy, but the—but it's—I don't know what else to do, I haven't got anything else to offer. Except now I can't even. . . . You can—you can do whatever you want with me, Dan, I—I won't complain, 's for you, if it makes you happy, then. . . ."

Each word squeezed down tighter on Dan's heart until the pain became unbearable. He took Gav's face in his hands and kissed him chastely. The tears spilled down Gav's cheeks. Dan wiped them away with his thumbs.

"I'm happy when you're happy, Gav," he said. "And you've got plenty more to offer than just a—a receptacle for my cock, all right?"

Gav shook his head, trembling. "You're going to leave," he whispered. "You're going to leave me, and I'll deserve it, I know—I know, any day now, any minute now, I'm horrible, I'm horrible, inside and out, and you're seeing it now 'cos I can't—Dan, I wish you'd just fuck me, I want to be good for you, I want—I want—"

"B, I love you very much, and while sex is nice, it's not worth hurting you. I'm going to go and get you a water and an aspirin, so that tomorrow morning isn't as awful."

"I don't feel right. I feel—I feel all wrong, something's wrong, don't leave me."

"All right, all right, I hear you," said Dan, kneeling at his side. "What feels wrong?"

"I can't—I'm not . . . I'm not in my head. Dan? I'm not in here. I'm—a bit to the left. I think. I can't see properly, it's all gone—all blurry, and it's all spinny and my stomach feels wrong and it's so hot, it's too hot, I can't breathe, I can't. . . ."

"That sounds an awful lot like being very drunk. D'you want to take your shirt off? It'll help you be less hot."

"No—no, no, I don't want you to—you can't—don't look, don't look at me—"

"Easy, shh, easy, B. You can leave the undershirt on, all right? Then nothing will be . . . er, exposed. Will that be all right?"

Gav nodded, tearful, and Dan helped him out of his vest and shirt, then his shoes and socks.

"Better?"

"I—I don't know. I don't know, I can't tell. Something's wrong, Dan, something's wrong with me, I don't feel well."

"You're very drunk, and probably going to throw up. You'll be all right. I'm going to go and get you some water, and an aspirin, and I'll be back in a moment."
Though Gav whined and begged, Dan extracted himself from his grip. When he came back a minute later, water and aspirin in hand, Gav was flat on his back on the bed, scratching his chest. Dan sat down on the bed next to him and pulled his hand away.

"Oy, don't scratch. D'you think you can sit up and drink your water?"

Gav shook his head. He was still crying.

"I think you can. Come along, I'll help you—ups-a-daisy, there's a lad. See? You're all right."

"Dan? Dan, I'm . . . Dan, listen, listen, this's important."

"Have a sip of water. I'm listening."

Gav sipped the water. His eyes wouldn't open more than half way. His skin had gone from rose-pink to wax-white, and his face was scrunched with misery.

"I didn't sleep with him," he said. "Not at all. Not even a little bit."

"D'you know, I had guessed," said Dan. "Based on the level of randiness when you got here."

"Dan?"

"Yes, B."

"Don't let me forget."

"That you didn't sleep with him? I shan't."

Gav shook his head. He grabbed Dan's face, fell against him, spoke into his ear.

"Don't let me forget," he whispered.

"I won't, B, but you've got to tell me what it is I'm meant to help you remember."

At which point, Gav finally gave up the fight and threw up on him.
"Hey, there's a familiar face," said Dan, when Gav crawled out of bed. "Good morning, you. What priced head have you?"

"I'll survive," Gav grumbled. He poured himself a coffee—only two-thirds of it cream and sugar—and settled in at the breakfast table.

"Not feeling in need of a prairie oyster?"

"Don't, I'll be sick again."

"Sometimes that helps."

Gav shook his head. He wrapped his hands round his coffee cup and hunched down in his seat. He took a sip, winced, and set the cup down on the table.

"Think the aspirin helped," he said.

"What can I say? I know my hangovers."

Chewing his lip, Gav stared into the middle distance. He attempted another sip of his coffee. He ducked his head and cleared his throat.

"Dan?" he said. "Thanks. From . . . Morning-Gav. You were right. And I'm glad we didn't."

Although Dan's heart sank, he said, "No trouble at all, B. Honestly, I'm just happy you remember any of it."

"I remember all of it," Gav said, a half-second too quickly. A flicker of pain crossed his face. "Blurry, and—dislocated, but I remember it. I do remember it."

"That's a good sign, isn't it? I reckon if your memory can survive being that drunk, it can make it through just about anything."

Gav's face pinched. He curled further into himself, tense and miserable.

"Could we talk about something else, please?" he croaked.

"We can do that, if you need to. Although . . . I just want you to know that whatever it is, if there comes a time when you do want to talk about it, I'll be here. All right?"

Although Gav nodded, his expression gave it away as a purely performative concession.

"Right," Dan sighed. He drank some of his own coffee, wishing it was spiked with something more numbing than cream. "Have you got something else you'd like to talk about, or would you rather we didn't talk at all?"

"What did you get out of Mrs James?" Gav asked, unfolding.

"I was hoping for small-talk, but I s'pose I can't complain," said Dan. "Nothing, mostly. She's alive, the children are alive, she hasn't seen James since he ran off. And—I think I mentioned—she said we could come back this morning, if you wanted to talk with her."
"Did she seem frightened at all?"

"Well—it's difficult to say, honestly. She was certainly annoyed, perhaps overwhelmed, but that's to be expected, trying to raise two children without a . . . on her own. The children seemed all right, though. Physically and mentally. They didn't strike me as frightened."

"Good, good. Did she bring up having me come by, or did you?"

"Honestly, I haven't the foggiest. Sorry."

Gav waved him off. "Can't blame you for it. Did she seem like she had something else she wanted to say, then? That she was holding something back?"

Dan mulled it over, sipping his coffee. "She might've done. She got a bit odd, when I mentioned that she might be in danger. At first she was worried—I might go so far as to say frightened—but then she . . . she just wasn't anymore, for no reason that I could see. It was terribly odd. In the end, she came round to the same conclusion as you and Dubois, that James is playing the pity-game with us."

"Told you as much, didn't I. Speaking of, did you mention Dubois to her?"

"I didn't, but she used some intensely pejorative language about him regardless."

Gav glanced up at him and raised an eyebrow. Dan unclenched his fist, huffing out a breath.

"I'll bet you can guess what sort," he said.

"I've got a pretty good idea. You didn't do anything stupid, did you?"

"Managed to keep from shouting or hitting anyone. Speaking of doing stupid things, what'd you get from Dubois? Other than a hangover, of course."

Pursing his lips, Gav drummed his fingers on the table. He took a sip of his coffee. He propped his ankle on his knee and bounced his foot.

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing I believe, then."

"I assume you at least managed a bit of better friendliness, considering you came home calling him Casimir."

"I never!" Gav squeaked, going red.

"I'm afraid you did."

"Well—you've heard how he goes on, correcting you every time you call him something else. You can't blame me for—for adapting. For convenience's sake. For—you know, it's to our advantage if he thinks we're his friends, makes him more talkative."

Dan raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I'm sure. Although apparently not more honest, in which case one does wonder if there's any point in talking to him at all."

"I said I didn't believe anything he'd told me, I didn't say all of it was useless."
"All right then, did his lies circumscribe anything useful?"

Gav made a face, one eye scrunched up. His ears twitches to inaudible voices.

"One thing," he said. "I think—no, I don't know, it's not at all certain."

"I promise I won't tell anyone if you turn out to be wrong."

"Well . . . I get the impression he knew, in some capacity. He knew what Peake and them had planned for him, and it didn't bother him at all."

"So you reckon he's suicidal?"

"I reckon he wasn't concerned about whatever they had planned for him," Gav snapped. "Which indicates, yet again, that they didn't mean to kill him."

Dan raised his hands in surrender. "Fair play, seems sound enough to me."

Muttering under his breath, Gav rolled his shoulders. He drank his coffee, annoyed but at least lively about it. He scratched his chest, noticed himself doing it, and sat on his hand.

"We might as well go and talk to Mrs James," he said at last. "She probably knows something about Peake and them. Independent confirmation of how her husband got tangled up with the Théâtre, at least."

"Could very well do. Shall we go now, or—?"

"Now's as good a time as any," said Gav.

"So, what's our plan?" Dan asked, as the cab pulled away and the two of them mounted the front stairs to Mrs James' door in the townhouse.

"Well, Dan, I thought I might ask her a few questions, and see what her answers are."

"All right, I was just trying to keep on the same page. Sometimes there's a plan."

"I don't think I need a plan for a housewife, thanks," said Gav. He rapped on the door, then tucked his hands into his pockets.

"You never know," said Dan. "She seemed pretty formidable to me."

"That's 'cos you're categorically intimidated by women."

"Women are categorically intimidating! I don't know what you're on about."

"What d'you think they're going to do, talk you to death?"

"Some of them have got—very cutting wits."

"Yeah? So have I, and you're not intimidated by me. Don't seem much intimidated by Dubois, either, and he's got a wit that could go through steel."

"Look, no, that's different."
"How so?"

"Well—neither of you are women, are you? If you get too witty at me, I've got . . . options for rebuttal. I can't very well tell a woman to piss off if she annoys me, can I."

"No, I think you pretty well could."

"But she might laugh in my face!"

"And?"

"What, and?"

"Why d'you care if a woman laughs in your face?"

"You're trying to tell me that wouldn't bother you at all? Having someone insult you and laugh in your face?"

"I reckon it'd get me pretty well cheesed off, but I'm not intimidated by it."

"Yes, well, me getting pretty well cheesed off is the problem, isn't it."

A flicker of understanding crossed Gav's face, a flinch, a wince. He covered it admirably, shaking his head and folding his arms, clicking his tongue.

"Honestly, it's the greatest ongoing mystery of my career how you ever wound up married," he said.

At the end of his patience, Dan replied, "It's no wonder at all to me that you never did."

"Although I'm aware that was meant as an insult, I'm very pleased about the situation. What's taking Mrs James so long, anyway? D'you reckon she didn't hear?"

"Might not," said Dan.

Gav knocked again, firmer, and called out, "Mrs James? Are you at home?"

Again, there was no answer. Dan leaned over to peer in the window and found the curtains still drawn. He could hear nothing from the house, not a rustle, not a peep. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Tension ratcheted up his spine.

"Something isn't right," he said.

"D'you reckon she might be out?" said Gav, apprehensive.

"At nine o'clock on a Saturday?"

Gav tipped his head in allowance and eased back from the door. Dan edged up to it. It opened at a touch of the handle.

"Oh, that's not good," Gav whispered.

Dan glanced back at him, whey-faced and tense. "Stay here. If you hear anything amiss, or I'm not back in one minute, go for help."

Gav nodded. Dan steeled himself, let out a breath, and crept inside.

The silence was pervasive, consuming. As the door swung to behind him, the babble and clatter of
Paris was smothered out. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, his breath rattled in his throat. The
curtains left the house in perpetual dusk. Clutter littered the floors and furniture—all the standard
flotsam of small children, clothes and toys strewn about carelessly. A weight pressed on Dan's chest.
He swallowed.

The sitting room was empty. He moved along the wall, eyes keen, ears pricked. Every squeak of the
floorboards beneath his feet made him twitch. His hands trembled as though the air itself was
shivering. A foul smell curled around him in tendrils and wisps. Dread pooled heavy in his stomach.
He tightened his throat, clenched his teeth, hoped against all hope.

Holding his breath, he shuffled through the kitchen, past the dishes left half-washed in the sink, the
food left to spoil on the countertops. On the other side, there was a short corridor, a set of rickety
stairs, a door ajar. The stench folded round him, suffocating. He sidled up to the door and braced
himself.

He pushed the door open.

"Oh God!" he cried. He clapped a hand over his mouth and staggered back. He caught himself
against the wall, choking. Footsteps thudded towards him. He couldn't turn fast enough. His hands
fumbled, his feet tripped over themselves. A yellow haze filled his vision, heat curled sticky and
oppressive against his skin, the smell of blood and black powder, a piercing insect-whine.

He stopped Gav with an arm across the chest, but too late, too late.

"Dan, Dan, what's happened, what—"

His gaze flicked up to the study beyond. His face went white. His eyes glazed over. He took a single
shuddering breath. Dan heaved on him, struggling in vain to push him out of line of sight, while Gav
wound up tighter and tighter, trembling-shivering-buzzing and any moment now going to snap—

And then he wasn't.

"Well, that's a mess and a half," he said.

Dan went cold all over. Gav extracted himself from his grip and slipped by him, into the room. He
clasped his hands behind his back and cast a dispassionate eye over the scene.

"Remarkably similar to Christophe's, isn't it," he went on. "We've got the decapitation, the
disemboweling, and the dismemberment. Five quid says it was Brouillard. It's the lack of fine motor
coordination from being drunk—see here, he's left the fingers on the littlest one 'cos he hasn't got—"

Dan staggered out of the house. He barely made it down the front steps before he was struck
immobile. He couldn't breathe. The world spun. His knees threatened to give out and he braced
against the wall. His bones were full of lead shot and his flesh was full of ants, his head swarming
with steam and screeching metal. He squeezed his eyes shut.

A tiny arm, bloodied fingers curled like spider-legs, sawed off jagged just below the shoulder—

His stomach heaved. He barely managed to keep from being sick.

"Monsieur?"

Dan tensed up, prickling with the sensation of eyes on him. He flapped a hand at the interloper and
choked out, "Get the police," before his stomach heaved again.
"Sir, what exactly—"

"Three people are dead, get the police!"

There was a beat of silence, then a soft, "My God."

Dan pressed his forehead to the wall as the pedestrian ran off. He counted the pores in the brick, not daring to close his eyes. He couldn't stop shaking, couldn't settle his stomach's churning. He couldn't make himself move, even though Gav was still inside the house, even though Gav probably needed him, even though whatever grace he'd been granted had certainly run out by now and he would be stuck, frozen, amidst that horrible tableau... .

Dan tasted bile. His chest was caving in. His feet were nailed to the ground. Tears crawled down his face and dripped from the end of his nose.

He had no idea how long he stayed like that, trapped helpless between horror and fear. It was long enough, at least, for the police to arrive. He barely managed ten words of explanation before he dissolved into a shivering wreck and had to be escorted away. He fought the gentle hands on his arms until—like a miracle—Gav emerged from the house, neat and professional and not at all concerned. He came up to the pair of officers and brushed their hands off Dan's arms.

"Enough of that now, that's not necessary," he said. "Gruchy, are you quite all right?"

"Am I... ?" He still couldn't breathe. His eyes wouldn't focus. Every hair on his body stood on end, attuned to some gathering lightning he could not see.

"Clearly not, then," said Gav. "Officers, I assume you'll want a statement from the both of us?"

"Yes, sir," one of them said.

"Very well. I've seen everything I need to see here. I should like to stay with Gruchy, if at all possible—as you can see, he isn't well. Can't blame him, it's gruesome in there. I don't envy your people having to pick through it by hand, though admittedly I'm curious about a few unturned stones."

"Wait, I know you," the other officer said. "You're that English detective, aren't you?"

"One and the same," said Gav, twinkling. "And if you could take Mr Gruchy and me back to the station, I'll happily begin collaborating with your detectives on this."

"Yes, sir, right away," said the officer. "If you'll just follow me... ."

The officer started off. Gav put a hand on Dan's back and pushed him along like a hot air balloon. Dan's skin crawled underneath it.

"Gav?" Dan whispered.

"What?" said Gav.

"Are you all right?"

Gav frowned. "Yeah, why?"

Dan couldn't find a single thing to say to that, so he just shook his head and focused on not being sick.
Dan's interview was brief, although this was to be expected. Generally, the police focused on Gav, and only came back round to Dan when it became clear that London's Golden Boy was much more interested in getting on with his own investigations than in cooperating with the police. This time, though, once the police were done with Dan, Gav plopped himself down and started in on a meticulous accounting of the case thus far. The poor clerk they had taking notes struggled to keep up, while Dan struggled to keep from falling on the floor and screaming like a two-year-old.

_Tiny bodies on the floor—_

He put his head in his hands and took deep breaths, following the swirls in the grain of the floorboards.

"I suspect your killer is a man by the name of Brouillard," Gav was saying, with the air of wrapping things up. "I've seen his work before—were you about, for that business with the Théâtre des Variétés? The second death is the one I'm thinking of, the nastier one."

"I believe I know the one you mean, sir," said their interviewer, a lieutenant by the name of Durant. "The young stagehand?"

"Yes, that's the one. It was very much the same sort of scene. If he wasn't averse to killing a sixteen-year-old, it's not a far leap to children."

_Blood spattered on round-cheeked faces—_

Dan dug his fingernails into his scalp. His eyes came unfocused. His lungs would only fill halfway.

"We'll make a note of it," said Lieutenant Durant. "Do you have an idea of where this Brouillard may be?"

"Not at the moment, but we've been working on it, as I've told you."

"I see. Is there anything else you would like to state before you go?"

"Are we being officially commissioned by your section to work on this case?"

"I would have to speak with my superintendent, sir."

"Of course. Can we expect your cooperation with our own investigations, at least?"

"That depends heavily on what is requested."

"I'd like any records you have on the people involved with that business at the Théâtre. Going back as far as you can."

"That is likely protected information, and I would have to speak to my superintendent to get it for you."

"Do that, then," said Gav. He got to his feet and shook Durant's hand. "Thank you for your cooperation in this matter. I look forward to hearing from your superintendent when he's got those records together for me."

Durant adopted the smile of a man who had just traded out a small problem for a large one.

"I will see what can be done," he said.
"Merci. Come along, Gruchy, no call to linger."

Dan heaved himself to his feet. Gav strutted out of the room. On the threshold, Dan hesitated.

"Lieutenant Durant?" he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Will there be—that is to say, do you know who will be handling the funeral arrangements?"

"Most likely, it will be the next of kin, if we can find one. Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted to be sure someone was taking care of it. I wouldn't want. . . . Well, listen, if you can't find a next of kin, or—anyone else, I'd appreciate it if you'd contact me, that's all."

"I'll see what can be done," he said again, nonplused.

"Thank you," said Dan. "Good evening."

"Good evening, sir."

With that done, he followed Gav out.
Dan was roused from his stupor when Gav sat down on the bed next to him. He glanced over and faked a smile.

"Allo," he said.

"Allo, B," said Gav. "It's four hours you've been pretending to sleep, now, and I've run out of things to do without you. Probably ought to eat something, if you're feeling up to it."

"I don't know that I am."

"You could at least try."

Dan shook his head. His stomach was still churning. He swallowed down the nausea, looking somewhere other than Gav.

"I'd really rather not," he said.

"Tea, then; surely you can manage a cup of tea?"

"It's too hot for tea."

"Nonsense, no such thing. I'll put the kettle on for the both of us. There's some details that need hashing out, and I'd hate to make you do them on an empty stomach."

"If it's going to be details, my stomach's going to be empty rather quickly anyway."

"Oh, don't be like that. You didn't throw up while you were there, you won't do it now."

"Could you please be slightly less bloody cavalier about this? Could you at least pretend to have an ounce of human compassion?"

"I'm not being cavalier and I have got compassion, but it's facts, B. You ought to eat."

"Wish I hadn't helped with your bloody hangover. Might make you quieter."

"Dan, it's honestly very hurtful, Dan, when I try and look after you for once and you get upset with me. And you wonder why I never bother!"

Rubbing his face, Dan sighed. He couldn't find it in himself to sit up. Even closing his eyes for a moment had brought back visions of the ruined study, as though the image was painted on the backs of his eyelids.

"I don't know how you do it," he mumbled. "I don't know how you—how you survive it, honestly. I can't get that damn room out of my head, and—Christ alive, I can't imagine how much worse it'd be if I could see it clearly. I don't know how you can stand it."

Gav shrugged. "It's not as though it's always on my mind. So long as nobody brings it up, I can
manage to keep it all stowed away. You know, for the most part, except for occasional. . . ."

"Upending of the cabinets?"

"That's a good way of putting it, yes. Apart from that, I generally just think of other things."

"Like what?"

"Well, like the back of your hand, for one."

Dan snorted. Gav picked up his hand and kissed it.

"Oy, Dan. What's the back of *my* hand look like?"

"I can see it, right there."

"Yeah, and so can I, whenever you do it. Not *physically*, of course, but it amounts to the same thing. Come on, give it a go."

Sighing and rolling his eyes, Dan held up Gav's hand and looked it over.

"Looks like a hand," he said. "Five fingers, all accounted for. Knuckles to go with. Appears to be attached to a wrist."

"Nah, you can do better than that."

"A twiggy little wrist, with little spaghetti fingers."

"Spaghetti fingers?"

Dan lifted his head and kissed the back of Gav's hand. "They're all right, though."

"Sit up, come on, you great loaf," said Gav, tugging on him. "I'll not have you wasting away in bed all day. Up you get, *uuuuuuuuup* you get."

Dan relented and sat up, since it was clear Gav wouldn't be able to pull him upright on his own. Gav kissed his cheek. Dan made a face.

"Thanks," he said. "Gav, look, don't take this the wrong way, but . . . I've got some concerns, about you, and about—what happened back there. Or didn't happen. I mean, it was . . ."

"It was certainly odd."

"I was going to say frightening."

"Surely not."

"A bit, B."

"Be that as it may, I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth. It's a damn blessing, from where I'm sitting."

"I'd feel a lot better about it if we knew who'd gifted you the horse."

Gav wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, well, can't have everything, can you. Are you all right?"

The instinctive *of course* died in Dan's throat before he could even open his mouth. He extracted his
hand from Gav's, pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms round them. A shivering
started in his chest and coursed out through him. His eyes stung, his sinuses prickled.

"We made it in time," he croaked, staring through his own feet. "We got here in time to save them,
and I—I just walked away. I could've saved them, if I'd just—if I hadn't—"

"You couldn't possibly have known."

"I could, though! James said it would happen, he told us it would happen, even who'd do it, and—
who's to say it's not because I turned up? What if Bones—or whoever was keeping an eye out, what
if they saw me, what if I—what if—"

"They aren't dead 'cos of you, B. Put that out of your head."

"You don't know that! You can't possibly know that. God, this is all my fault, I should've known, I
should've done something, but I—I left them there. I left them there to die, I left those children there
to die. . . ."

He choked off, burying his face in his knees just before the tears spilled over. He hissed his breaths
through his teeth, seized by such an all-consuming pain that he couldn't move. Gav put a gentle hand
on his back and he flinched.

"Dan," he said softly.

"God damn it, I need a drink!" Dan burst out. His voice cracked. He dug his fingers into his thighs,
but the pain wasn't enough to resettle him, to quell the ache in his chest and the unbearable clarity of
his thoughts.

Gav rubbed his back, like a schoolteacher unsure of how to properly comfort a distraught pupil.
"Please don't. It wouldn't help."

Sniffling, choking on sobs, Dan nodded. He raised his head and wiped his face, gritted his teeth until
he found a shred of composure.

"I know," he said thickly. "I know, and God, Gav, I'm trying, but it's just so damn hard. It's so damn
hard, I just want—just a bloody hour of not having to think about it, a damn hour of not having to
think at all!"

"But that isn't how it works, B. You think anyway, and it makes you twice as miserable as when
you're sober. Then in the morning, nothing's been solved, and you're hungover on top of it."

Dan rubbed at his face. His tongue was dry as cotton, his throat itching. He sniffled and coughed.

"I always think it'll be different, for some reason," he said, disgusted. "Somewhere in the back of my
head, I always think it'll help, even though I know it won't, 'cos I'm an idiot. I just wish it would. I
just wish something would."

Gav's hand stilled on Dan's back. Dan looked to him and saw his face drawn with thought, with
pain. His heart skipped a beat.

"Gav?" he said.

"It . . . isn't your fault, B," Gav said. "I don't know how much that helps, but—it genuinely isn't."

"It genuinely is."
"No," said Gav. He took a breath. "It's mine. It's my . . . fault. That this happened. I was so caught up in not falling for James's pity-game that I—I got it wrong. I didn't listen to him when he said his family was in danger, and I didn't listen to you when you said we ought to do something about it. I went off with—with Casimir, instead of coming with you, where I could've been of help. I made that decision. I was . . . derelict in my duties, as a detective. This isn't your fault, B. It's mine."

"Stop, come off it."

Gav shook his head. "Dan, you know how much I hate being wrong. It bloody kills me. But I hate seeing you like this more. I don't want you to wind up drinking again. I'd—I'd rather be wrong than have you go back there."

Choked by the lump in his throat, Dan could only fold Gav in his arms and bury his face in his shoulder, fighting down another wave of tears. Gav hugged him back, squeezing tight.

"I'm sorry," Gav said. "For all of this. For every bit of it."

"Enough of that," Dan managed. "Just—be here for a moment."

"I'm here, Dan," he said. "I'm here."

Just after dinner, a telegram and a letter arrived along with the evening paper. Gav took the letter and gave Dan the telegram, which was from Gabriel. It read:

ALL'S WELL HERE. STANDING BY TO PULL YOUR ARSE OUT OF THE FIRE. KEEP ME POSTED.

—G.

"Bless her," Dan said to himself, shaking his head.

"What's that?" Gav asked.

"Gabriel being Gabriel. What've you got?"

Gav brandished the letter. "Casimir being Casimir."

"Oh no, what is it now?"

"Apparently someone involved has got loose lips, 'cos the press have got hold of the fact that we're on the case. It's got to have been a policeman, as well, to judge by the amount he knows."

"Damn and blast, it's in the papers already?"

"Here, check," said Gav, tossing the paper to Dan. "Unless he gets a different paper than we do."

"Possible, but I'll—oh look, here it is, plastered all over the front bloody page. Did you even glance at it before chucking it at me?"
"B, I was reading the letter, B, I can't read two things at once!"

"All right, all right. What's Casimir got to say about it?"

"Standard faff, condolences, apologies. Says if we need anything, he'll be happy to help."

"Do we need anything from him? Say no."

"I can't categorically state that we won't need anything from him. Not until I know his level of involvement, anyway."

"But as of right now?"

"Nah."

"Good."

"You're not still jealous, are you?"

"It's the furthest bloody thing from my mind right now, B."

Gav gave him a dubious look, but didn't press the issue. Dan hid his rapidly warming cheeks behind the paper, skimming the article about the murders. As he read, his stomach sank and his blood cooled.

"Bloody hell, you're right about there being a leak in the police," he said. "Must've been one of the ones we talked to, as well, 'cos they've mentioned about the Théâtre."

"They what?" Gav cried, affronted.

Dan handed it back to him. "See for yourself."

As Gav read, his hands clenched until they threatened to tear the paper.

"That was said in confidence," he growled. "If I see that damn clerk again, I'll wring his little neck!"

"Steady on, B. You don't know it was the clerk, and I hardly think it calls for any wringing of necks. They didn't even mention Bones, which I'd think would be the important bit."

Gav slammed the paper down hard enough to make Dan and everything on the table jump.

"It's the principle of the thing, Daniel," he said, restrained.

Dan raised his hands in surrender. His arms had broken out in gooseflesh.

"All right, understood," he said. "Just please don't wring my neck, either."

"Not to worry," said Gav. "So long as you don't go spilling confidential details to people with no business knowing them, I won't have to."

"That's not even remotely reassuring, B."

Gav blinked, wrinkled his nose, and shook his head as though a fly had landed on his cheek.

"No," he said vaguely. "No, it isn't. Sorry, B. Obviously I won't be wringing any necks, that's barbaric. Don't know what came over me."
"That's . . . that's all right. You've had a difficult few days."

"I s'pose I have. I s'pose that's all it is."

"I reckon so," said Dan. "I'm sure the hangover isn't helping, either. I always get grouchy when I'm hungover."

"That you do."

"Are you—sorry, I know I ask this much too much, and it must be infuriating by now, but—are you feeling all right?"

"I feel . . . fine," he said, shrugging. "Bit tired, perhaps a bit frustrated, but otherwise—fine."

"And just now?"

"Just now, what?"

"Did you feel fine just now, when you were yelling?"

"I wasn't yelling."

"You did, a bit."

"I . . ." His eyes went glassy. He shook his head again, pressed the heel of his hand to his temple. "Did I?"

Dan's stomach bunched up under his lungs, squeezing half the air out of them. Something hairy and primal at the base of his skull made his legs twitch.

"You did, B," he said, as gently as he could. "D'you . . . not remember?"

"No, I remember, just not quite. . . ." He trailed off. He rubbed his eye, harder than was good for it.

"Oy, ease up on the eye, would you? You'll put it out, doing that."

Gav made a face and sat on his hand. "Right. No, you're right. It just—looked a bit funny. A bit out of focus. It's probably only the hangover, anyway. I'm sure it's fine."

"I'm sure," said Dan.

At the insistence of the deep foreboding in his belly, he took the paper back.

Dan was woken in the small hours of the morning by a rhythmic clicking sound.

He propped himself up on an elbow, rubbing at his eyes. The low rumble of Paris filled the spaces in the sound, a bubbling surface that hid silence beneath. The room was dark, lit only by the ambient lamplight outside. There was cold space on the bed next to him, empty.

Standing at the hotel room door, turning the locked handle over and over again, was Gav.

"B, what're you doing?" Dan mumbled. His voice was rusty with sleep, his eyes struggling to focus.

Gav didn't answer, didn't so much as turn his head. His shoulders were slumped, head bent to his
task, his new cotton pyjamas hanging limp off his wiry frame. The door handle rattled, a mechanical click, ka-click, ka-click, ka-click like the ticking of a watch.

Something heavy coiled up in the pit of Dan's stomach. Every hair on his body stood on end. His sluggish heart kicked up to a thunder.

"Gav?" he said.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click, like any moment the lock would rattle loose and he could be on his way. Dan's innards bunched together and tried to crawl out of him. He gulped. Steeling his nerves, he slipped out of bed. The floor was cold under his feet, the night air cool against his bare skin. Still, Gav didn't look up, didn't change his attitude in the least. Dan crept towards him, hands sweating, guts in tangles.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

"Gav, it's Dan," he said as he approached. His voice was thready, trembling. "I'm just coming over to you, now. Are you awake? Can you hear me?"

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

Dan sidled along the wall until he could see Gav's face. It was blank as a slate, his eyes open and glassy. He was wax-white, breathing so slowly that Dan could barely see it. His arm was the only thing that moved, a simple lever from the elbow down. His hand was clenched white-knuckled on the door handle.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

"All right," Dan said. It was hard to speak with his heart in his throat. "All right, so I reckon you're just . . . sleep-walking, and that's what this is. I reckon that's all. I'm just going to come over and— and wake you up, now. And then we'll both go back to bed and laugh about this in the morning. All right, Gav?"

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

"Fuck me running," Dan muttered. He took a deep breath. He bent his knees, readied his right hook, and sidled towards Gav.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

The noise was like fingernails on the back of his neck. His pulse pounded in his ears. Prepared to leap back at the first sign of violence, he stretched out one trembling hand and, as gently as he could, touched Gav's arm.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka—

It wasn't like waking up. The moment Dan's fingers touched him, Gav just stopped, like a machine, like a switch somewhere had been flipped. He didn't blink. His hand did not unclench from the door handle. His breathing did not change.

Dan gritted his teeth and swallowed down screams. His whole arm broke out in a cold sweat. He forced himself to wrap his hand round Gav's biceps, to get a better grip on him. The muscles beneath the cotton sleeve were steel-cable taut.

"Come—come back to bed, Gav," Dan croaked. "Come on, let's . . . leave the door alone, yeah?
Nowhere to be at this hour."

Thought it made his stomach crumple like a tin can, he put his free hand on Gav's other shoulder. Gav's eyes stayed fixed straight ahead, all the angles of his body pinned in place. It was only when Dan manually turned him, tugging his hand off the door handle, that his arm went limp. Nothing else changed, not his eyes, not his face, not his breathing. Dan guided him back to bed, step by shuffling step, sat him down, laid him down, tucked him in. At no point did Gav wake up.

Dan went back to his own side of the bed and climbed in. He lay down on his side, head pillowed on his hands, and watched the slow swell of Gav's shoulders as he breathed.

He didn't sleep a wink the whole rest of the night.
"B, you look awful," Gav said, settling down at the breakfast table with his second cup of coffee. "Sleep poorly?"

Dan yawned. "Hardly at all. Might have to resort to more coffee, if you've got plans for the day."

"Such plans. Have another coffee. Maybe two."

With a sigh and a resigned nod, Dan got up to pour himself another cup. His bones had doubled their weight overnight, his head filled with some sloshing grey fluid. Gav watched him go, idly curious.

"Not as bloody young as I used to be," Dan grumbled. "Was a time I could stay up all night and not have no consequences whatsoever."

"Was it nightmares?" Gav asked. "You haven't had any of them in a while. Wouldn't surprise me, given yesterday's horribility. Horrib—hor—what?"

"Horribility, yeah. And no, it wasn't nightmares."

"I s'pose that's good."

Dan hesitated. He wrinkled his nose, wiggled his moustache, and returned to the table with his coffee.

Carefully, he said, "Actually, it was you."

"Me? What'd I do?"

"I think you were sleepwalking. Or something."

"That's ridiculous, I don't sleepwalk."

"You haven't done, but you did last night. I'm guessing you don't remember it."

"No, not..."

He trailed off. Dan forgot how to breathe. Gav frowned into his coffee, his eyes distant. Dan's hand, quite of its own accord, grasped his butter knife.

"I... dreamt something," Gav murmured. "Terribly strange dream. There was a door—not a door I'd ever seen, more like—more like every door I've ever seen. All of them at once. As though someone told me, there's a door, and nothing else. And I had to... go somewhere. I had somewhere to be, but I didn't know where. Not urgently, not... but the door wouldn't open. I couldn't work out how to—no, that's not right, either. I knew how to open it. But..."

"But?" said Dan, sick with apprehension.

Gav shook his head. He had a sip of coffee. When he put the cup down, he was sharp and clear again.

"Wouldn't open. Anyway, I don't think it matters too much, other than your lost sleep."

"D'you know, Gav, I reckon it might."
"Come off it, what could it possibly matter?"

You aren't acting right and it's scaring me, Dan wanted to say, but picked at the remains of his toast instead, buying time to gather his thoughts.

"Can't be good for you, can it," he said. "I mean. What if you'd got out, and gone wandering round Paris in your pyjamas? Especially with the press hanging about."

Gav winced. "Ooh, yeah, that'd be less than ideal. Still, so long as we keep the door locked, it shouldn't be an issue, yeah?"

"Unless you work out how to unlock it."

"Nah, it'll be fine! It might not even happen again at all. Might just be a one-time thing."

"Gav, the more you try to play this off, the more worried I get."

"So if I said it wasn't fine and I was scared shitless, you'd feel better?"

"I might do."

"It's not fine and I'm scared shitless. There, d'you feel better now?"

"No, 'cos I know you're just doing it to make me feel better."

"Daniel, my brain is crumbling in my head. You could at least let me go mad with some dignity."

"You're not going mad and your brain isn't crumbling. If you'd just see a doctor—"

"Absolutely not," Gav snapped. "No doctors, I've had it up to here with bloody doctors."

"Why, though? What've doctors ever done to you, that's put you off them?"

"They're no bloody help at all, for one thing, and for another, they gossip like magpies. It'd be in the papers within a week, The Nose of London Finally Blows, or some bollocks. It was bad enough what they said about me whilst I was in hospital, and then I had an excuse for being off my head. No, doctors are off. I'll die first."

"I really, really wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Would you rather I lie to you about how I'm feeling? Oh wait, no, you've been up my arse about that for the past month."

"Gavin," Dan growled.

Gav pinched his lips together and took a sip of coffee. With a sigh, he set the cup down. Just before he spoke, there was a knock at the door.

"Oh, what now?" he said, rolling his eyes. "B, would you get that?"

Dan clenched his teeth. "We're not done talking about this," he said, and got up to answer the door.

A bell boy from downstairs was there, brass buttons polished to a mirror shine. He flashed a smile at Dan and sketched a twitchy half-bow.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "I was asked to tell you that a Mr Casimir Dubois is here to see you,
sir, if you were in. He sent his card."

He handed over a gold-embossed card. On the back, three words had been written.

*Brouillard à Paris.*

"What's that?" Gav called.

"Dubois being Dubois," Dan said over his shoulder. He turned back to the bell boy. "Tell him we'll see him in half an hour."

The bell boy's smile froze on his face.

"I... will do that, sir," he said.

"Gruchy, don't be a pillock," said Gav. "You boy, go and fetch him. We'll see him right away."

"Yes, sir," the bell boy said, with considerable relief. "Thank you, sir."

He sketched another half-bow and scurried off. Miffed, Dan shut the door.

"Couldn't even let me have that, could you," he grumbled.

"Any other day, B, I would've done, 'cos it'd be hilarious. Today, we've got more important things to do. What's the card say?"

Dan handed it over. Gav's eyebrows shot up.

"You see, I told you he'd be useful to have along," he said.

"Told you he'd be useful to have along," Dan sneered, rolling his eyes. "Sod off, you smug little penis. He could be lying, anyway."

"Hmm, yeah, doubt it."

"What, you don't think he'd make any excuse just to get back in our hair?"

"Absolutely he would, and he might've done. But if he has, Dan, you've got to consider: what made him pick Brouillard? It wasn't in the paper. He could've said anyone, and there's juicier bait he could dangle—if baiting it is—so either he's actually spotted Brouillard, or he's a smarter cookie than he looks."

Dan scowled at him. "I hate this new hobby of yours, where you hold up a magnifying glass to every bloody thing Dubois does and say, *yep, that's evidence he's up to something, better look closer.* I reckon maybe he's found a button or two on you."

"Don't be ridiculous. I haven't got buttons."

"B, of all the madly conceited things you've ever said, that one's far and away the stupidest."

"You what?"

"It's hubris, B, pure hubris. You'll get taken to the bloody cleaners with that attitude."

"You're only jealous 'cos you've got a big shiny obvious button that's got *jealous twat* printed on it in block capitals."
"Big, shiny, and obvious? Sure we're not talking about your nose?"

Frowning mightily, Gav screwed up his napkin and threw it at Dan's face.

"Prick," he accused.

"Well, if we're still talking big and obvious. . . ."

Gav kicked him repeatedly under the table, fighting back a grin. "Stop being funny when I'm holding a grudge at you!"

"Who was being funny?" Dan asked, red in the face and smiling despite it. "Statement of fact, B."

"Talk of smug little penises!"

"Little? Then I reckon you've got an awfully shallow—"

"Dan!"

"Hah-hah, how the tables turn, Mr Free! Not such fun when you're the one being embarrassed, is it?"

Gav pouted at him. Dan nudged him under the table.

"You look well in pink," he said.

"You look like a tomato with a moustache," Gav returned.

Dan flipped him off. Gav stuck out his tongue. Someone knocked on the door.

"Oh, bollocks," Dan hissed, rubbing his face in the vain hope that it would make his blush go away. Gav laughed into his hands.

"Hoist with your own petard, B!" he whispered back, snickering.

"Messieurs?" Casimir said through the door.

"Go and let him in, Dan."

"Me? Why me?"

"It's always you."

"Exactly! You do something for once!"

"All right; I will."

Gav got up, breezed to the door, and threw it open like a grande dame.

"Good morning, Casimir," he said. "How wonderful to see you again!"

"Ah, Gavin, good morning!" said Casimir. He ducked in and kissed both of Gav's cheeks in quick succession, then swept past him while he stood there, stunned. "I see you have recovered admirably from what must have been a truly scorching hangover; your fortitude never ceases to amaze me. And Daniel! Always a pleasure to see you, as well."

"I fear it's a pleasure I shall never have to do without," Dan said through his teeth.
Casimir grinned and stuck the tip of his tongue out. Behind him, Gav had recovered enough to shut the door. He touched Casimir's arm, gesturing to the empty chair at the table.

"Have a seat, make yourself at home," he said. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you, I can't stand the stuff," said Casimir, dropping into Gav's chair like he owned the place. "Just the smell makes me nauseous."

"Does it? That won't do. Should we open a window?"

"Oh yes, that would be lovely. Thank you so much."

"Of course," said Gav. He threw open the curtains, then the window. "There, hopefully that'll help."

"It already has," Casimir said, much too fondly.

"Wonderful! Could I offer you a cup of tea, then, in lieu of coffee?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all."

Gav bustled into the kitchenette to put the kettle on. Casimir watched him with his cheek propped up on two knuckles, smiling to himself. Dan looked on in unadulterated shock.

"I see the two of you have resolved your differences, then," he managed.

"Thoroughly!" Casimir chirped.

"Oh, don't tease him, Casimir," Gav said over his shoulder. "That's cruel."

"Cruelty is a fundamental underpinning of my personality, Gavin, surely you must know this by now."

"Yes, but you mustn't use it on Dan. You'll upset him, and he'll hit you in the mouth again."

"Wouldn't that be a shame! There's so many better things we could do with my—"

"Finish that sentence, and you'll make your dentist a rich man," Dan growled. Someone had nailed all his ribs together, cold metal against the bone.

Casimir rocked back in his chair, laughing. Gav snorted.

"He means it, you know."

"I know, that's what makes it so delightful."

"For tea purposes, is Irish Breakfast an acceptable blend?"

"I've already had my Irish breakfast this morning."

"Based on your egregious flirtation and the lingering scent of gin on my cheeks, I had guessed. The question stands."

"I suspect I am not spoiled for choice."

"No choice at all, unless you'd like Nothing Tea."
"Otherwise known as boiled water?"

"In most places."

"I think I'll have the *regular* tea," Casimir said, flicking a knowing look at Dan. Dan's ears burned. He ground his teeth. Casimir sparkled.

"So did you actually come to talk business, or was the card just a clever ploy to get in the door?" Dan asked.

"It could be both," said Casimir. "I felt it was rude to leap directly into the gruesome drudgeries, without first applying myself to social niceties."

"All very good and proper," Gav said, tending to the kettle.

"When have you applied yourself to a single social nicety when there was a case on?" Dan asked. "Hm? When have you ever?"

"Just now, today. It's going swimmingly, you should try it sometime. Cream and sugar, Casimir?"

"Only sugar, thank you."

"One lump or two?"

"Three."

"Ah, a man after my own heart."

"I try desperately to be."

Dan kicked him under the table. Casimir brought his heel down on Dan's toe with bruising force. He smiled serenely while Dan swallowed down curses and tucked his throbbing foot under his chair. Gav brought Casimir his tea, putting a hand on the back of his chair as he set it down in front of him.

"There you are, three lumps of sugar and no cream."

"Thank you so much, you're a treasure. Do pull up a chair, I should hate to see the fireworks if you tried to oust Daniel."

"I have a sneaking suspicion that you'd love to see those fireworks," said Gav, smiling. He retrieved the chair from the room's writing desk and pulled it up exactly equidistant between Dan and Casimir.

"How well you know me already," Casimir said smugly. "Is this your coffee, here?"

"It is. May I have it, please?"

Casimir handed it to him. Gav raised it in a toast, which Casimir took him up on. Dan pressed his fists while his chest collapsed underneath him.

"Thank you," said Gav. "And now, I think we'd better get to business, before poor Dan has a fit."

"I fear constantly for the safety of my teeth; onward to business, then, and perhaps I can keep them another day."

"Hopefully. So you've seen Brouillard?"
Casimir sipped his tea and twirled a hand. "I, personally, haven't seen him, but he has been seen. I am privy to an—"

"Ocean of gossip?"

"Precisely. And in the many nets I cast, I dredge up some very interesting fish from time to time. Mr Brouillard is, evidently, *not* well-liked in the whore community."

"I suppose you are?" said Dan.

"Don't be rude," Gav admonished.

"I'm extremely rich, Daniel," Casimir said, laughing at him. "And, by certain metrics, little more than a very well-paid whore myself. Of course they like me."

"I don't suppose your informants would know where to find Brouillard," said Gav.

"You would have to ask them. Word made it to me only in whispers and Polish."

"Polish?"

"Theo is a sweet thing, and means well, but he and I both suffer from chronic cases of monolingualism, albeit with different presenting symptoms."

"I'm impressed you managed to get anything at all from him, then."

"Not all that impressive," Dan muttered. They both ignored him. He slumped down in his chair, struggling to breathe past the pain in his chest.

"One makes do," Casimir was saying. "It's a simple matter of patience and, of course, cleverness."

"Of course, an immense amount of cleverness."

"Mr Free, are you flattering me?" Casimir said, twinkling at him over the rim of his teacup.

"No no no, *complimenting*. It's entirely different."

"Is it?"

"Entirely."

"Regardless, I am flattered."

"That sounds like your own problem."

"Whoever said it was a problem?"

"'Scuse me whilst I jump out the bloody window," Dan said under his breath, in English. Gav slapped his arm.

"Stop that at once," he said.

Casimir raised his eyebrows, looking between the two of them. Dan got up and poured himself another cup of coffee, just for the sake of having something to do with his hands that wasn't strangling Casimir.

"Is Daniel quite all right?"
"He didn't sleep well. It makes him grouchy."

"How unfortunate! Perhaps we should leave him alone and let him nap."

"I'm fine, thank you," Dan shot over his shoulder. "And I'd be considerably less grouchy if you'd stop blathering about nothing and get back to business."

"If you insist," Casimir said, shrugging. "Alas, I fear that if Brouillard truly is in Paris—or really, even if the murders were perpetrated by another of that same number—the next body we find will be Chad's."

There was a beat of silence.

"My God," said Dan, horrified.

"You—why didn't you lead with that?" Gav cried. "We've been sitting about here, blathering about nothing, while—"

Casimir held up a hand. "You mistake me, gentlemen. By my accounting, Chad is already dead, and has been since last night. It's simply a matter of finding him."

"What went into your accounting?" Dan asked.

"One doesn't make a mess that big for no reason. It's far too much work to go through without some sort of feedback."

Gav shut his eyes and drew a slow, deep breath.

"He made Chad watch," he said. Dan's stomach lurched.

"Every artist wants his work to be seen," said Casimir.

Gav twitched, somewhere between a shiver and a shake of the head. "That's not it. He was told to kill Christophe, he was most likely told to do this, as well."

"Artists can be commissioned. I doubt his instructions included a particular methodology."

"This isn't art," Dan said. His voice trembled. His skin burned. "It's hideous. It's monstrous."

Casimir started to snap out a flippant reply, took in Dan's expression, and stopped. All the gleam faded from him, all the sparkle smothered out. He closed his mouth and looked away.

"You're right, of course," he said. "My apologies."

"No, actually, you might be on to something," Gav said, still with his eyes closed. "Not about the artwork, that's pretentious frivolity and Brouillard wouldn't stand for it. But I think the violence is uniquely—what was the word you used, Dan?"

The conversation lurched to a stop, like missing a stair in the dark. When Gav continued to not answer himself, Dan supplied, "Monstrous."

"Yes, that's the one. It's perfectly, ostentatiously monstrous. Which begs the question—why wasn't Mr James killed then and there?"

"Perhaps Chad wasn't there, when it happened," said Casimir. "He would have had to be restrained, or otherwise immobilized; kept quiet to keep from disturbing the neighbours; either brought in
without alerting the family or somehow incapacitated during the initial attack; and then, of course, it is a lengthy process to make so thorough of a mess, during which he would have to be restrained, as well—no, unless Brouillard had a partner, it's simply unfeasible. He must have arrived afterwards.

Gav's eyes twitched under their lids. "No marks of restraints. The chair's still pushed under the desk, hasn't been moved since the blood started flying. But—there was a struggle. Could have just been the missus, fighting for her children, but—no, someone's been dragged out, you can see, here, it goes towards the door. . . ."

"Can you see it that clearly?" Casimir asked, leaning in.

Waving an irritable hand, Gav said, "I'm looking at it right now."

"Your memory is truly that photographic?"

"When I'm not being distracted. Wish I'd gone round the back of the desk, I can't quite. . . ."

He leaned to one side and frowned, trying to peer around the obstacle. Casimir mirrored the movement, watching his eyes.

"Is it terribly messy? The papers said it was terribly messy."

"Utterly horrific, now quiet down."

"Gav, I don't think you're going to get anywhere looking over it again," Dan said, his guts squirming, his neck prickling. "We know it was Bones, we'd be better off working out where he's gone now."

Gav wrinkled his nose, shook his head, and finally opened his eyes. He met Casimir's gaze for just a moment before turning away to take a sip of his coffee.

"Probably true," he said, "and I've got an idea."

"I have a guess," said Casimir.

"If either one of you say that damn—"

"The Théâtre," they both said.

"Although it may not be so simple to get there," Casimir added.

"No?" said Gav.

"I'm afraid not. When I came in, you see, I passed a fairly large contingent of what appeared, alas, to be reporters."

Dan dragged a hand down his face and groaned.

"How many?" Gav asked, cautiously hopeful.

"Perhaps half a dozen, all told."

"Then we may have a chance yet," said Gav. "Dan? I think it's time we pulled a good old-fashioned bait-and-switch."

Dan took a gulp of his coffee to scald the automatic retort off his tongue. The burn was dissatisfying,
the taste too dry and bitter.

"Fine," he said. "We'd better hurry before any more of the bastards turn up."

"Capital idea!"

"What, precisely, is the *bait-and-switch*?" Casimir asked.

"You're about to see," said Gav, getting to his feet. "It's a delightful little performance. Dan does it a treat."

Dan took another gulp of coffee. His head throbbed. His chest ached. His hands shook.

"Damn sobriety to hell, at this rate," he muttered.
Comeback Tour

Dan ambled out the front door of the hotel, hands in pockets, whistling the most ostentatiously British song he knew, just shy of *God Save the Queen*. The reporters raised their heads like a pack of wild dogs deciding whether a passing donkey was worth the chase. Dan stopped and appraised them, eyebrows up, the corners of his mouth pulled down.

"Good morning, then," he said, in his best pompous-Englishman voice. It came out, as it always did, sounding like his dad. "I say, are you boys from the paper?"

The reporters all looked at each other, calculating the depth of Dan’s cultural ignorance.

"Several papers, monsieur," one of them answered.

"Blimey! Something newsworthy's happened, has it? Do tell."

There was a collective tightening of jaws, a lifting of noses. Dan smiled his blandest smile, blinking owlishly.

"Perhaps you would know something about it," another reporter piped up—younger, and without a cameraman accompanying him. "It's to do with another Englishman."

"Well, all Englishmen do know each other, as you know. We hang together when abroad. Or else we should all hang separately! Hahah."

"*Si seulement,*" a third reporter muttered.

"Pardon? What was that? I don't speak the language, I'm afraid. Not enough frog in my throat, eh what?"

"I said it seems sensible, monsieur," the reporter sneered.

"Right-o! Now about this other Englishman of yours—I'll bet I know who you mean."

The reporters' demeanour flipped like a switch. To a man, they perked up, ears twitching.

"It's that famous detective, isn't it? The one with the nose." He touched his thumb and forefinger to his face, approximating the size of it. "Can't remember his name at the moment."

"It could be," the first reporter allowed.

"Well then, you're in the wrong place, my dear boys!" said Dan, jovial. He cocked his head at the hotel behind him. "Saw him get snagged by your friends out back just as I was going through the lobby."

"*Merde!*" one of them spat. They all scrambled, grabbing notepads and tripods, snapping at each other about stupidity and carelessness. Without a single backwards glance or even a thank-you, the whole pack of them sprinted off towards the back of the hotel. Dan waited until they rounded the corner, then jogged back up the steps and poked his head in.

"We're clear," he said. "Come on."

Gav and Casimir hopped up from their hiding spot behind the door. The three of them hurried across the street and cut through several alleyways, twisting and turning, keeping their heads down. Casimir
grinned like a fool the whole way. He flagged down a cab in record time, and held the door for both Gav and Dan.

"You were right," he said to Gav, settling in next to him as the cab trundled off. "He does do it a treat."

"Fantastic, thanks," Dan said, his lip curling. "Always fun to be reminded that I'm an accessory."

"Not at all!" said Casimir. "You have a talent for camouflage, Daniel. Why, the moment you walked out the door, I scarcely recognized you. It is a remarkable skill, to become unremarkable."

"Yes, I can certainly see why you'd think so."

"Oh, just take the compliment, Dan," said Gav, rolling his eyes. He turned to Casimir and added, "I've been saying the same thing for years, but he never listens to me."

"I'm not certain what astonishes me more," Casimir said. "That you've complimented him more than once, or that there's ever been a time he hasn't listened to you."

"I—what? Are you implying I'm not complimentary to Dan?"

"I've never seen you do it, nor any evidence that you're inclined to."

Gav turned to Dan, feathers ruffled. "Dan, you're lovely. Every day of my life is brighter for having you in it. You're the backbone of this partnership and I'd be lost without you."

"Er... thanks?" Dan guessed, while heat rose to his cheeks and bubbled in his chest. "You're a treasure?"

"Aw, bless," said Gav.

Casimir put his feet up on the seat opposite him and propped his cheek on his hand, smiling an odd little smile.

"Very blessed indeed," he said.

By the look of things, the Théâtre des Variétés hadn't been touched in a month.

A fine film of dust lay across the lobby floor. Greasy hand- and nose-prints blotted the windows, smearing the view outside. The corners were fogged with cobwebs, the smell of mildew stifling. Darkness filled the place like a miasma, seeping under the theatre doors, down the stairs, out of the corridors. It took Dan four tries to get the gas lamps to light. They sputtered and flickered and ran perilously dim, although it was surprising enough to find them operational.

"Who's been maintaining the place, I wonder?" Dan said. His voice was hushed, tamped down by the eddying silences that spun out of the darkness.

"What do you mean?" Casimir asked, holding the door for Gav.

"I mean I expected to find it vandalized, or at the very least, the gas shut off. Someone must've been keeping an eye on it and paying the bills, otherwise there would've been vagrants and schoolchildren sneaking in here within a week. Which is also why I think we ought to have brought the police along."
"Couldn't have done it without admitting we'd had contact with James," said Gav. "And then having to explain why we didn't call them in to arrest him right away, since he is a wanted man. Much easier to come to them afterwards saying we were looking for evidence of Brouillard here—which is, helpfully, true."

"Yes, I'm sure breaking and entering will go over much better with the authorities."

"Technically, nothing was broken into," Casimir pointed out. "The door is unlocked."

"And I don't like that, either."

"It might explain the lack of vandalism. A locked door is a challenge, whereas an open door is an invitation."

"People will carve their initials on the fence in their own back garden. Invitations don't enter into it, except maybe to explain the lack of smashed windows."

"It certainly doesn't explain the lack of footprints," said Gav. "Look at the floor. No one's been this way in a month."

Dan looked at the floor. There were faint, but obvious tracks in the dust where the three of them had ventured in. The rest was undisturbed.

"Not to say nobody's been here," Gav went on. "There's always the stage door."

All their gazes drifted in the same direction. The theatre doors bowed under the pressure of the silence behind them. A shiver ran up Dan's spine. He swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Perhaps we should . . . go in that way, as well, then," he said. "It'll be black as pitch in there, and at least we know where the lights are, round back."

"Sounds . . . ."

Gav trailed off, frowning. Dan's heart skipped a beat.

"Gav?"

"What did I just say?" he mumbled. "I said something important, just now. Dan, what did I say?"

"You said—er, something about the stage door? How nobody's been in this way?"

"No, before that, it was—it was important, it's important, why can't I—?"

He pressed the heel of his hand to his eye. Dan hurried to his side and pulled it back.

"B, don't do this," he said, halfway to pleading. He risked a glance at Casimir, who was watching with entirely too much interest, and switched to English. "You'll hurt yourself, come on, not here."

"I've—Dan, I've forgotten. I've forgotten, it's happening again. What did I say?"

"Oy, oy, easy! If it was important, it'll come back, all right? Just keep calm, that's the important thing right now. Don't want you having a moment in front of the company, yeah?"

"Don't want—no, we don't want that, I don't want that. I . . . ."

"Come on, easy does it," said Dan, guiding Gav's hand away from his face. The other hand snuck to
his chest and started scratching. Dan let it pass. "We'll get you back on the case and you'll be right again."

"Yes," Gav said vaguely. He took a deep breath, shook himself, and clicked back into place. "Yes, that sounds like a wise idea. Désolé, Casimir. Allez, en route."

"Après vous," said Casimir, making a sweeping gesture towards the door. Gav nodded to him and strode out. Dan trailed after, worrying his lip between his teeth.

Casimir put a hand on his arm. Dan jerked back, tensing, but Casimir let him go without a fight.

"Is something the matter with Gavin?" he asked.

"It's none of your business," Dan snapped.

Casimir raised his hands in surrender. "Understood. My apologies."

Letting out a slow breath through his nose, Dan counted backwards from ten.

"Though I appreciate your concern," he said through his teeth. "And I'm sure he does, as well."

"Regardless, I shall refrain from prying any further. Shall we catch him up?"

"Let's."

Even with so slight of a delay, Gav was tapping his foot and scowling by the time they made it round back of the Théâtre.

"Every time I turn my back on the two of you, there's mysterious delays," he said. "Should I start detecting, or would one of you like to provide an explanation?"

"Certainly!" Casimir said blithely. "I asked Daniel if you were all right, and he told me to piss off. Not quite in so few words."

"Well then, it will please you to know that I'm perfectly fine. Now you can stop wasting my time with worrying about it."

"Oh dear, I should hate to waste your time. Perhaps I ought to return to Marseille and remove myself from your hair permanently."

"No, no no, that won't be necessary." Gav said hurriedly. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me. I'm just very impatient because I'm nervous."

Dan's jaw dropped. Casimir smiled.

"My, you are a quick study! All's forgiven, my sweet. Lead on."

Gav ducked his head and darted to the stage door, but not in time to hide the pinkening of his cheeks. Casimir's smile only widened once his back was turned. Dan bit back the venomous threats on his tongue and followed Gav. He did not hold the door for Casimir.

Once again, the darkness of the theatre closed round him. He stood still, blinking purple afterimages from his eyes, hands halfway outstretched in the murk. Floorboards squeaked as Gav crossed to the nearer wall. He moved unhindered by the dark, talking in hushed tones as he went.

"If both of you wouldn't mind staying still for just a moment," he said. "Undisturbed dust may prove
"to be our greatest asset."

"I fear we haven’t much choice, if we value the health and well-being of our shins," said Casimir.

There was a rapid clicking, a wheeze and a gurgle and a sputter, and the lights rose. Towering shadows, cut with spindles of light, spilled back from the stage. The silence receded with the dark, lingering in corners and crannies and a great clouded mass overhead. The gas lamps held it back on hoarse whispers and butterfly flames.

"Ah-hah," said Gav. "We seem to be in luck."

Dan looked to the floor. A set of tracks had been printed into the grey dust, leading towards the stage. There was no set returning.

"Dubois, I think you’d better stay here," Dan said, his stomach tightening.

"Why?"

"I don’t expect you’d much enjoy seeing James’ body, which I suspect we’re about to."

"Ah," said Casimir. He sounded disappointed. "I suppose it would be best not to test that expectation."

"Don’t touch anything," Gav said, sneaking along beside the path of the footprints.

"Pardon?"

"Please don’t touch anything."

"I shall refrain."

Dan glared as Gav moved off. The corners of Casimir’s mouth curled up, his whole demeanour unbearably smug.

"Bon chien," he whispered.

Grinding his teeth, Dan turned on his heel and hurried after Gav before he did something regrettable, like bash Casimir’s face in. His back lit up with prickling, as though a bucket of ants had been dumped down his shirt. He did not look back.

The tracks led up the righthand side of the stage, winding through the clutter and the draped curtains. Dan risked a glance between the false walls of the set, and was relieved to see that there was no obvious body lying about.

He and Gav followed the trail out onto the stage. Empty air hung above the rows and rows of seats, thick with silence and veiled by the bright lights, churning with the same deadly gravity that lurked past the edge of every precipice.

L’appel du vide, they called it. He wondered what would happen if he answered.

"What on earth...?" Gav muttered, snapping Dan back into the present.

"Hm? What?"

"Look at this." He gestured. "How is that possible?"
Dan looked. The trail of footprints led to centre stage, and then simply stopped.

"Er," said Dan. "Trapdoor?"

"Not a chance. There'd be scuff-marks. It's like he just . . . ."

The silence howled around them. Dan looked up, up, up into the massed clouds of darkness, and swallowed.

"B," he whispered. "Are we sure they were coming in?"

"Don't be daft, of course they were. The toes are pointed forward on the—the—bollocks, what's the damn word—on the things, on the floor, right in front of my damn face!"

"Footprints?" Dan suggested.


His face scrunched up. His breath came shorter. He shook his head and stumbled a step, unbalanced. Dan's heart leapt into his throat.

"Gav?"

"Footprints," he said again. "I—there's something—there's something, if only I could see it clearly. I need to see it clearly."

He pressed the heel of his hand to his eye, his face contorted with pain. Dan hurried to his side, cursing under his breath.

"No no, no, don't start that again, not now."

"There's—there's—"

A shudder raced through him. His uncovered eye snapped open. He gasped. His knees buckled. Dan just barely caught him before he hit the floor.

"Gav!"

"Oh, God!" Gav wailed. He turned deathly pale, shaking like a leaf in Dan's arms. He went to cover his other eye and cried out again when Dan stopped him.

"B, what's happening? What's wrong?"

Gav's only answer was to heave and choke, to clamp his jaw shut and hold his breath.

"Shit—all right, not here, not here, hang on!" Dan said, hauling him towards the stage door. "Bit further, hang on to it, twenty paces, almost there—"

The two of them stumbled out into the blazing sunlight. Gav staggered out of Dan's arms, fell to his hands and knees, and threw up. He gasped in a breath, weeping and shuddering, then threw up again. Dan knelt at his side and put a hand on his back. Even through his shirt and jacket, he was burning hot.

"B, talk to me, what's wrong?"

"Wasn't Brouillard," Gav choked. "Oh, God, I can't—it wasn't Brouillard, it was the—"
He heaved again, spitting up bile and breathless whimpers. Dan held him and rubbed his arm, encouraging the taut muscles to relax.

"Shh, Gav, it's all right, you're all right! Easy does it, B, just breathe."

Gav slapped at his leg, hyperventilating, trembling head to toe.

"The wife, it was the wife—no footprints, there were no—God, I can't, make it stop, make it stop, please—please—"

"Hang in there, B, we've just got to find you something else to focus on. We'll do an easy one: what's the back of my—"

With a full-body convulsion, Gav's eyes rolled back in his head. Dan cursed and yanked him back before he face-planted into his own vomit. Gav collapsed against him, limp as a doll.

"Shit—no no no, Gav, no, please don't go!"

As if he had heard the desperate plea, Gav sucked in a deep breath. His eyelids fluttered. He fumbled a hand onto Dan's chest and slowly, unsteadily, sat himself upright again.

"I'm all right," he mumbled. "I'm all right, Dan. I'm here."

"You—you are? That's not to say—I meant, good! That's good. Please . . . stay that way. Please. Are you all right?"

"What was I . . . God, what was I saying?" He laughed to himself, shaking his head. "Sorry about all that, B. Went properly off my head for a moment there."

"I can't exactly argue with you," Dan said, his skin crawling all over. "Gav, what happened? What was all that?"

Gav started to answer, but caught sight of something over Dan's shoulder and stopped. Dan looked back to see Casimir slipping out of the stage door, puzzled.

"It was nothing," Gav said, still in English but with an eye on Casimir. "Reckon I just got to thinking too much about the James house and it finally caught up with me, that's all."

He squeezed Dan's arm, silent and urgent. Dan returned the squeeze on his shoulder.

"Well, it won't be helped by sitting on the ground," he said. "Come on, up you get, there's a lad."

Although Gav was still shaky, he managed to get to his feet without much assistance from Dan. The two of them turned to Casimir, who was leaning up against the wall with the air of a man who had an abundance of time.

"I'm sorry about all that," Gav said in French.

"Not at all," said Casimir. "Am I to presume that Chad is in a similar state of dishabille as his family?"

"He wasn't in there, that I saw."

Casimir's eyes narrowed. "Then what was?"

"Nothing," Gav admitted, sheepish. "I think it was something of a delayed reaction to the family,
"How strange! Are you all right now?"

"Yes, yes, perfectly, thank you. Although I'm not sure it would be wise to go back in to finish our search just yet, I . . . may need a moment. Just to be certain it doesn't happen again."

"Of course; take as long as you need. Perhaps Daniel and I could continue the search while you recover." He appealed to Dan. "If that would be all right?"

"I'd prefer to stay with Gav," said Dan. "Since we're not in a rush."

Casimir shrugged and settled in against the wall.

"Very well." He flashed a smile. "I don't have anywhere to be."
Although they searched for well over an hour, the theatre yielded nothing to them. In Dan's rush to get Gav out of the building, he'd brought them both trampling over the original footprints, all but obliterating them. Gav tsked and shook his head, but didn't belabour the point. Dan's stomach curdled with guilt anyway. When at last Gav suggested that Dan should wait on the stage while he and Casimir investigated the catwalks, Dan bit down on his objections and wished them both luck.

He could swear, in the ten minutes they were up there, that he heard voices, whispering like marsh-lights through the darkness. He squirmed and fidgeted, glancing out at the rows and rows of empty, decaying seats. The bright lights were hot against his skin, beating down like the Arabian sun. His kerchief was thoroughly moistened from wiping his forehead by the time Gav and Casimir returned.

"Nothing," Gav spat. "Not a damn thing up there. It's ludicrous."

"I don't suppose footprints would show up, up there, so . . . maybe it's just that," said Dan. "Or maybe he walked in and then just—walked back out, backwards, in his own footsteps?"

Gav raised an eyebrow. Even Casimir looked dubious.

"Stupid idea, sorry," Dan mumbled, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Gav said to himself, kicking at the dust on the floor. "Where was he going? What was he doing here? There must have been a reason for it, but I'll be damned if I know what it was. And he must have gone somewhere, as well, he can't have just vanished, but I'll be damned if I know that, either! It's too strange. It's too bizarre. People don't behave like this. Someone's playing games. Someone, Dan, is fucking with us."

"But—who, and what for?"

Simultaneously, slowly, both of them turned to Casimir. He raised his hands in surrender.

"Not I," he said.

"Is that the truth, Mr Dubois?" Gav asked. His voice was so cold that Dan's unmentionables huddled up near his stomach for warmth.

"It is," Casimir said, unshaken. "I know why you would suspect me, but I can assure you, I had neither the opportunity nor the motive to set this particular stage."

"And can anyone confirm that?"

"Why yes, indeed; several people can."

"Which people?"
"The florid and fabulous regulars of the Red Ravine Hotel," said Casimir. "Some of whom you may have encountered previously."

"Oh, no," Dan groaned.

"That's awfully convenient for you, isn't it," said Gav.

"I make my own convenience."

"This is the second time you've just happened have an airtight alibi when it matters most. A person might begin to suspect that this pattern is not coincidence."

"A person might take into consideration that I spend most nights amongst that company, when I am in Paris."

"Or, perhaps, that you're lying, and all your little friends are deep enough in your pocket to lie for you, too."

Casimir twinkled. "Certainly, you of all people could catch them out if that were the case. I haven't been by to see the day-birds yet, and those most hungover from last night should be waking soon. Once again, it seems our needs align."

"Yes," Gav said, showing teeth. "How convenient."

"If, of course, you're going to be blatantly antagonistic the whole way, I could just as well leave you to do it yourselves," said Casimir. "I'm sure you don't need me for anything."

Gav's jaw clenched. He swallowed, flexed his hands, and let out a slow breath.

"I would appreciate it," he ground out, "if you would continue to accompany us."

Casimir smiled, turning out an elegant hand. "With the request so politely made, I could hardly refuse."

The back entrance of the Ravin Rouge was closer to what Dan had pictured for the place, being much more dilapidated and unsavoury than the front.

"I always take the rear entrance," Casimir told them, turning a key in the lock. "I find it, in many ways, both more comfortable and more appealing. There's a metaphor in that, somewhere."

"For God's sake," Dan muttered.

"No, purely for my own. Come in, let us not waste our dear detective's time."

He breezed in, leaving the two of them to follow. Dan caught Gav by the arm before he did.

"What's going on?" he whispered, in English.

"Not here," Gav said.

"A hint, anything."

Gav leaned in and spoke into his ear, scarcely a breath of sound passing his lips.
"I'm not convinced he doesn't speak English. Not here."

Dan frowned, but nodded.

"All right," he said. "But later."

"Later," Gav promised.

They followed Casimir inside, where he led them down a narrow corridor lined with closed doors. Distinctive sounds emanated from a few of them, which set Dan's ears to burning and caused Gav's eyebrows to climb for his hairline. Casimir spoke to them over his shoulder, entirely unaffected.

"I hope you'll forgive me if we check in downstairs first," he said. "Certain high-strung parties would never forgive me if I didn't stop by to greet them first and foremost. Your business will most likely lie upstairs, with last night's revellers. Still, a few of the day-birds were here early enough to catch me on my way out, and they can perhaps caulk up the gaps in the timeline."

"How incredibly helpful of them," Gav said dryly.

"It's not my fault I have an airtight alibi," said Casimir. "Although it's always such a shame to spoil your fun."

"Maybe one day you'll actually kill someone, and then you won't be such a disappointment," Gav said.

"Lead me not into temptation, my sweet," Casimir purred.

"Lead you right into the bloody guillotine," Dan said under his breath, in English.

Casimir either didn't hear or ignored him. He reached a set of double doors and flung them wide open, stepping inside with his arms out.

"Rejoice, o ye fatted calves, the prodigal son has returned!" he said, his hoarse voice cutting through the chatter. Every eye in the room turned to him, frills and lace fans stilled, conversation crashed to a halt. Across the way, a familiar young blond in an outrageous pink dress leapt to his feet.

"Cassie!" he cried. He sprinted across the room, threw himself into Casimir's arms, grabbed him by the face and kissed him full on the mouth. Casimir stiffened, but only for a moment. He shucked off his jacket without breaking the kiss and held it out behind him on one finger. One of the other men plucked it up and kissed Casimir's hand, which finally prompted him to pull back from Francine.

"Thank you so much, my little cabbage," he said over his shoulder.

The man pecked him on the lips. "Thank me later," he said.

"Oh, with great pleasure," said Casimir, grinning.

"Excuse me," Francine pouted.

"So sorry, my sweet; where were we?"

"Good grief," Dan muttered, in English, as they got back to it. The conversation in the room picked back up, eyes lingering, smiles hidden behind hands. Dan fidgeted, his cheeks on fire. He spotted Richelle, Désirée, and the Sergeant amongst the crowd and did his best to avoid all possibility of eye-contact with them.
"What?" said Gav.

Dan flapped a hand. "Bloody shameful display, isn't it."

"In what way?"

"Well—I mean, out in front of everyone? It's indecent."

"That's rather the point of this place, isn't it? I don't think we've got any room to judge."

"Who was judging? I just don't want to see it, that's all."

"The door's right there," said Gav, cocking a thumb behind them.

"Are you asking if I'd like to leave? 'Cos I'd love to leave."

"You can leave or not, as you like, but don't be rude."

"You're telling me not to be rude? You, Mr Free, are telling me not to be rude?"

Gav scowled at him. Francine did something extra indecent, and Casimir pulled away.

"Fran," he said, disapproving.

"Cassie, I can't help it," he whined. "Why won't you come back to the wedding rooms with me? You're such a dreadful tease, it's absolutely killing me!"

Casimir pried Francine's hand loose and kissed the knuckles.

"My sweet, if I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times: I only sleep with men."

At Dan's side, Gav froze. His eyes locked on Francine, his breath coming short. Dan couldn't quite name the expression on his face, although it smarted of fear.

"It isn't fair," Francine was saying. "It simply isn't fair!"

"No, it certainly isn't fair that you keep asking when I've made it abundantly clear what the answer is," said Casimir. "I only sleep with men. If ever there comes a time when you are a man, then we can discuss it further."

"But no one will, Cassie, nobody wants me, you're my best hope."

"That's entirely untrue; firstly, because I can think of at least three people who would very happily take you to bed; and secondly, because, as you are and as you wish to be, you have a snowball's chance in Hell of ever convincing me to become one of them."

Francine pouted at him. Casimir pecked him on the lips.

"I can tell you which three, if it would help."

"Do," Francine said tearfully.

Casimir leaned in and whispered in his ear, and Francine rolled his eyes.

"Oh, stop," he said, dealing Casimir a foppish smack on the cheek.

"I'm completely serious."
“Dreadful! A waiter, Cassie? Haven't you any standards?”

“Not a one.”

“Well I have, and I say no-thank-you to waiters.”

“What about detectives?”

“Oh, even worse,” said Francine, grinning ear to ear. "They're horrifically nosy."

“One in particular is markedly nosy-er than others."

"Hah-hah, very original," Gav drawled. There was a minute tremor in his voice, undetectable to anyone who didn't know him well. "And before you ask: I am entirely, absolutely uninterested in any liaisons with anyone here, regardless of sex."

"Anyone, really?” said Casimir, the picture of innocence. "Certain parties will be severely disappointed, Mr Free."

"I'm here on business, thank you, and business it shall remain."

"What luck! Francine loves business, don't you, my sweet?” said Casimir, giving him a squeeze. "Mr Free requires independent confirmation of my whereabouts last night. Would you mind terribly taking him upstairs and letting him nose about?"

"You're horrendous," Francine said, doe-eyed. "But of course, I'll be happy to show him the bedrooms."

"Show them the bedrooms, I'm coming, as well," Dan butted in.

"Don't be silly, Gruchy,” said Gav. "You're going to stay here and make sure Mr Dubois doesn't pull his little disappearing act."

"But—"

"I think I can handle a crop of hangovers and one—one ingenue on my own,” said Gav.

Tittering and blushing, Francine darted over and swept up his arm.

"Oh, you're a charmer,” he said. "Ingenue, gracious, with a tongue like that, you could almost rival Cassie."

Casimir pressed a hand to his chest, wounded. "Have I been that cruel to you, that you must insult me so? After but one passing remark, hardly even a compliment, from this squawking little jaybird, and suddenly I have a rival?"

"Yes," said Francine, and stuck his tongue out, and dragged Gav away.

As they went, Gav cast a questioning look over his shoulder. Begrudgingly, Dan nodded. Gav smiled at him, shoulders slumping with relief, before Francine whisked him back out the double doors.

"Unbelievable," Casimir muttered, shaking his head. "Ingenue, I'll be damned."

"It really is tremendously cruel, what you're doing to him," Dan said, too fed up to care about discretion. Other men were drifting towards them, gently but with purpose. Dan's head filled with
tortured visions of sunlit flats, hot tea, unwelcome lips and hands.

"Her," said Casimir.

"Sorry, what?"

"Francine is a woman." It was said without a hint of irony or jest.

"Er . . . right?" said Dan, thrown for a loop. "If you say so. Still . . . she has every right to be upset with you."

"By whose accounting? I've been nothing but kind to her."

"You call that kindness?"

"Yes, what do you call it?"

"Leading-on."

"That isn't—no, I've been perfectly clear about my limits, and I've done my best to accommodate her outside of them, that's in no way—"

"If you say one thing, sir, and through your actions imply another, that's leading-on."

Casimir blinked. He looked to the door where Francine had gone. All the sparkle faded from him. He dropped his gaze, frowning at the carpet.

"I was trying to be kind," he said softly.

Despite himself, Dan felt a twinge of pity. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stood a little closer, the better to keep their conversation at least somewhat private against the encroaching admirers.

"A hard no is better than an endless maybe," he said. "And you really can't go round . . . carrying on with people when you've no intention of following through, regardless of how much fun it is."

"It isn't fun," said Casimir.

"It—sorry, what?"

"It isn't fun, with her," he repeated. "I don't enjoy it. It's boring at best and slightly nauseating at worst."

"Then what on earth are you doing it for?"

He gestured helplessly to the door. "She likes it."

"You poor damn fool," said Dan, before he could stop himself.

A small smile turned up the corner of Casimir's mouth.

"Do I detect a glimmer of a kindred spirit, Mr Gruchy?"

"Not if you know what's good for you."
After twenty minutes, Dan was starting to get nervous.

The amount of drinking going on in the common room couldn't be called excessive, even given that it was barely noon, but it was certainly obtrusive. More so were the comings and goings of the men, hand in hand and cheek by jowl, sober or drunk, tepid or desperate. They made no pretence about their intended activities, and although none of them directly bothered Dan, he could feel eyes on him at all times. It made his skin crawl.

Even more obtrusive than that, of course, was Casimir, who had dropped himself onto the most convenient piece of furniture, swept up the first glass of liquor that passed by, and had been cheerfully snogging anybody who sat down next to him. Dan, by some anxious tide or social current, had washed up against the drinks cabinet. There was a tickle in the back of his throat that worsened every time someone came by to refill their glass.

Surely, just one drink couldn't hurt, could it? It wasn't as though Gav needed him to do anything, other than stay here and be ready to provide backup if things went south. Then again, he wasn't sure how he was supposed to know things had gone south, with Gav in a completely different part of the building. By that metric alone, it was clear that Gav didn't anticipate needing his help.

Dan watched an older gentleman pour himself a gin and tonic, clearer than spring water, sparkling with starlight. He pressed his fists and swallowed down the sand in his throat. The gentleman caught him looking and smiled.

"Care to make a double of it?" he asked, offering the bottle.

"I really shouldn't," said Dan. He fidgeted, fiddled with the lint in his pockets, unable to look away from the clear glass bottle, cut and beveled like a diamond.

"You're a sturdy gent, I'm sure one won't hurt," said the gentleman. With a twinkle in his eye, he added, "I promise I won't tell. You look like you could use it, my friend."

Dan winced, rubbing the back of his head. "I don't know, Free might get upset with me for drinking on the job."

"Then why not make it business? I could—"

"Lucien, où est-ce que t'es aller?" Casimir called from across the room.

"Oh dear," the gentleman sighed. "Right on cue, the fussy child bawls for his mama. I must attend to him, I fear, or else he shall throw a tantrum." He offered Dan a smile, gesturing with his drink. "You are, of course, welcome to join us—if you would like?"

Dan glanced at Casimir, lounging on the sofa, with one man murmuring in his ear while another kissed up and down his neck. He returned his eyes to Lucien posthaste.

"No, thank you," he said. "If I had to sit next to that, I think I'd down the whole bottle."

"Ah, noted," said Lucien, twinkling again. "I'll leave it here, then, in case the distance isn't sufficient."

"I appreciate it."

Lucien raised his glass to Dan. He wound through the crowd and settled in near the triumvirate on the couch. Casimir extended a limp hand to him, regarding him through half-lidded eyes. Lucien took it politely and kissed his fingers, then turned it sideways and pressed the drink into it.
"You're much too kind," Casimir said, fluttering his eyelashes.

"I am deeply invested in your happiness, my little rook."

"How sweet!"

"As if you didn't know."

"It's always nice to be reminded, Your Majesty."

"You seem to need to be reminded to drink your drink, too."

"Oh, where are my manners? Of course."

He drained half of it in one go. It went down smooth as silk. Dan's throat bobbed reflexively. His hands were sweating. Casimir's sigh of contentment nearly pushed him over the edge. Surely, just one drink couldn't hurt, everyone in the room had had at least one by now, Gav wouldn't even have to know, and if he found out, he couldn't possibly mind just one... .

Except it was never just one, Dan reminded himself. One became two, and then two was four, and eight, and twelve, and the next thing you knew he was passed out in a gutter with blood on his knuckles and two pubs he could never show his face in again. Gav had made it abundantly clear that he minded that, even when their relationship had been strictly professional.

Dan breathed deep, digging his fingernails into his palms, and moved away from the drinks cabinet. He played it off as a bored meander, although he could feel several people watching him. He'd made it about halfway to the back doors when they swung open and, of all people, Gav poked his head in.

"Pardon me," he said. "Casimir, could I borrow you for ten minutes or so?"

"Me?" said Casimir, pressing a hand to his chest. "But of course; I love being borrowed. Excuse me, my lovelies—yes, I know, you're distraught, I promise I won't be long—"

While Casimir extracted himself from his entourage, Dan tried to catch Gav's eye. Gav spared him only the briefest glance, so quick that Dan couldn't read anything in it. Dan made his way over, arriving as Casimir slugged back the rest of his drink and handed the empty glass to Lucien.

"What's our plan?" he asked Gav out of the corner of his mouth.

"Stay here and I'll come and get you when I'm done," said Gav.

"What?"

"And you know why, so don't argue with me. Ah, Casimir, te voilà."

"Oui, ma jolie, allons-y," Casimir purred, taking Gav's arm. Gav's cheeks pinkened. He hauled Casimir off, head down and eyes studiously averted.

Before the door swung shut, Casimir tossed a wink over his shoulder. Dan's blood boiled. His fists clenched so tightly that his arms trembled. The grinding of his teeth filled his ears, his heart landed hammer-fist blows on his ribcage. When someone cleared their throat next to him, he nearly knocked their head clean off.

Lucien took a quick sidestep when Dan rounded on him. His hands stayed clasped behind his back, his eyes on the far wall. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth.
"Just by the by," he said, "for absolutely no reason at all, I had the sudden and overpowering urge to tell you that the walls upstairs are, indeed, very thin."

"Sir," Dan uttered, "with all due respect, fuck off."

Lucien recoiled. Before he could say anything about it, Dan turned on his heel and stalked from the room—and then down the corridor, dripping with lewd noises, and out into the blinding sunlight and the sweltering spring air. He stormed halfway down the back alley and upended the first bin he came to with a throat-ripping snarl. Rubbish scattered everywhere, clatter and crash, startling a flock of pigeons from the washing lines overhead. Dan shoved a hand into his hair and gripped tight, taking deep breaths through his nose while bright red pain pooled under his scalp. His pulse thundered in his ears, throbbed in his hands and throat. He tasted blood.

Slowly, by the steady exchange of air through his lungs, the fire in Dan's blood cooled. He pried his clenched hand open, finding a large crop of black hairs stuck to the sweating palm. He wiped them off on his trousers and rubbed his face. He walked down the alley and back, weak in the knees, a strained soreness rising between his shoulder blades and up one side of his neck.

"Calm down, Gruchy," he said to himself. "Ease off. Damn stupid fool. You'll hurt someone, carrying on like that."

More deep breaths, more pacing. His hands shook. A large snake had curled up in his stomach and was fidgeting in its sleep. A drink or two would settle it down, would dissolve the lingering tension in his shoulders and settle the swirling fog in his head. He'd have to go back in anyway, to wait for Gav where he'd been told, and it would be damnably awkward after an exit like that—nothing that a few drinks couldn't ease, two or three at most—

Dan slapped himself.

"Stop it," he hissed. "It doesn't work like that and you damn well know it."

Of course, he'd drink himself stupid at the first opportunity; one was too many and a hundred was not enough. Then again, maybe he ought to drink himself stupid, drink himself sick, drink himself straight to Hell because clearly that's where Gav thought he could go—

He slapped himself again, harder. His fingers caught on his nose and brought tears welling to his eyes. Wincing, he rubbed the smarting handprint on his cheek and wiggled his nose.

"Ow," he said.

The squeak of rusty hinges behind him was like an electric shock straight to the spine. He leapt a foot off the ground and whipped round so fast he lost his balance and had to catch himself against the wall.

Gav blinked. "Good grief, are you all right?"

"I—you—hi, yes, sorry," Dan sputtered. He couldn't draw a proper breath. His cheek still stung, pink and prickling.

"I was told you left in a bit of a huff."

"Well—a bit, but I'm all right."

"If you say so. I've got everything I needed, if you'd like to be getting on."
"Yes," said Dan, with considerable relief. "Let's. Please."

"Right-o, come along, then."

He set off at a brisk walk. Dan pulled himself together and followed.

"So, er . . . I assume Dubois' in the clear?"

"You needn't sound so disappointed. But yes. Airtight alibi."

"Unless he's got people lying for him."

"Possible, I suppose," Gav sighed, rolling his eyes. "But I think it's a waste of time to keep picking at him. If he's behind it, we'll find something else that brings us back to him. Meantime, there are other scabs we can pick at."

"Bones and Chad?"

"Precisely."

"All right. So where do we start?"

"Since both have vanished without a trace, but one is apparently a frequent patron of certain sordid establishments, I thought we might start there."

"Eugh," said Dan. "Have we got to make the whorehouse circuit? They're bloody depressing, them."

"We haven't got to, provided you're all right with letting Brouillard get away with it."

Dan made a face. "Of course I'm not, but . . . look, about that."

"Hm?"

"Earlier you said—back at the Théâtre, you said something about it . . . not being Brouillard. You said it was the wife."

"Did I?"


"Oh, right, when I was having my moment. Obviously absolute nonsense. She was decapitated, a person can't very well cut her own head off."

"Well—I don't know, there could be—"

"Especially not when both her arms are off, as well," Gav said dryly.

"Ah," said Dan. "Yes. That does rather . . . preclude the possibility. It's just—well, it's not like you to talk . . . absolute nonsense."

"I'm aware, and it's terribly distressing, so could we drop the topic, please?"

"Right. Sorry. I only wonder if it might be possible to make it less distressing by talking about it?"

"No," said Gav.
There was no arguing with that tone of voice, so Dan didn't try.
Love's Labour's Lost

Although Gav and Dan spent the afternoon after their visit to the Ravin Rouge and all of the following day combing through the whorehouses of Paris, they turned up nothing definitive on Bones. Most places threw them out on their ears on principle, and even those where they weren't turned away at the door tended to demand exorbitant payment for information on customers, regardless of how poorly-liked they were. The only thing resembling a breakthrough that they made was turning up Casimir's "Theo." As promised, Theo only spoke Polish, so the account was muddled at best, but they at least obtained confirmation that Bones had been in Paris only a few days ago.

"Well," said Dan, as he and Gav emerged into a late-afternoon rainstorm. "Either Bones is a bigger hypocrite than Dubois, or else that was a woman in trousers. Now, I'm not saying Bones isn't a hypocrite, but my money's on the latter. Whole bloody city's lousy with cross-dressers. I don't know what's wrong with people these days."

Gav mumbled something, drowned out by the rain.

"What was that?"

"Said it's none of your damn business how other people dress, Gruchy," Gav snapped. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and stalked off into the rain. Dan hurried after him with the umbrella, caught flat-footed.

"Well—maybe not, but still! It's just silly, honestly. I mean, she could be arrested for that sort of thing. Can you imagine, risking being arrested over clothes?"

"Yes, how tremendously silly."

Dan made a face. He shifted the umbrella to cover Gav better, even though it left his own arm exposed to the rain.

"At any rate," he said. "What's up next?"

"I don't know, Dan," Gav sighed. "I'll have to have a think about it."

"Really? All right, then. Let me know if you need anything, I s'pose."

Gav didn't answer. He kept his eyes down, watching something much further away than the pavement, worrying his lip between his teeth. Dan's heart grew heavy, as sodden and grey as the city around them.

"Have I said something to upset you?" he asked.

"No. No, I'm not upset."

"You sound upset. You look upset."

"I'm just—tired, Dan," he sighed. "I'm just tired."

Despite what Gav had said, the chilly-shouldering continued throughout the evening and night.
Dinner was quiet and stilted, and while Dan got ready for bed, Gav stayed in the armchair, staring at nothing and chewing his cheeks.

"Are you coming to bed, B?" Dan asked.

"I will," Gav said vaguely. "Just thinking, 's all."

"All right. Should I leave the light on?"

"Doesn't matter."

Dan made a face. "I'll leave it on, then. Just so you're not sat there in the dark."

Absently, Gav's hand slid to his chest and started scratching. Dan struggled with himself over whether or not to say anything about it, until it had gone on for half a minute with no sign of abating.

"You're scratching," he said.

Gav's only response was to push his hand up into his hair and lean on it.

"Well . . . good night, then, B," Dan said. "I love you."

"You as well," Gav mumbled, automatic.

Dan tucked himself in and lay awake in well-lit silence until, at last, merciful sleep stole up on him.

Gav didn't move the entire time.

When Dan woke up in the morning, it was to the smell of coffee and pancakes. Yawning and blinking, he shuffled his way to the kitchenette and gathered up some of each. Gav was in the washroom, and by the time he came out, Dan had managed to wake the rest of the way up.

"Morning, B," he said. "You manage to get any sleep last night?"

"Might've dozed off."

He beelined for the coffee, keeping his eyes down. There was a pinkness to his cheeks, a fresh-scrubbed-ness reminiscent of a schoolboy. The longer Dan watched him, the more pronounced it became; something about his face was off. His hair was as perfectly wild as ever, his features all in place, eyes clear (if bloodshot), lips pink against pale skin. . . .

"Hang on," said Dan, frowning. "Have you shaved?"

Gav rubbed his jaw and shrugged. "It's too hot for beards these days. Tired of my face being all sweaty and bristly."

"Fair play. It looks well on you, anyway."

"I think I look a bit like a thumb, to be honest."

"Oh, no, you do a bit, as well," said Dan, grinning. Gav glared at him, and he winced. "Whoops, was I meant to disagree with you?"

"You said it looked well on me."
"It does look well on you! And you also look a bit like a thumb, they're not exclusive. You're a very attractive thumb, if it's any help."

"It isn't."

"Well, it'll grow back," Dan assured him. Something was squeezing down on his chest, unsettling his stomach. "But honestly, it's fine. I've just not seen you clean-shaven in—years, probably."

"D'you want to know why? It's 'cos last time you told me I looked like a thumb."

"Come off it, no I didn't!"

"Free, what've you done to your face? You look like a thumb with a nose."

"All right, but how long ago was that? Must've been actual years, if I was still calling you Free, you absolute camera."

Gav shook his head. He finished fixing his coffee and brought the morning post and paper back to the table with him.

"Telegram for you," he said, tossing it across to Dan.

"Look, I'm sorry I upset you. Honestly, it's your face and you've got the right to do whatever you want with it, regardless of what I think."

"Yes, I'm aware," said Gav. He sipped his coffee and flicked the paper open.

Fighting down the bitter taste of foot in his mouth, Dan turned his attention to the telegram, which was Gabriel again.

**SAW THE NEWS. JOLLY BOATMAN PUB, DOVER, 4 O'CLOCK WEDNESDAY PLEASE. DON'T MAKE ME FILE REPORTS.**

—G.

"Good grief," he sighed, rubbing his head. "As if we didn't have enough to worry about already."

"What's happened?"

"Gabriel wants to meet up tomorrow, presumably concerning how we've managed to get ourselves tangled up in something this heinous already."

"Both of us, or just you?"

"She didn't specify. Why, are you planning on not going?"

"Not if I can help it. Much too much to be done here still."

"If that's the case, then I should stay. I'll send another telegram back, tell her we can't—"

Gav was already shaking his head, lips pinched. "No, no, knowing Gabriel, that'll make it worse. It's only, what, a two-day trip? I can spare you for two days."
"Gav, I'm really not comfortable leaving you alone just now."

"Why not?"

"Why not? 'Cos you've been acting damnably strange ever since we got here, and I'm scared of what might happen if I leave!"

"Come off it, I'm fine. Nothing's happened in days, it was just a rough patch, that's all. Anyway, if anything goes terrifically wrong, I've got Casimir to look after me 'til you get back."

"That's not reassuring."

"I've said it before and I'll doubtless have to say it again: jealousy doesn't become you."

"It isn't about jealousy!"

"It damn well is!" Gav snarled, slamming his hands down on the table. Dan jumped so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. "If you're going to lie to me, you could at least have the courtesy to do it well!"

"I'm not lying, I don't trust the bastard! He's got you wrapped round his little finger and I shudder to bloody think what he's planning to do with you!"

"That, Daniel, is what we call jealousy!"

"How can you be so bloody stupid? Until a week ago, you felt the same way about him I did, and then he got his damn teeth in you—"

"He's had nothing in me, thank you very—"

"Shut up! Shut up, for God's sake, shut your damn mouth and listen for one damn minute! I'm not blind, Gavin! Every time you talk to him, he twists your arm, and he's not bloody subtle about it, and you're acting just as damn erratically with him as you are with every other damn thing, and—Christ alive, how the hell am I meant to trust you if you won't tell me what's going on?"

"You might try thinking with your brain instead of with your prick," Gav spat.

"I might have an easier time of it if you weren't such a fucking frigid bitch!"

The crash of the breaking coffee cup was like a gunshot. Gav flinched. Dan's fingers stung. His arm rang with violent vibrations. A pit of cold in his stomach bubbled over, quenching the red heat under his skin. The haze cleared from his vision.

Gav stared up at him, cowering. Rubbing his mouth, sick to his stomach, Dan took a step back, then another.

"I'm sorry," he choked. "I'm—I'm sorry, I didn't mean. . . . I'll just—I'll clean that up."

Shaky and dizzy, he picked his way across the room and knelt by the shards of ceramic, the splattered coffee on the wall and floor. His hands trembled so badly he could only pick up the largest pieces, and even then had difficulty holding on to them.

"Have you been drinking?" Gav asked. His voice was strained, barely held together.

"No," said Dan. "But . . . not by a large margin."
Gav sniffled and let out a breath. Dan kept his eyes on the broken ceramic, the sticky mess underneath it.

"I think that you had better go and meet with Gabriel," Gav said. "And take the time in between to— to sort yourself out."

"Should I bother coming back?" He could barely speak past the lump in his throat. His vision blurred and swam.

"That's up to your discretion. If you think you can—can—if there isn't going to be a repeat performance, then—but I won't tolerate this sort of behaviour, Daniel. I simply won't tolerate it."

Dan swallowed, kept his head down, let the tears in his eyes spill over silently.

"I suppose I ought to leave right away," he said.

"Yes," said Gav, thready with something approaching relief. "I think that would be for the best."

He nodded. He didn't even feel it when he cut his finger on a shard of ceramic.

"I'm sorry, Gav," he said. It came out as a whisper, hoarse and tearful.

Gav sniffled again. His breaths were chopped up, staccato, by the intensity of his shaking.

"You had damn well better be," he said.

The Jolly Boatman was the sorriest place Dan had ever seen. Fitting, he thought, for the sorriest man in all of England.

It had been a long, cramped, bumpy train from Paris, and then a long, cramped, choppy ferry across the Channel. He'd rented a barren hotel room, not slept a wink all night and not left the bed all day, watching the hours drain down the face of his pocket-watch. At three o'clock he'd roused himself, put as much effort as he could muster into tidying up, and dragged his carcass out onto the rain-grey streets. He'd left all his bags in the hotel room.

All the bags he'd taken to Marseille, anyway. He'd have a few more to pack up, once he got to London.

He arrived at about five past the hour, damp and miserable, and spotted Gabriel loitering under an awning down the block. She came to meet him, and he shook her hand reflexively when she offered it to him.

"Gruchy," she said. "Good to see you in one piece. Where's Free?"

"Stayed in Paris," said Dan. "There was a lot to be done. Apparently."

"Are you feeling all right? You look awful."

Dan shook his head and rubbed his face. "It's been a difficult few days."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Let's get out of the rain, and you can tell me what's been happening. I'm afraid we'll have to find someplace other than the pub, though."
"That's . . . actually ideal, if I'm being honest, but why?"

She shrugged. "They won't let me in the front and I refuse to go in the back."

"They what?"

"Don't make a scene. There's a coffee house not far from here, we can try there."

"Well—all right. If you say so."

They moved off together, Gabriel under her umbrella and Dan under his hat. Sure enough, there was a coffee house a few blocks down the street. Although they received a large number of hostile looks when they entered, no one said anything. The host seated them at the very back of the shop, tucked away out of sight at a tiny table that wiggled if it was breathed on, despite the fact that the place was half empty. When five minutes had gone past with nobody coming by to take their order, Dan took matters into his own hands.

"I'll just go and ask at the counter," he decided, getting up. "What should I get for you?"

"If they've got rooibos, that. If not, just black coffee."

"Will do."

They did not, in fact, have rooibos, so Dan returned with two black coffees. He sat and sipped his, scalding his tongue to mollify his indignation.

"Honestly, it's ridiculous," he grumbled. "Horrendous service. I don't know how they stay open."

"Presumably it's better if you don't walk in with a Black woman," said Gabriel.

Dan blinked. "Surely, that's not—"

Gabriel raised her eyebrows. Dan sipped his coffee.

"Right," he said. "Well. Makes it even worse, doesn't it. They shouldn't treat you like that, like a—a lesser class of person."

"A staggering insight, Gruchy. Never would have thought of it myself."

"I only meant—right. Sorry."

"Your heart's in the right place, although I do feel I must point out that you and Free do it, as well."

"We—we do? How, when?"

"It's in the little things. Like only offering forty percent at most commission on cases you're not even working on, while someone else is paying you exorbitantly. Or the way you'll offer your chair to a White woman, but not me. You've certainly gotten better about interrupting me, but only through very concerted effort on my part."

Dan sipped his coffee again, swallowing down his automatic objections.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll . . . do better. Or—well. I would."

"Oh dear, that sounds ominous. Is it to do with why you look like you've been run over?"
"It's—well, yes, but I wouldn't want to burden you with it. It isn't your job, anyway, and you've got enough to do without having to be my—my counsellor."

"Gruchy, I'm asking you. I want to be burdened."

Dan's resolve crumbled. In one blabbering rush, he spilled the whole thing to her—Gav's erratic and frightening behaviour, Chad's appearance and disappearance, Casimir's inexplicable leverage, the gruesome murders and the mysterious footprints and, at last, the altercation between himself and Gav. He couldn't bring himself to go into detail, too sick with guilt and fear to push the words up his throat, but he got the gist across. Gabriel sat quietly and listened through the whole thing, until Dan ran out of steam. While he idled, she sat back and folded her arms.

"Well," she said. "What a damn mess."

Despite himself, he snorted.

"Understatement of the century," he mumbled. He took out his kerchief and wiped his nose. "I've got no idea what to do about any of it, and—I don't even know if I should go back. I think I shouldn't. I think that might be for the best."

"Gruchy, that's the exact opposite of the best idea, here."

"I don't think you understand just what it is I've done."

"Most likely not, but what I do understand is that Free is in trouble, and you're probably the only person who can get him out of it."

"I don't know about only. He's got Dubois to look after him."

"Dubois is the trouble."

Dan looked up. Gabriel was scowling, flinty and taut, hard in the jaw and sharp in the eye.

"How d'you mean?" he asked.

"From what you've told me—and from what I've observed—all of this started when the two of you got to Marseille, correct? Free was ill before, certainly, although whether in body or mind it was unclear. He certainly wasn't having any outbursts, or sleepwalking, or forgetting things. It was only when you started interacting with Dubois that it got worse, and the longer you've stayed, the worse it's gotten. The way I see it, there are two possibilities for what's causing it, and both of them hinge on Dubois."

"What are they?"

"Either he's found out some dirt on Free that you don't know, and is blackmailing him, or else—and I am sorry to say this—they're involved."

The old crushing pain squeezed down on Dan's chest again, so tight he couldn't breathe. He took a gulp of coffee and could barely swallow it. His eyes wandered to the grain of the table, too heavy to raise any higher.

"Can't say it hadn't occurred to me," he said. "At least . . . the second bit."

"Whichever it is, it isn't playing nice with the stress of getting tangled back up with the Théâtre and the murders. If you can get him out from under Dubois' thumb, I guarantee you it'll improve. If you
leave him there, it will only get worse."

"He doesn't want me to come back, though."

"Did he tell you that?"

Dan fidgeted. "Not . . . exactly, no."

"Then either he does want you to come back, or it'll be a lesson to him in how to communicate properly."

Chewing his lip, Dan stared into his coffee like it would give him answers. All he could see was his own face, haggard, sleepless, dull. He took a deep breath.

"Gabriel?" he said. "What do I do?"

"In my opinion? You ought to go back to Paris as soon as possible. Next chance you get to talk with Free, when Dubois isn't there, ask him what's happening. Reassure him that whatever Dubois' dangling over him, you're willing to help. And then—this is the important part—whatever Dubois' dangling over him, whatever he's done or not done, you've got to help."

"But—how, though? I don't even know what's wrong!"

"Neither do I, Gruchy, but at least three people are dead, two of them young children, and it's obvious to me that you and Free aren't going to do anything about it until you've worked out your differences, so I think you'd better hop to it."

Wincing, Dan said, "All right, yeah, we've maybe sort of . . . lost the thread of priorities."

"I'd say so."

"The police are working on it, though, I'm sure it's not down to us."

"The police are useless, and you know it."

"I . . . cannot argue with you on that," said Dan. He sighed, rubbed his face, set his coffee down. "Gabriel, thank you. For—all of this. I think you're probably the only person I know with any blasted sense, and I'd be lost without you, and . . . I also think you should take full commission on the cases. All of them you do whilst we're gone."

Her eyebrows shot up. She blinked.

"That's unexpected, but not unwelcome," she said. "I will very gratefully accept that offer."

Dan nodded. "And—look, if there's anything else you need, anything that I can help with, let me know, yeah? 'Cos you didn't have to come all the way out here, and listen to me babble, and—and spend time you could've been working to help me get my head in order, and I appreciate that. I want to do right by you, even if I can't . . . really do right by anybody else."

"I might need you to write a few letters to get your clients to actually pay me."

"Are you serious?"

"They're surprisingly recalcitrant all of a sudden."

"Well, give me the names and addresses, and I'll get right on it. If nothing else, I can have them send
their cheques to me, and then pass them on to you."

"Thank you."

"Yeah, any time. If there's anything else, let me know."

Gabriel took her time responding. She drank her coffee, fiddled with her fingernails, glanced around the coffee house and chewed her lip.

"There is one thing," she said. "I need about a month off. I could do as few as three weeks, but not really any less than that."

"Er . . . how soon?"

"No time limit. I didn't want to ask too soon after starting, but it is very important."

"All right," said Dan. "I'd like maybe a week's notice before you go, so we can get our—our things in order, but . . . yeah, take the month."

Her shoulders sagged. She nodded. "Thank you. Sincerely. It means a great deal to me."

"Of course." He hesitated, then asked, "May I ask what it's for? You haven't got to answer, if it's not my business."

Again, she didn't reply right away.

"About two weeks before I met you," she said to the wall, "my aunt died. My mother's sister. She had no children of her own, but she practically raised me. She named me. We knew she was ill when I left Nigeria, but I'd hoped I'd get to see her again. I . . . didn't. All I got was a letter, telling me where she'd been buried. Technically, I should've gotten to pick the place, but—I wasn't there. I'd like to at least go and . . . and see her. Say my goodbyes."

"Oh, God, Gabriel, I'm so sorry," he said, aching all through his chest. "I wish you'd told me sooner, I would've—well, I don't know, but I wish you'd told me sooner."

She shrugged. "If I'd wanted you to know, I would have."

"That . . . is a fair point. At any rate—yes, take the month. Take as long as you need. We'll keep your desk tidy for you."

That almost got a smile out of her.

"Thank you. You're a good man, Gruchy. Despite what anyone else may think about you, I know that's true."

"I—well," Dan sputtered. "I . . . would beg to differ. Honestly I've not been particularly good to you at all, I mean, decent at best."

"You gave me job, negotiated to a nearly fair starting wage, helped me find somewhere to live, and you do your best to listen when I talk. You're not perfect, but you're trying, and that's more than I get from anyone else."

"I think that says more about everyone else than it does about me," said Dan, squirming in his jacket.

"I disagree." She sipped her coffee and set it on the table, keeping her hands wrapped round it. "If I may ask, are you religious?"
"Not for a very long time, no. Er, sorry."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to evangelize. I just wanted to ask: would it bother you if I prayed for you? At least as regards your current predicament?"

"That . . . I think that would be fine," said Dan, oddly touched. "Thank you. For that."

"There isn't much else I can do. Now, I think you've got a boat to catch, if you want to get back to Paris before tomorrow."

Dan tipped his head and drained his coffee.

"As always," he said, "you're absolutely right."
At the hotel room door, seconds after he'd knocked, Dan's doubts finally caught up with him.

His suit was clammy from the rain, rumpled from the long journey back to Paris. He wasn't completely sure how late it was, but it was past midnight. He shifted his sweaty grip on the roses he'd bought back in Calais. His hair was falling in his eyes, and he'd not shaved, and the closest thing he'd had to a bath was walking through the rain, and he suddenly and fervently hoped that Gav wasn't in, just to buy himself a few more minutes—

Footsteps approached on creaking floorboards. Dan's heart leapt into his throat. He strangled the rose stems, sending a flurry of petals to the floor. He took a step back, stood up straighter—thought better of it, slouched back down again.

The door opened. Gav looked him over. He was still dressed. His hair stood out at all angles like he'd been pulling on it. There was a tremor in his hands that spoke of one too many cups of coffee, a redness to his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights. His skin was waxen, his lips pale.

"Roses, Dan?" he said quietly. "Really?"

"Well, er, yes. It—it does look a bit silly, now, or at least now that you've mentioned it, er, I just thought—well, I don't know what I thought, to be honest with you, thought it might be a-a-a nice . . . sort of gesture, um, of apology—but I have, also, got a replacement. For the cup. That I broke. It's just—it's in my bag right now, and the flowers would've got squashed, and I didn't really, um—"

"D'you want to come in?" Gav offered.

"Yes," said Dan, sagging. "If that would be all right. Yes, I would like that a lot."

Gav stood aside. With much bumbling and stammering, Dan managed to get all his bags in the door. Once it was closed behind him, he shoved a hand back through his hair and, belatedly, offered the roses to Gav.

"Er . . . here," he said. "If you want them. It's fine if you don't! It—oh, should I have not brought all my bags in? I didn't even—sorry, that should've been asked already, I'm sorry, I didn't—"

Gav took the roses from him, glanced them over once, then tossed them over his shoulder and threw his arms round Dan instead. Dan froze, his hands upraised and his heart in his throat. Gav buried his face in Dan's shoulder, trembling.

"Don't ever do this to me again," he whispered.

"I can't promise," said Dan, every word laced with pain. "I can't promise you it'll never happen again, and I wish I could, and—and by God, I'll try, but—"

Gav shook his head. "I thought you weren't coming back."

"I . . . thought you wouldn't want me to."

"Idiot," Gav scoffed, squeezing him tighter.

Slowly, gently, Dan folded Gav into his arms. The trembling damped down, but didn't settle completely. Dan kissed his head, soaking in the warmth of him. There was a faint, flowery scent
lingering about him, like perfume, passing familiar.

"I am sorry," Dan said. "I'm sorry for what I said, and what I did, and . . . I'm sorry for running off. I'm sorry for leaving you here. I know you don't want to tell me what's going on, and—and that's your prerogative, maybe I've got no right to know. I just want you to know that—whatever it is, whatever's happened or happening . . . I'm here. I'm here and I love you and I'll help you if I can."

"What if you can't? What if no one can?"

"Then I'll still be here, just in case."

"Even if—" Gav began, and stopped.

"Yes," said Dan. "Even if. There's nothing you could do that would ever make me stop loving you."

"What if it was—awful? What if it was just awful?"

"I said nothing and I meant nothing, B."

"Or what if it's . . . something I was? Something I am."

Dan frowned. He rubbed Gav's back, kissed his hair. The flowery scent was stronger there, clinging to the perfect strands. Gav's heart pounded against his chest.

"I don't reckon so," Dan said. "I mean, I can't think of anything. Unless you were—I dunno, secretly a woman or something, but that's obviously not the case, so I don't think you've got anything to worry about."

Gav sniffled. His hands were clenched tight on the back of Dan's jacket. He was still shaking.

"There's just so much," he said quietly. "There's so much and it's all tangled up and I don't know where one thing ends and the next begins and—and I'm frightened, Dan. I'm frightened of what you'll think of me. I'm frightened of . . . what you'd do."

It hit like a bullet through the lung. Dan flinched from the pain of it. He could feel Gav's bones through his clothes, so much closer beneath the skin than they'd once been. He felt suddenly monstrous, a Frankenstein's creature, like one incautious squeeze would shatter Gav into powder.

"I would never, never hurt you," Dan said softly. "Not even at my most horrible. I would die first."

"Is that what you said to Sarah, too?"

Dan bit his lip, squeezed his eyes shut as his lungs filled with blood. Gav had not loosened his grip, had made no move to get away. Dan kept his hands gentle anyway, his embrace easy to escape.

"I was different then, Gav," he said. "I was drunk and hurting and lost. And by God, I learned my lesson. I'm not going back there. I'm not going to undo all the work you did to save me from the man I was."

Gav let out a breath, somewhere between laugh and scoff.

"So it is what you said to her, then."

"Well . . . yes. When it comes right down to it, I—I probably did, at some point. But—"

"You've stopped drinking, and you actually love me, and, and, and. Any of it could change, Dan.
I'm not looking to be convinced. I'm explaining to you why I can't tell you what's wrong with me."

Dan swallowed down the anguish rising in his chest, the sobs and futile protests. He kissed Gav's hair again.

"Can you tell someone?" he asked, hoarse and quavering. "Is there someone out there who—who can make it so you haven't got to do this alone?"

Gav took a deep breath, tensing as though he expected retaliation. "There's Casimir."

"Then—God bless him, I s'pose."

Some of the tension seeped out of Gav's shoulders. His breath came a little easier, although his heart was still pounding. Dan held him, rubbed his arm and nestled in his hair, determined not to be the first to pull away. Breath by breath, his nose filled with that flowery perfume, until at last he could ignore it no longer.

"Gav?"

"Yeah?"

"This is going to sound like a—an immediate breach of the peace, but I promise I've got a good reason for it. Have you been to see Casimir lately?"

Gav pulled back from him, suspicious, accusatory. "Why?"

"'Cos . . . you smell like opium, B," said Dan, his guts in tangles. "And I'm just—I'm hoping for a best-case scenario, where it wasn't . . . yours."

Gav's eyes focused on something behind Dan's head, flicking over a different scene. His mouth pinched at the corners. He shook his head.

"I never even saw it. Though it might explain a few things."

"Good," Dan sighed. "Good, well, that's a load off my mind. Er . . . please don't start."

"I'm not a complete imbecile, Dan."

"No, of course not, but—I just worry, that's all. I worry about the sort of trouble he might get you into. He worries Gabriel, as well, it's not just me. Even you're suspicious of him more often than not!"

"I was. I won't blame you for mistrusting him, but I will ask that you don't pressure me to follow suit."

"Can I ask what it is that's changed your mind?"

Gav shrugged. "I've never met anyone who was so . . . like me. It's strange and nervous and—a relief. A tremendous relief. Although if it's any consolation, I'm also starting to understand why you get so frustrated with me."

"Some consolation, though mostly from the fact that if he's anything like you, he's all talk. It—it's very good talk! It's really exceptional talk, at least on your part, just—well, I just can't imagine you doing much harm to anyone, that's all. And that's a comfort, 'cos it means Casimir won't be doing much harm to you, either. That's really all I've been after."
"All?"

"Well. That's . . . what I've concluded is the important bit. Now."

Shaking his head, Gav said, "You're hopeless."

"I really am."

"Have you slept?"

"Not a wink in two days. You?"

"Similar. Should we go to bed?"

"I would like that, yes. If—if it's all right. If I've not . . . lost that privilege."

"You've been sufficiently remorseful for my accounting. Just—never do it again. All right? I don't want to have to decide what to do if it happens again."

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't," said Dan.

Gav took Dan's face in his hands and kissed him chastely.

"I love you," he said. "I know everything's been horrible and I've been a mess, but I do love you."

Dan kissed him back. "I love you, as well, B. Even though I've been horrible and everything's been a mess."

"Good. Now that's settled: shall we go to bed?"

"Please. I'm bloody knocked."

"Now you mention it, so am I. But Dan?"

"Yeah?"

"Have a bath first."

At two o'clock in the morning, Dan woke to the acute sensation of danger.

He lay perfectly still, not even daring to breathe. Lamplight spilled through the parted curtains, casting the room in silhouettes and shadows. Paris roared like a gale outside. His pulse thundered in his ears, his skin prickling. The bed next to him was empty.

He could feel Gav standing behind him.

Any sound of breath was drowned out by the ambient noise. The floorboards remained silent under unmoving feet, not even a sway in his balance to give him away. The heat of his body disrupted the flow of air in the room, a warm spot in the cool night. The weight of his attention was like a foot on Dan's throat.

Dan took a slow, deep breath. He swallowed. His arm shifted minutely, preparing to roll him over, to coax Gav back to bed again.
Floorboards creaked. A flicker of reflected light flashed on the far wall. Dan froze solid.

The roar of Paris swelled up like seawater to a sinking ship. His throat closed, strangling. Cold sweat crawled down his back. His ears rang. He didn't dare to blink, eyes fixed on the far wall. The prickling of his skin swarmed to a point on the side of his neck, drawn magnetic to whatever Sword of Damocles hung above him by a hair-thin thread.

Silence, and stillness, and the crushing pressure of a foreign attention were all that came from behind him.

He risked a breath, because he could not risk a later gasp. An eddy stirred through the darkness. Another breath, slower, more sleep-like, was met with better stillness.

Dan breathed. Paris muttered on. The pocket watch on the nightstand snipped out thick waxy dollops of time. Dan counted them, tick by tick, measuring his breaths and the frantic pounding of his heart.

A minute. Ten minutes. Half an hour.

Gav had not moved. No light had glanced across the far wall. None of the watch's snipping had eased the tension in the air. His legs and arms were stiff, his back aching.

Forty-five minutes. An hour. The stiffness turned to cramping, the ache to full-blown pain. He wasn't sure he could have moved, even if he'd wanted to.

A creak of shifting weight. Dan held his breath. His heart stopped. His vision blurred with terror. A rustle of cloth. The dispersion of the prickling sensation across his skin. Another creak, another rustle.

Footsteps, moving away, unhurried.

He breathed. He did not move. The watch measured out a minute, then two.

Click.

Dan bit his tongue to keep from screaming. His heart stuttered back to life. His thoughts were nothing but a single, prolonged wail.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click, as steady as the ticking of his watch and infinitely less human. Dan risked a fidget, just to ease the pain of holding still for so long.

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

As slowly and silently as he could, he stretched. He kept his breathing focused, somnolent, though it made him dizzy and weak with the way his heart was pounding. Inch by inch, he shifted his position, aiming to wind up on his back.

Ka-click, ka—

The sudden silence was deafening. Dan closed his eyes like shutters before the storm. The cold attention gusted over him. He fought the instinct to hold his breath—better it thought he was sleeping, better it noticed nothing amiss, better it stayed by the door . . .

Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.

He didn't look. He couldn't risk opening his eyes again, not knowing what was watching him, not
knowing upon what thread its clemency was suspended.

Not knowing what he'd do if it got out.

*Ka-click, ka-click, ka-click.*

For two hours.

Eventually, the noise settled in his ears, fading into the background with the ticking of his watch and the mumble of Paris. He slid in and out of sleep, half-formed dreams lurking in the fog of his mind. The gap in the curtains slowly filled with blue-grey light. The mumble of the city rose again to a mutter, a milk-bottle clatter with paper-boy cries flung over it.

Amongst such a ruckus, it was strange how quiet the room could become.

The panic hit before the realization, an electric shock to the base of his brain. He locked up, frozen in terror and not knowing why, for six horrible seconds before—

A slow creaking of floorboards. Shuffling footsteps, approaching. Dan trembled where he lay. The footsteps rounded the bed. A weight settled opposite him, shifted, sighed, stilled.

For the next hundred beats of Dan's heart, nothing moved. Sunlight painted the insides of his eyelids pink, fell warm across his face. The cold sweat of the night was clammy on the sheets beneath him. As the ringing faded from his ears, he heard slow breathing, not his own.

With his fear clenched between his teeth, Dan cracked an eye open.

Gav lay in the bed, curled up on his side, facing Dan. His eyes were closed, his hands folded beneath his cheek. The vein in his throat showed his pulse ticking along. He was close enough to touch, close enough that his breaths tickled the hairs on Dan's arm. Still, Dan did not reach out to him, did not bridge that suddenly precipitous gulf no matter how much it drew him.

*L'appel du vide,* they called it.

On the bed between them was a six-inch long serrated hunting knife.

"You're up early," Gav remarked, stirring copious amounts of sugar into his coffee. "Sleep all right?"

"Hardly at all," Dan admitted. He hadn't been able to stop jittering yet, couldn't take his eyes off Gav for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Damn and blast, that's no good. Was it nightmares? You should've woken me, I would've helped."

"I don't . . . think so. I think you were sleepwalking again."

"Was I?" He brought his coffee to the table and settled in. He didn't look at all concerned. "Well, then you definitely should've woken me."

"It seemed like a bad idea at the time."

"Why?"

Dan hesitated. He glanced at the bed. He took a deep breath and braced himself.
"Gav, where did you get the knife?"

Gav's brow furrowed. "What knife?"

"This knife," said Dan, withdrawing it from inside his napkin.

The frown smoothed out of Gav's face. His eyes came unfocused. Dan's heart skipped a beat.

"Oh," he said vaguely. "That knife. Right. Casimir lent it to me, I think."

"You think? You don't know?"

"Well—I might've told him, d'you know, about what happened. He was terribly concerned. He offered to let me borrow it, and I—I s'pose I must've accepted, 'cos it's here now. I just don't exactly—no, no I did, I agreed when he offered it. Seems awfully silly now, though, doesn't it? I mean, what am I going to do with a knife? Honestly."

"That's not exactly a relief, but it's good to hear. D'you think you'd mind terribly giving it back to him?"

"I don't see why not. I've no use for it." He blinked, came back into focus, sipped his coffee. "Why, though? You sound nervous."

"I am nervous. You were carrying it about with you last night."

"Well, that's not—"

"You brought it to bed with you."

"If I'm sleepwalking, of course I'm not going to remember to put the bloody knife back."

"Look, regardless, I'd feel a lot better about it if you'd give it back to Casimir. If you—I dunno, walked out the door in your sleep with it, you could be arrested."

You could hurt someone, he did not say, but he couldn't stop himself from thinking it. He tucked the knife back into his napkin, just to lessen the crawling of his skin.

Gav made a face. "Fair point. I'm meeting with Casimir again this afternoon anyway, I'll give it back then."

"Can I ask what the meeting's for?"

"Case things."

"Am I invited to come along?"

"You're invited to stay home and catch up on your sleep so you don't pass out and crack your head open. Don't argue with me, we both know you're useless when you haven't slept. Although when you're done, I might ask you to go and see the police about those files. They're probably hoping we've forgotten."

"I will do that," Dan said carefully, "but if I could, I want to ask you for something as well."

"Which is?"

"Will you see a doctor?"
"Come off it, we haven't got the time for doctors."

"We can make time. I'll go with you, or—if I'm not trustworthy, we'll ask Casimir to go with you, but I really can't carry on as though nothing's wrong anymore, 'cos I don't want all that—that to happen again. And damn it all, I'm scared, Gav. I'm scared that if we ignore it, you're going to get hurt."

Gav pursed his lips. He drank his coffee. He propped his ankle on his knee and scratched his jaw.

"I'll ask Casimir if he's willing," he said. "He might know someone discrete enough. Or be able to make someone be discrete enough, worse comes to worst."

"Thank you," said Dan, sagging with relief. "Honestly. Thank you. I know that's a massive concession on your part, and I really, genuinely appreciate it."

Gav shrugged. "If they chuck me in the loony bin, it's your job to get me back out."

"I will."

"Even if I'm actually mad?"

"If you're mad, then so am I, and I'll keep you company."

"Oh, Dan," Gav sighed. "Of course you would."
Despite his misgivings, Dan remained behind in the hotel room as he'd been told when Gav went out that afternoon. Tempting as it was to stay up and try to sort through things on his own, he had to admit that Gav was right; he was absolutely useless when he hadn't slept, and nothing he did in this state would be any good to anybody. He dropped off the moment his head hit the pillow into a sleep that was deep, but far from dreamless.

He would find himself in the Théâtre, or some place like it. The air was sweltering hot under the stage lights. Someone, some thing, was hunting for him, shuffling with elephantine footsteps, grunting and muttering in a foreign tongue. In sweat-drenched desperation, Dan would hide himself beneath the body of a fallen actor, smear their blood on his face and hold his breath until the looming presence passed over—but scarcely seconds after he'd extracted himself, begun to stumble towards the sound of distant cannon fire, back it would come, and he would return again to the death-ridden stage, to the dust and the dirt and the blood.

In the late afternoon, he finally woke. He was no less exhausted, although his head was brutally clear. He dragged himself out of bed and took a long bath, scrubbing the sweat and the memory of Afghan soil from his skin.

By the time he was done, the sky was turning pink and gold and the lamplighters were gearing up for their work. He dressed as quickly as he could, nearly forgot his wallet, had to go back for his hat, and then, at last, hurried off for the police station. Hopefully, the lieutenant they'd spoken with last time was still on duty; if not, it would make the process much more difficult.

He arrived at the station just before seven o'clock, and, in an unprecedented stroke of luck, found that Lieutenant Durant was both still in and willing to see him. There, however, his luck ended, as the files Gav had requested were not available, and to judge from Durant's tone, they would not be available for a long time, if ever. Dan pressed as much as he dared, but managed to extract no promises from the man. He gave a curt thank-you and collected his hat.

"Mr Gruchy," Durant said, before he could go. "There was one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I recall you asked about funerary arrangements for the victims. It's... being kept out of the papers, due to the sensitive nature of the case, but I wanted to let you know that we got in touch with a next-of-kin. The woman's mother has taken on the task."

"Thank you," Dan said, much more sincerely than last time. "That's something of a relief. Er—while we're speaking of one-more-things and newspapers. I think one of your people might have loose lips."

Durant's mouth turned down at the corners. "We're aware," he said. "It's being looked into."

"Right. Of course. At any rate, thank you for your time, sir. You'll most likely be hearing from us again about those files."

"Yes," he sighed. "I suspect I will."
It was about half seven when Dan left the police station. The sun had sunk below the rooftops, although the sky was still bright and the streets still lively. A cool breeze kept the air fresh, tattering the thin clouds into lace. Dan wandered away from the station, chewing his cheeks and wondering where he ought to go next.

Half seven was getting on towards late, and certainly he wouldn't expect Gav to be out until after dark. It would be sensible to head straight back to the hotel and wait for him there, doubly so because that was where Gav would expect him to be. Still, the last time Dan had left Gav and Casimir alone, it had become a very late, very drunken night, and he had no wish to repeat the experience—and, despite what he'd said to Gav, there were still lingering doubts in his mind about what exactly the two of them were up to together.

It couldn't hurt, could it, if he dropped by Casimir's flat? He could excuse the action easily enough, saying he'd checked back at the hotel and not seen Gav, grown concerned because of the latest bout of sleepwalking, and come to find him. If Gav was there, he would understand that line of reasoning; and if Gav was not there, Dan might have the opportunity to twist Casimir's wrist a little on the nature of their relationship. Of the two of them, he was certainly the more forthright about his affairs, and the repercussions for annoying or upsetting him were markedly less severe.

Somewhere in his heart, he knew it was a bad plan, a faithless and deceitful plan, but perhaps that was called for to uncover a faithless and deceitful act.

With a worm of guilt squirming in his stomach, he planted his feet on the curb and started the arduous process of flagging down a cab.

The building that housed Casimir's flat was lively this time of evening, even on a Thursday. Dan passed several well-dressed, less-than-sober individuals on his way up, and heard much laughter and conversation wafting out from the rooms he passed. When he got to Casimir's door, however, all was quiet. While he wanted to be relieved, the sensation wouldn't come to him. A winch turned on his back, drawing his spine tight. He glanced up and down the corridor.

Instead of raising his fist to knock, he put his ear to the door.

First, he picked up the faint sound of footsteps on creaking floorboards, the rustle of cloth. It was impossible to tell how many people were in the room, but it was certainly more than none. After a moment, Casimir spoke.

"What's troubling you, my sweet?" he asked. Dan bit his tongue. It could be anyone. Gav could be back at the hotel already, could be anywhere other than here, could be—

"This is wrong," Gav said.

Dan clenched his fists so hard his bones creaked. He nearly bit through his tongue to keep from screaming aloud. His insides filled up with razor blades.

"No, simply unaccustomed," Casimir replied. "Almost everyone has said the same thing. It will get easier."

"I don't—we shouldn't be doing this. What if someone sees, what if—my God, what if Dan—?"

"Then it will be, as they say, about damn time. It's tiresome, keeping secrets from him. Besides which, he should know."
“What if he doesn't approve? What if he wants no part of it, what if he hates me?”

“What if God descends from Heaven to pinch my nose? It's about as likely. There is not a doubt in my mind that Daniel will be happy for you. Confused, at first, perhaps, but I'm certain he will understand.”

“But look at me!”

“I have been, and I will continue to, with great pleasure.”

“Stop joking! I'm horrible, I'm hideous, I'm—”

“Still slouching, my sweet.”

“Cassie—”

That was the last damned straw.

Dan hammered on the door. Through the roar in his ears, he heard footsteps approaching, Gav pleading with Casimir not to answer. He couldn't see straight, buzzing like a wasp in a glass jar, his nose full of needles and his guts full of blood.

Casimir answered the door and, contrary to all expectation, burst into a grin bright as stage-lights.

"Daniel! I hoped it was you. Do come in, please. We weren't expecting you, but you're welcome all the same."

He stood aside, beckoning. Knocked off balance and breathless, Dan drifted inside. The room was brightly lit, all the gas lamps turned up and all the curtains tightly closed. Casimir shut the door and skated to the back of the flat, near the bedroom, where a cheval glass had been pulled out and positioned to face the common area.

Cowering there, halfway hidden behind the glass, was Gav.

Who was wearing a dress.

"I'm afraid we may have rather a lot of explaining to do," Casimir mentioned. "But, as I've told Gavin multiple times, it's been getting tiresome keeping this from you, and you really ought to know. Do come out, my sweet. It's too lovely of a gown for you to be hiding it."

He extended a hand. As nervous as a mouse, Gav took it. Casimir led him out into the main area, watching his every movement like a mother hen.

It was, in all fairness, a very lovely gown, although much changed since the last time Dan had seen it. There were ruffles of satin, bundled skirts over a bustle that accentuated a narrow waist. There was intricate beading on the chest and corset, depicting a cascade of blue jay feathers. There were matching silk gloves, a glittering brooch, a lace fan dangling from the wrist.

There was Gav, red and miserable and crying.

Dan stood rooted to the spot, unable to take his eyes off Gav. His head spun so much that it was difficult to stay upright.

"Is . . . is this what. . . ?" he said. He couldn't find the air to say any more.

Gav bit his lip, squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. His hands clenched to fists. He trembled from
head to foot. Casimir patted his arm, gentle, and Gav shrank from the touch. Dan bristled.

"Has he put you up to this?" he demanded. "Because I swear to God, if he's done this to you, I'll kill him."

Upon the instant, Gav crumpled, wracked by such breathless sobbing that Casimir had to hold him up. Dan bit his tongue, cursing its stupidity.

"It's all right, it's all right," Casimir murmured to Gav, leading him to the sofa. "Come and sit down, take a moment to breathe. Can you breathe? We can be rid of the corsetry if—"

Gav shook his head, clutching Casimir's wrist with one hand and the collar of the dress with the other. Casimir shot Dan a look of such utter disdain that it made his teeth splinter.

"I—I didn't mean—look, that came out all wrong," said Dan, his guts in tangles. "I only meant—I meant if . . . if this wasn't something that you wanted, if it was—if at any point you'd been, er, coerced, I meant—of course there's nothing wrong with it, if you haven't been, I just can't imagine why you'd ever want to, you know, of your own accord. . . ."

"My dearest Daniel, I would recommend you close your mouth before you put your foot all the way down your throat," Casimir said.

Dan zipped his lips. Casimir put an arm round Gav's shoulders, while Gav continued to sob.

"Breathe, my sweet. Daniel may have a foolish mouth, but he isn't upset with you. Already, it's going much better than you'd expected!"

Gav sucked down a shuddering breath. Casimir rubbed his arm and held his hand and murmured gentle nothings to him until, at last, he regained some modicum of composure. Dan kept quiet the whole time, though a lake of molten lead was oozing out under his skin.

"There, that's better," said Casimir, wiping the tears from Gav's cheek with his thumb. "Shall we take a stab at explaining all this? Daniel has been very patient, but I'm sure he'd like to know."

"Some form of explanation would be nice, yes," said Dan. "Although—not at the cost of more, er . . . upset. I meant if it's too upsetting, I can wait."

Gav shook his head, sniffling. "You do it," he said to Casimir.

"I'm sure he'd prefer to hear it from you," Casimir said, but Gav was already shaking his head again.

"I can't," he whispered.

"All right. Daniel, come and sit down."

Dan obeyed, easing himself down on the divan across from the two of them. Casimir smiled politely and inclined his head.

"So, it went something like this: Gavin approached me about the issue the night we all arrived in Paris. He told me this was something that had been preying on his mind for a long time, but he'd always been much too frightened and ashamed to pursue it. In order to ease his fears, I brought him to meet Francine and the other ladies, and, since then, we've been working on making something he's comfortable with. We were planning to make a debut this weekend, but it seems neither he nor the dress is quite ready."
"Oh," Dan said faintly. "So . . . oh. I see. It—it certainly explains some things. So the footprints . . . ?"

"No, actually, I'm happy to say I was entirely truthful on that count. It made for a convenient excuse, of course, but I think it is perhaps a topic for a different time."

"Gav, do you believe him?"

Gav nodded, sniffling. The sheer, unadulterated misery on his face made Dan want to crawl into a hole and die.

"Right. Well. That's good enough for me. Although . . . presumably there were, er, other conversations. Had. At the hotel."

"Many, although it doesn't surprise me that he's kept them under wraps," Casimir said. "He's been terribly concerned about your reaction. He seems to have it in his head that you'd be disgusted with him."

"I don't know where he would've got that idea, because I'm not at all. Gav, I'm not disgusted with you. Not at all."

Gav sniffled. His lip curled.

"I am," he said. "I'm horrible. I look like a—a monster."

"What? No! You—you look like you, B. Just—you in a dress. And it's a very fetching dress, as well! It's a lovely dress."

"I hate it," Gav said thickly.

"You liked it well enough when it was on the mannequin," said Casimir, insulted. Dan glared at him, and he added, "Although it may require further tailoring."

"No, I hate—the dress is fine, it's lovely, the problem is me. I hate me in it. I make it look stupid and horrible and ugly."

"Not to my eye," said Casimir. "Daniel?"

"I think it's lovely, and you're lovely."

"You're lying, and I can tell."

Dan rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh. Carefully, he took Gav's hands.

"I think," he said gently, "that you look uncomfortable, and out of place, and frightened. That's all, B. That's the only thing I see here that's amiss."

"Dan, I've always been uncomfortable and out of place and frightened."

He took a moment to absorb this, his tongue tied by the fear of saying the wrong thing. He squeezed Gav's hands, ran his thumbs along the neat seams in the satin.

"I'm sorry that you've had to live like that," he said. "And I wish you had . . . no, I'm sorry, that I've behaved in such a way that you didn't feel safe telling me about it. I'm sorry that you felt—that you had to resort to secrecy."
Gav snorted. "You mean that I had to resort to Casimir?"

"Well—yes."

"I'm flattered," Casimir intoned.

"You should be," said Dan. "You should be doubled over by the weight of the honour you've been given."

"All right, steady on, Lancelot," Gav said. He sniffled again, went to wipe his nose, and stopped, looking down at his glove with considerable distress. Quick as thinking, Dan whipped out his kerchief.

"Here, have mine," he said.

"Thank you." With a great trumpeting sound, Gav blew his nose, then blotted it dry. He nearly smiled. "I make a sorry Guinevere, though, don't I."

"Nonsense," said Casimir. "Guinevere would be green with envy. You are a Helen of Troy, a Cosette, a perfect Mercédès Herrera!"

"Am I? And which one of you is Dantès, in this analogy?"

"Clearly, Daniel is."

"Making you Mondego?"

"Heaven forbid! If I am anyone, I am Haydée; but I would prefer to be no one. I have infiltrated the narrative to ensure an ending where neither waiting nor hoping is necessary."

"Ridiculous, you've caused twice as much trouble as you've solved."

"I? I caused nothing. I merely abided by your wishes."

"If you hadn't been flirting at every possible opportunity, it wouldn't have been half as bad."

"You knew I wasn't serious."

"Dan didn't."

"You could have told him at any time, my sweet."

"So could you!"

"I tried to, but you wouldn't let me say it directly, and Daniel is not a roundabout man, except at the waist."

"Don't do that, it's not funny when you do it."

"My apologies. At the very least, he can rest easy now."

"Can—can I?" Dan stammered.

"Why yes, of course," said Casimir, twinkling. "After all, I only sleep with men."

Gav turned pink. Casimir winked at him, less lascivious and more conspiratorial. Dan rubbed his forehead.
"D'you know," he said, "I think I could really do with a cup of tea."

Over the past hour, things had settled.

Tea had been made for Dan, white wine for the other two. Casimir had brought out a phonograph and set quiet music to playing. As the tension eased and the ice melted, he and Gav fell into an increasingly invested discussion of whether or not Edmond Dantès enjoyed the company of other men. In Casimir's opinion, it was obviously so; he contended that no man could be so intensely dramatic and yet adhere only to the proclivities of polite society, and cited his relationship with Abbé Faria as further evidence. Gav disagreed; Dantès was obviously in love with Mercédès, and showed no interest in other men, apart from his interest in disgracing and murdering them.

"It could be both," Casimir pointed out.

"Both men and women," Gav asked, "or both romantic and homicidal interest?"

"Yes," said Casimir. "Both."

When Gav grew more preoccupied with his wine and Casimir's copy of *Le Comte* than with the discussion, Casimir went into the kitchen to start another pot of tea and crack open a second bottle of wine. Dan mustered his courage and approached.

"Could I speak with you for a moment?" he said. He glanced at Gav. "In private?"

"Of course," said Casimir. "The balcony, perhaps?"

"Outside? Won't people...?"

"We'll keep the curtains drawn. Miss Free, if you will excuse us for just a moment?"

Gav hid his face in his hand and waved them off, pink up to his ears. Casimir led Dan out onto the balcony. The night was cool and clear, smelling faintly of rain. Stars glittered above them, and lamps below, leaving them adrift along a mirror plane of light. Casimir draped both arms on the railing and gazed out over the city.

"Am I in trouble?" he asked, playful.

"No," said Dan. Casimir turned to him, sobering instantly.

"Are you in trouble?"

"No, there's no—it's not about trouble. Of any kind."

"And yet, you seem troubled."

Dan took a deep breath. He couldn't look Casimir in the eye, so he addressed his left ear instead.

"Look, I know that honesty doesn't come naturally to you, but I need to know, honestly and bluntly, if you can muster it: what are your intentions with Gav?"

Casimir frowned. Dan barrelled onward, words spilling through his mouth like river water.

"Because—I love him desperately, but I can't remember the last time I saw him happy, and if—and if
it's because of me, then . . . ."

He choked off, turned his face away so Casimir wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. Music wafted out onto the balcony, thin and faint. The railing was cold in his clenched hand. All around them, Paris murmured quiet nothings to itself in the dark.

"Daniel," Casimir said, "I have for you an exciting and novel concept, perhaps kept too good of a secret from men of the world such as yourself, but it's known in certain exclusive circles as friendship."

Dan shook his head. "I hope you'll forgive me if I find it hard to believe that's all it is. I've seen the way you look at him."

"Have you seen the way he looks at you?"

Against his better judgement, Dan glanced back through a gap in the curtains. Gav was lounging on the divan, sipping white wine and running his hand over every ruffle of the dress. He caught Dan looking and grinned, twiddling satin-gloved fingers at him. Red in the face, Dan waved back.

"He is, in your own words, desperately in love with you," Casimir went on. "I'll admit that you are not incorrect in thinking I hold a certain fondness for him. We are, in several ways, kindred spirits, although I find myself less inclined towards the trappings of womanhood. If the cast of characters were somewhat smaller, I would not be averse to pursuing more intimate endeavours; and yet, things are as they are, and I must do the best I can with what I am given."

"Ahah, more intimate endeavours? When not an hour ago, you said—"

"I know what I said, Daniel," Casimir interrupted, speaking softly, keeping his eyes averted. "Do you?"

It all clicked together at once. Dan went slimy from head to toe. Casimir glanced at him out of the corners of his eyes and faked a smile.

"You needn't shy away; I know when I'm not wanted. You asked what my intentions with Gavin are; they are only and solely to make him happy. There is nothing in the world I can imagine that would make him more miserable than losing you."

It was like a swift punch in the chest. Dan struggled to regain his breath, only to have the tears in his eyes spill over. Hurriedly, he scrubbed at his face, wiping away both the tears and any chance he'd had at denying their presence. Casimir began to reach out to him, but stopped before he got anywhere close. He folded his arms back on the railing and gripped his own wrists instead.

"The weight of another's happiness is a crushing burden to bear alone," he said gently. "I'm sorry that you've been denied assistance for so long."

"You're an angel," Dan said thickly. He sniffled and cleared his throat, clenched his jaw and dug his fingernails into his palms.

"If angels are anything like me, I pity the poor souls condemned to Heaven," said Casimir. "Come now, cry if you must; it's a lovely night for weeping."

"No—no, I'm all right, I'm all right. Sorry. God, I'm a mess, hahah."

"I've known messier. Although I might recommend regaining your composure before you go back in."
For a time, neither of them spoke. The music played, the breeze whispered, Paris trundled on. Through deep breaths and careful concentration, Dan pieced his composure back together. He watched Gav through the gap in the curtains, sipping his wine and making a poor approximation of conducting the phonograph orchestra. The clumsiness of his attempts didn't seem to bother him at all.

Dan leaned back on the railing and sighed. Something warm had settled in his chest, some migratory bird come home to roost after a long, bleak winter.

"In case it wasn't clear," Casimir said to the sea of lights, "you should ask him to dance."

"Oh," said Dan. He cleared his throat. "Right. Thanks."

"Good luck, Sir Lancelot."

Since Dan had no idea how to respond to that, he mustered his courage and ventured back inside. Gav was just finishing his wine, perusing some passage in the middle of *Le Comte*. Dan cleared his throat. Gav looked up at him, sparkle and shine, blush and smile. Dan extended a hand.

"Mademoiselle," he said stiffly. "Er . . . may I have this dance?"

Gav cracked the biggest, most beautiful grin he'd ever seen. Tickled pink, he took Dan's hand.

"You may, monsieur," he said.

Dan helped him to his feet and brought him to the clear space in the middle of the flat. He settled a hand on Gav's hip, and Gav put his on Dan's shoulder. Dan offered a sheepish smile.

"It's been a long time since I've danced," he said. "So if I stand on your toes, I'm sorry."

"I'll stand on yours first, more than likely," said Gav. "I've never really danced before."

"Nonsense, of course you have."

"Only leading."

"Well—lead, then," said Dan. "I don't mind."

"I do," said Gav. He ducked in and pecked Dan on the lips. "You lead, B. I'd like to be led."

"All right, then. I will."

With the very first step, Gav stood on his foot.

Eventually, the music ran out. The phonograph crackled and went silent. Gav, with his head resting on Dan's shoulder and his arms looped round his waist, let out a long sigh.

"B?" he mumbled.

"Yes, B?"

"Thank you."

"I dunno what we're meant to do now, though."

"Good question. I think I've had my share of leading, though."

Gav wrinkled his nose. "I reckon we'd better collect Casimir before he falls asleep out there."

"Seems wise. Should you, or shall I?"

"We'll both go."

"Er . . . d'you know about . . . ?"

"Of course I know."

"Right. Good. It's—entirely one-sided."

"I know that, too." He sighed again, roused himself, and pulled away, stopping to kiss him before they got completely disentangled. "The poor bastard."

"Oh, stop," said Dan, while his cheeks went hot. Gav smiled and kissed him again.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go and see what state he's in."

Arm in arm, they went to the balcony. Casimir was still there, regarding the lights of Paris, arms folded on the railing. As Gav and Dan came out, they caught the tail end of a sniffle, a quick turn of the head to feign inattention.

"Cassie?" Gav said. "Are you all right?"

Casimir wiped his eyes and turned, a self-deprecating smile affixed to his face.

"Perfectly, perfectly all right," he said, choked up. "It was—simply such a lovely night for weeping, I would have hated to let it go to waste—"

"Is it something that can be helped?" Dan asked. "After all you've done for us, it wouldn't seem right, to—to leave you out in the cold."

Casimir shook his head. "No, there is no help for me. I could not infringe upon your goodwill, when I have been so troublesome to you even in my good intentions. Even if I could, there is little that could be done—nothing, indeed, that can be done. I am at peace with my sorrows. They are old friends of mine. Thank you, sincerely, thank you, but no."

"Well, then come in and have a drink," said Gav. "If we can't alleviate your sorrows, we can at least drown them."

"That," said Casimir, "I will very gratefully do."
Reconciliation

It was one o'clock in the morning before Casimir finally passed out in the armchair, although he would've drunk three or four more temperate men under the table by then. For the sake of some semblance of privacy, Dan carried him to his bed and put him on his side, just in case he didn't hold his drink well when he was unconscious.

"All squared away," he said, returning to the sitting area and settling in across from Gav. "Though we probably ought to keep an eye on him. Poor sod."

"I get the impression that he's struggling quite desperately with some foolishness of the heart," said Gav. "Not that he'll say anything about it."

"C'est pas tes affaires?"

"Precisely."

"It's—it's not to do with me, is it?"

"I don't think so, or at least, not directly. I'd call whatever candle he's got for you more of a symptom."

"Thank God for that, at least."

A gentle breeze stirred the curtains. Laughter and drunken singing bubbled up from the Champs Elysées below. Gav tugged off his gloves and draped them on the arm of the divan, his movements stiff and weary. The smile had gone from his face. He kept his eyes down.

"Should we talk about this?" Dan asked softly.

"I . . . don't know," Gav admitted. "I don't know. I've been frightened to, and I'm still frightened to, and—maybe it'd be better if we just forgot it had happened at all."

"If it's any consolation, I really, genuinely am relieved. Maybe not—as relieved as I could be, there's still rather a lot I don't understand, but . . . it's not what I thought, and I'm glad it isn't."

"What did you think it was?"

Dan shrugged and scratched his ear and looked somewhere else.

"Thought you were sleeping together, didn't I," he mumbled.

"Oh, bloody hell, no," said Gav, aghast. "Have a little faith, B, I'm not a total bastard."

"Right. Sorry. I just—I don't know, I s'pose I jumped right to the worst-case scenario and didn't bother thinking of other ones."

"Well, you're not meant to be the one detectiving. Besides, even I might've had a hard time guessing . . . this."

"Is it—sorry, if you don't want me asking questions—"

"It's all right."
"Good. Right. Is this more of a—I'm really not sure how to phrase this, er... Is—is this a permanent change, or...?"

"No, no," Gav said hurriedly. "It's just a bit of fun, that's all. I'm not going to go outside like this. It's just—tomfoolery."

"Tomfoolery, you sound like an old man."

"Hahah, yes, well, that's the only word for it I've got."

Dan bit his cheek and wrinkled his nose. Outside, somebody was shouting at the drunken revellers to clear off, to which they responded by singing louder and more off-key. Casimir shifted in his sleep, but did not wake. Gav glanced back at him, saw nothing amiss, and resettled himself on the divan. He adjusted the dress, tugging each fold and ruffle into place like it was the bedding of a sleeping child.

"It... didn't really sound like tomfoolery, earlier," Dan said. "When you were—when I first got here. It seemed rather a bit more important than that."

Gav chewed his lip. "If it was, would you be upset?"

"Upset? No, why on earth should I be upset? I'd be—I don't know, B, I don't know a bloody thing, except that if it makes you happy, I'm all for it."

Gav dropped his gaze and almost smiled. When he spoke, though, his voice shook.

"It's as though—Dan, it's as though I've been living my whole life in winter, and... for the first time, spring has touched my heart. Suddenly there's light and life and colour, and—and I don't want to go back, I don't know if I can bear to go back, but I can't imagine living a life that isn't cold and grey. I can't picture my future in colour."

"Gav," said Dan, aching right down to his core.

"I don't expect you to understand—I'm not sure I understand—and I know I'm not explaining it properly, and I wish I had words that made any sense, but—"

Dan took his hands. His voice petered out.

"I'm not going to say I understand," Dan said, "but I think I know what you mean."

Gav looked up at him through tear-stained eyes. "Do you?"

"Well, it sounds an awful lot like the way I felt when I met you."

"I don't know if that's quite the same," Gav said, faking a smile.

"I'm sure it isn't. But back then, I didn't think I had a future. I couldn't think more than a couple months in front of me because even that seemed like—like a generous estimate of how long I had left."

"And that's got better, has it?"

"No," said Dan. "Not really. But I make plans anyway, because the thought of being able to spend another year with you—a whole year!—is so blisteringly wonderful that it doesn't matter how impossible it seems."
Gav sniffled and turned his face away. Dan squeezed his hands.

"I can only imagine how much more wonderful it would be to spend a year in the summer of your heart," he said.

"Stop, you'll make me cry."

"I'm told it's a lovely night for weeping."

Gav moved to sit next to him, then punched him in the arm. Dan slipped that arm round his shoulders and kissed his temple. The fabric of the dress was cool and pleasant beneath his hand. Gav laced his fingers with Dan's free hand and leaned into him, sighing.

"Here, I've had a nice thought," Dan said.

"What is it?"

"Well, it's only that—if this did get to be a permanent thing, or even just a—a semi-permanent, sometimes-thing, well . . . you know, if there were pseudonyms involved, and paperwork made up —"

"Dan, Danny boy, my dearest and loveliest Daniel, please do get to the point."

"Sorry. I thought, you know, if you wanted to, if it worked out that way . . . we could be married."

Gav stared at him. Dan avoided his eyes, blabbering.

"Though I know—I mean, I know I'm not exactly—I've not got the best track record, with being married, and I'd understand if you didn't want to, of course, in light of how the last one went, but—"

"I'm given to understand it tends to work out better if you're actually in love with the person you're marrying."

"Yes, now you mention it, that does seem a rather important component, doesn't it? Never occurred to me before, hahah. That—that one could . . . get married to someone. Whilst in love with them. It—you know, it's really a very nice idea, really an overwhelmingly nice idea, if—"

"Of course I'd marry you. Although . . ."　

Dan's heart sank. "What?"

Gav wiggled his nose and scratched his ear. He didn't pull away, though.

"I don't think I want to be your husband," he said. "I don't know what I want, exactly, but I know that doesn't sit right."

"Well," said Dan, "I mean, the other option would be wife."

"I'm not sure I like that, either, although it's . . . better."

Dan considered this.

"Did it bother you, earlier, when I called you an old man?" he asked.

"No, of course not, that would be silly."
"Silly or not. Did it?"

He made a face. "Maybe a little. Just a—a rug-burn of a thing. And it is silly, 'cos it didn't used to."

"I didn't used to mind being drunk every night, Gav, that doesn't mean I've got no right to detest the idea now."

"Then . . . yes. It hurt. It's been hurting for some time."

"I'm so sorry, B. I'll do better."

Gav shrugged. "You couldn't have known."

"I know now, and I'll do better." He hesitated, then asked, "How long?"

"Ages," said Gav, offhanded. "The more I think about it, the farther back it goes. But I know what you're getting at, and to be honest, it was all that business in the sewers that brought it to light. It didn't cause it, but . . . ."

Dan waited. A shiver ran through Gav. His free hand picked at the ruffles of the dress.

"But I feel like I've done it all wrong," he said quietly. "The bit that gets stuck in my head, the bit that—that makes me sick, it's the wrong bit. By the time they got round to the knives, the worst was over. Isn't that stupid? By that point, I was just thinking . . . it's hideous, but I hoped they'd just cut me into bits. Just chop me up into bits so small that when someone found the body, they'd think . . . they'd think that poor girl. That they wouldn't know. I can still feel them all looking at me, when—when they took my clothes. And it's stupid, it's idiotic, that should be nothing compared to what came after, but . . . ."

"Nobody gets to pick where the pain happens, B," Dan said, squeezing him. "It hurts where it hurts. There's no should about it."

Gav sniffled and wiped his eyes. "I think I'd like to go home, now," he said. "Or—back to the hotel, is what I meant. If you think Casimir will survive the night."

"I'll go and check on him before we leave, but I think he'll be fine. D'you . . . want help, getting out of the, er—only it does look a bit complex, and most of it's behind your back."

"I might need some help with the corsetry," Gav admitted.

"Right. Shall I avert my eyes for the rest?"

"We'll see how I feel about it when we get there. Oy, Dan?"

"Yes?"

He took a breath before he said, "You were right. About—talking about it. I wish I'd listened to you sooner."

Dan gave him another squeeze and kissed his head. "Couldn't possibly blame you, B," he said. "A stopped clock's only right twice a day, after all."

They made it back to their hotel just before three, after the ordeal of getting Gav out of the dress,
double-checking that Casimir wasn't going to die in his sleep, and a considerable amount of difficulty acquiring a cab. They made little conversation through their bedtime routine, although for once it was a comfortable silence. At last, the two of them stumbled their way into bed, Gav in his pyjamas and Dan in his customary nothing. As Gav nestled in, Dan put out the lamp on the bedside table.

"G'night, B," he said, settling down with his back to Gav.

Instead of the usual response, however, a timid hand touched his shoulder in the dark.

Puzzled, Dan turned his head. Gav caught him in a kiss as soon as he could, tugging on his shoulder. On the spot, Dan melted; obliged the gentle tug and rolled over, slipped an arm round Gav and held him close. Gav responded in kind, putting a hand on the back of Dan's head and tangling their legs together, tasting tongues and pressing bodies close together. His hand skated to Dan's hip and tugged on him again, insistent, pulling him over as Gav rolled onto his back.

Dizzy from the kissing, breathless and aching, Dan pulled away.

"Gav."

"I'm sure," Gav said, holding his gaze. "I want this. I'm sure."

"All right," said Dan. He dipped his head and kissed Gav. "But if at any point you want me to stop, you tell me, yeah? Right away."

"I will."

They kissed again. Dan's hand found its way to Gav's hip, to the warm skin beneath his pyjamas. It was Gav who broke off this time.

"Dan?"

"Yes, B?"

"Could . . . would you mind not taking my—could we leave the shirt on? For this one?"

"Of course. D'you want me to not touch there, either?"

Gav's relief was palpable. "Just the front. If you could."

"No trouble at all."

Another kiss, longer, deeper, warmer. Gav tangled his hands in Dan's hair, hooked his heels behind Dan's thighs and pulled him in close.

"Dan?" he said, as Dan kissed his way to the corner of his jaw.

"Mhm?

"Please don't be gentle."

"You're sure?"

"Completely. I'd quite like to have a bit of difficulty walking tomorrow."

"Oh," said Dan, going hot all over. He nibbled Gav's neck, and Gav bridged up against him. "Is that so?"
"Yes," Gav breathed.

"Right, so I'll nip down by the shops first thing in the morning, and fill your shoes with treacle."

Gav burst out laughing. Dan kissed down his neck, across his throat, back up the other side. Gav gurgled and squirmed, delighted. With considerable relish, Dan spoke into his ear.

"Or I reckon I could just fuck you silly," he said.

Gav pulled on his hair, crushed their lips together and moaned into his mouth, and Dan helped him wriggle out of his pyjama bottoms as quick as he could.

Very few words passed between them after that, but then again, there wasn't much else that needed to be said.

For a long time after, there was quiet, too. The heart of Paris beat steadily round them, its lamplit veins splayed out across the satin darkness. Gav lay curled in Dan's arms, breathing slow and deep, his hair damp and his skin warm. The blankets were all in a heap at the foot of the bed. As the sweat cooled on Dan's skin, he retrieved one or two of them, taking care not to disturb Gav. He stirred anyway, wrapping clumsy arms round Dan as he settled back in. Dan kissed his forehead and toyed with the hair at the back of his neck.

"All right, B?" he asked.

"Mm," said Gav. He nuzzled into Dan's neck and sighed.

"Sleepy?"

"Mmmhm."

"Yeah, I'm knackered, me." He yawned.

"Oy, B? Love you."

Dan kissed his head again. "I love you as well, Gav." He hesitated, then added, "Could I ask you for something, though?"

"Anything," said Gav, pulling back to watch his eyes. Dan made a face and looked somewhere else.

"I know you don't mean anything by it," he said, "and it's silly of me, but . . . it makes me feel—I get very insecure, right, when I say I love you and you just go you as well. I think I need you to say the whole thing, every time. Otherwise I get . . . I dunno. Nervous."

"Yeah, of course," said Gav. He sounded appalled, wounded. "I was only saving time, that's all. I'm sorry, B, I had no idea it bothered you so much."

Dan shrugged. "Well, that's why I'm telling you."

"Dan, I love you tremendously. I love you with all my heart."

"Thanks, Gav. I love you, as well. Tremendously and with all my heart."

They kissed. Gav settled his head on Dan's chest and sighed.
For the first time in over a month, Dan slept easy.

Morning rolled round, long and lazy. Gav slept in while Dan bathed and made breakfast. When the smell of crepes and coffee failed to rouse him, Dan returned to the bed. He settled on the bed next to Gav and laid a gentle hand on his back.

"Oy, there's breakfast and coffee, if you want it," he said.

*Mmmh*, said Gav, pulling a pillow over his head. Dan slid his hand down to Gav's rump.

"How's the derriere?" he asked.

"You're a very welcome pain in my arse," Gav mumbled into the pillow.

Dan snorted. "Poor thing. D'you need anything?"

Wincing and pouting, Gav rolled onto his side and stretched.

"*M* all right," he said. "You all right?"

"Since you ask, my back's killing me. Not as bloody young as I used to be, I'll tell you that."

"Poor thing," said Gav. "Anything I can do?"

"I've just had an aspirin, I'll be right in half an hour."

"Mm. Anything you'd like, then?"

Dan thought about it. "Back rub?" he suggested.

"I'll give it a go. Can't promise it'll be any good, though."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Let's have you, up you get."

Dan pulled him upright, and Gav fidgeted round behind him, wincing and hissing through his teeth the whole time.

"All right there, B?"

"Look, you already know you've made good on your promises, there's no need to be smug about it," Gav grumbled. He dug his thumbs into Dan's lower back, working at the knotted muscles with more enthusiasm than aptitude.

"I've also filled your shoes with treacle, just in case."

"No you haven't."

"I have. You'll see."

"I'll just take *your* shoes then, won't I."

"You'll look ridiculous."

"Not as ridiculous as you, walking about in your socks."
"Ah, but not for very long, d'you see, 'cos I'll just go and buy new shoes."

"So could I."

"If you're going to, you might get the ones with heels. You might almost be as tall as me, then."

"I'd also break your toes if I trod on your foot."

"Eh, it'd be worth it. They'd go well with the dress, I think."

Gav's hands paused in their work, and returned to it with more care. "I . . . s'pose they would, at that."

"We probably ought to collect it from Casimir, at some point. If you'd like to, I mean."

"It's safer with him, for the time being. It might—well, there might be questions, if I keep it."

"Ah, right, didn't even think of that. Best to leave it where it is for now, then."

"I think so. But—someday, yes, I think I'd like to keep it."

"We'll find a space for it when we get back to London. Maybe enough space for others, as well?"

"Dan, have I ever mentioned how much I love you?"

"Once or twice. I love you as well, B."

Methodically, Gav worked his way out from Dan's spine, up his back and round his shoulders. Despite his ineptitude, he managed to work a good deal of the pain out—or perhaps that was just the aspirin. Eventually, Gav got bored with it and draped his arms over Dan's shoulders, kissed his cheek and rested their heads together.

"Thank you," said Dan.

"My pleasure."

"On a mostly unrelated note, I think we ought to send Gabriel flowers, or something. I'd have made a much bigger fool of myself if it weren't for her. And—oh, damn! I was meant to write those letters, as well."

"What letters?"

"Apparently, our clients don't want to pay her, so she—"

"They what? Hell with that, I'll write the bloody letters. They'll be damn lucky if I don't set the debt collectors on them."

"I'm glad you've decided that you like her, 'cos I was wondering how I'd break the news that I promised her full commission on all the cases she solved whilst we were gone."

Gav pulled up short, blinking. "Care to run that by me again?"

"We oughtn't get paid for work we're not doing, and she should be paid for the work she is doing. We won't be ruined, even if Casimir stiffs us."

Gav made a face. Dan pinched his cheek.
"Come on, you girls have got to stick together, haven't you?"

"I'm not a girl," said Gav, smacking his hand. "And it isn't about that. I just wish you wouldn't make major bloody financial decisions without my input."

"Oh," said Dan. "Whoops."

"Oh, whoops, is underselling it a bit."

"Sorry, no, you're absolutely right. That was stupid of me, especially considering the circumstances. I dunno what I was thinking."

"I've got a sneaking suspicion that you weren't thinking at all, B."

"That seems more than likely. I really am sorry."

"I'll let it slide, just this once, and only 'cos I agree with you; us ladies have got to stick together. Now, if you wouldn't mind finding me a pen and paper, there's some bloody skinflints back in London who need the fear of Gav put in them."
"So," said Gav, easing himself into the armchair after an hour of pacing. "Brouillard and James."

Dan put down the paper and sat up straighter. "Right. Still need to find them. Though frankly I'm shocked nobody's turned up James' body yet."

"I'm not. In fact, it simplifies things considerably that nobody has."

"Oh?"

"We've been coming at this whole murder from the wrong angle. Casimir said it could've been done with a partner. I reckon he's right. I also reckon I've worked out why there were no marks of restraints anywhere: James was the partner, which is why we haven't found his body, and why none of the neighbours reported a disturbance. The missus wouldn't have caused a fuss if it was her husband walking in, rather than a stranger. Then, while he takes care of her, Brouillard offs the children."

"It's certainly possible, although I can't think of any reason why James would do it. Seems completely out of character."

"Completely out of the character he was playing for us. You've no idea what he was like when he wasn't acting."

"It doesn't make any sense to ask us for help protecting his wife and children and then kill them."

"He didn't ask us. He asked Casimir, and Casimir asked us. James was rather upset about that, if you recall."

"I recall him thinking he was going to be arrested, and getting upset 'cos it would further endanger his family."

"He's a tremendous actor."

"It doesn't make sense. He wouldn't ask a detective to look into a crime he's going to commit!"

"Not of his own accord, but he'd already roped Casimir in, so he had to stick to his story. Think about it, B: how was it meant to go? James turns up distraught on Casimir's doorstep, gets let in on the strength of a certain soft-spot for gingers, and spills his whole cock-and-bull story about fearing for his children's lives—plays the pity-game with him. Casimir, being very bored and finding James very tiresome, eventually agrees to go and check on the wife and kids for him, just to shut him up. At which point, Mrs James kills Casimir—like she said she would—and maybe Casimir lands a few good hits on her as well. At the very least, the altercation is loud and all the neighbours will know what it was about and who was involved. Then all that's left is for James or Brouillard to finish off whoever survives, and it all wraps up nice and simple."

"That's a fine story, but I still don't believe it."

"Why not?"

Dan chewed his cheeks. He fixed a mismatched crease in the paper, folded it down square, worried at the corner with his thumb.
"You think it's the second time they've tried to kill Casimir whilst framing him for murder?"

"Yes, exactly."

"No, not exactly. A week ago, you were convinced they weren't trying to kill him at all."

"A week ago I was off my head."

"You also said it was the wife."

"I just said: I was off my head. However improbable it is to you that James did it, it's impossible that his wife did."

"Then how did he make that big of a mess without leaving any footprints? Why make the mess at all?"

"The mess was a result of them showing off at each other, and as to the footprints: I reckon whatever were there either got filled in or wiped up after the fact. That's what the smear leading out of the room was—not someone being dragged, but someone wiping up their evidence."

"All right," Dan sighed, throwing his hands up. "So James and Brouillard did it together. How do we find them?"

"Thank you," Gav said primly. "Unless they've had other business in Paris, they'll more than likely have gone back to Peake's safe house, wherever that is. Our best bet for finding it is those files from the police—someone will have property somewhere, or a prior booking for squatting or some such."

"It sounds straightforward enough, though I doubt it'll be that easy to get our hands on those files."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Meantime, we ought to also be looking into any other family or close friends who might live in or near Paris. They could be useful, which means they might be on somebody's other business list."

"Right. I reckon you'd better go after the police this time, they're sick to death of me. I can come along or not, as you prefer."

"I think your talents are better used elsewhere today. See if you can't get Casimir to fish us up some friends and relatives, if he's not too hungover. If he is, maybe you can still pry something out of him about Brouillard. We'll all three of us meet back up for—dinner, most likely, call it five o'clock at his flat, and we'll see what we've come up with."

"We might want to strike up correspondence with the prisons, as well," said Dan. "If Brouillard and James really are working together, they might be planning to break Elyse, Crawford, and Jenzen out."

"Good point, I hadn't thought of that. I'll mention it to the police whilst I'm there."

"You're sure you don't want me to come with you?"

Gav eyed him up, dubious. Dan raised his hands.

"I was under the impression you didn't want me and Casimir colluding behind your back."

"I trust you not to do any colluding today," said Gav. "Anyway, it's not as though I've been completely honest and upfront with you, especially as regards things done with Casimir. Now that I've seen the sort of trouble he gets up to, though, I'm not worried about it."
"Well—thank you. I don't know that I've exactly earned that trust, but . . . I won't break it."

"I'm sure you won't. Although if he gets to being untrustworthy, I'm expecting you to rat him out."

"It would be my pleasure."

Gav smiled. "Yes, I thought you might say that."

Dan arrived at Casimir's flat just after noon, expecting him to be intensely hungover but at least functional. He was on the verge of knocking when he heard voices emanating from inside.

Against his better judgement, for the second time in as many days, he lowered his fist and put his ear to the door instead.

"I sincerely wish you'd change," Casimir was saying, strained with unprecedented emotion. "It doesn't suit you. It doesn't suit you at all."

"So ungrateful!" said another man. His voice was deep and rich, his French accented with a steel-string twang. "After everything I've done for you. I thought you'd appreciate it."

"I don't."

"I was only trying to cheer you up. You've been so miserable lately, I wanted to do something to make you happy. You know it's all for you, darling."

"Don't call me that! I've said a hundred times—"

He broke off in a strangled yelp. Dan went rigid, paralysed between fear and morbid curiosity.

"I call you whatever I want, darling," the other man murmured.

There was only the sound of choking, panicking breaths wheezed through a constricted throat. Dan's fingers sought the firearm that he no longer carried. His hand inched towards the doorknob. Casimir broke out coughing and gasping, and Dan froze again.

"But I hate to see you unhappy," the man said, compassionate. "It worries me, little rook, the way you've been wasting away. If you'd only get back to your hobbies, you'd soon forget all about this unpleasantness."

Casimir said nothing. Dan gulped, listening for his breath, for movement. He ought to go to the police, but if he left, there was no telling what might happen. Perhaps he could cut it short if he knocked, or maybe he'd only get Casimir deeper in it the next time this man showed up, or maybe he'd be throwing himself on a landmine, or—

At the approach of heavy footsteps, Dan leapt back from the door. It swung open and a man stepped out. He was several inches taller than Dan, half again as broad. He had a round, boyish face, topped by a mass of auburn curls. He dressed like an American—or at least, how Dan imagined an American ought to dress. Dan scrambled out of his way, but the man came to a placid stop as he tugged Casimir's door shut behind him.

"Howdy," he said, nodding to Dan.

"Er . . . good afternoon," said Dan. "I hope I'm not interrupting."
"Naw," he said, a twinkle in his eye. "He's all yours, pal."

He clapped Dan on the shoulder with a hand the size of a shovel head, then strode off. Dan bobbed in his wake like a fisherman's skiff. He blinked the fog out of his eyes, shook the bees out of his head, and rubbed his tingling shoulder.

"Bloody hell," he muttered to himself. After a steadying breath, he returned to the door and knocked. "Casimir? Are you at home?"

He didn't reply right away, and when he did, sounded even more hoarse than usual.

"I am," he said.

"May I trouble you for a moment?"

"For as long as you like, Daniel."

Dan slipped inside.

If a printer of dictionaries had required an illustrative example of the word *disheveled*, they might have included a photograph of Casimir in that moment. His hair was mussed, his suit askew. He slouched in his armchair like a puppet with its strings cut. A handprint lingered on his neck, pink and blotchy. Both his gloves were off, bare fingers clutching the upholstery so hard it was a wonder it hadn't torn. His right hand was covered in ugly, ropey scars. The pinky and ring fingers were less than stumps.

He had been crying.

"Good grief," said Dan, sick to his stomach. He bit his tongue and mustered his focus, determined not to reveal that he'd been eavesdropping. "What's happened?"

Casimir pried a hand off the chair and waved it.

"Nothing of any importance," he said.

"Clearly it was."

"Nothing of any importance to you."

Dan folded his arms. "If it's upset you this badly, I might be inclined to make it a matter of some priority."

Casimir cracked a smile. He set his elbows against the chair and dragged himself up into a less despondent posture. The mutilated hand slipped into his pocket and the other ran back through his hair.

"Gallant as ever, Sir Lancelot," he said. "I'm sorry; you must have come here for something, and my personal business is interfering. What was it you needed?"

Dan chewed his lip. The room was in perfect order; the only thing out of place was Casimir himself. The faint smell of opium lingered about the place, sickly and unpleasant. Dan rifled through the clamour in his head, wondering how far he could push without giving away how much he'd heard.

"Who was that man?" he asked. "And before you try and change the subject again, I came here to check on you, because you were in *quite* a state last night, and we were worried about you—apparently, rightly so!"
Casimir swallowed the lie whole, not even a hint of doubt crossing his face.

"Of course," he sighed, rolling his eyes. "Can I not be left to decay in peace? He was an old friend, let us leave it at that."

"It doesn't seem like your conversation was exceptionally friendly."

"I don't tend to get along well with my old friends," Casimir said dryly.

"Cas, listen, if you're in some sort of trouble—"

"I'm not," he said. "And please don't call me Cas, you will give me ideas."

"Sorry," said Dan. "But look, if there's anything I can do to help, you will let me know, won't you?"

Casimir didn't answer. Dan kept his eyes firmly on the space above Casimir's head, clasped his hands behind his back and squeezed. Casimir sighed and hung his head, pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Where is Gavin?" he asked.

"At the police station, harassing them for files on the Théâtre troupe."

"Is he expecting you anytime soon?"

A shiver ran up Dan's spine. He clenched his hands until his fingers went numb.

"Sooner rather than later," he said.

Casimir met his eyes. Dan's heart curdled like old milk.

"If I asked," Casimir began.

"No," said Dan.

Casimir turned out his hand. "Then at this time, there is nothing you can do to help. But thank you for the offer, and I will certainly keep it in mind."

"It wasn't that sort of offer."

"I'm aware."

"You don't seem like you were."

"I'm aware now."

"Good," said Dan. "Well. Good. So long as the air is clear, and the . . . ideas aren't being had."

"In the interest of clearer air and forbidden ideas: if you ever change your mind, I am, to be perfectly frank and entirely impolite, exceedingly easy."

Dan went slimy from his toes to his scalp.

"I'm aware," he managed.

Casimir burst out laughing. "Oh, bless your poor soul," he said, propping his head on his hand. "Is Gavin expecting only you, or may I accompany?"
"I . . . believe you're welcome," said Dan. "Although technically I have got an errand or two to run before I catch him up. Still, you can come along, if you're not too hungover."

"I think that I would like that," said Casimir. "I think that I would like that a great deal, because I can't remember the last time I laughed at anything, and I've just discovered that I've missed it sorely."

Dan heaved a sigh and cocked his head at the door.

"Come along, then, and you can help me sniff things up for the Nose of London," he said. "If nothing else, I make a pretty good laughingstock."

"No, not at all." Casimir got to his feet and fixed his suit, his hair. He plucked up his gloves from the table and tugged them on. "You simply have a talent for humour, well cultivated and much practiced."

"I'm afraid it's not nearly so intentional as you're making it out to be."

Casimir came to his side, offering a warm smile, and once again stopped himself just shy of touching Dan.

"Nonetheless," he said, sticking his hands in his pockets. "Thank you, my friend. It isn't what I wanted, but it's precisely what was needed."

With a great mustering of his resolve, Dan clapped Casimir on the shoulder and steered him towards the door.

"Then you're in luck," he said, "because there's plenty more where that came from. But first: talking of hangovers and sniffing things has given me an idea. . . ."

Wedged in underneath an awning to shelter from the rain, Dan and Casimir considered the dilapidated doorway across the street.

"Now, the question is," Dan said, worrying the lint in his pockets, "are we going to get arrested if we try it?"

"Considering the neighbourhood?" said Casimir. "Doubtful. I do, however, question the necessity of going through with this at all. Presumably the police will already have picked the place clean."

"As a very wise friend once told me: the police are useless, and you know it. Anyway, if they have already found something, Gav ought to be able to get it from them."

Casimir tipped his head in allowance. "It seems you have some wisdom of your own."

"Have you got the hairpins?"

"Yes, although I must point out that you should have asked that question twenty minutes ago, if you wanted it to do any good."

Dan scowled at him. Casimir smiled and shrugged.

"Smug prick," Dan muttered in English, setting off into the rain.

"I have no idea what you said," Casimir said, following blithely, "but I'm going to assume it was a
At the door to Bones' flat, Casimir handed over the hairpins. Dan bent them into the proper shapes and took a knee in front of the door. While he got to work, Casimir leaned up against the lintel and kept watch over the street.

"A person might wonder where you picked up this particular set of skills," he remarked.

"Gav's not a patient man," said Dan, fiddling with the pins.

"Gavin isn't a man at all," Casimir pointed out.

"A patient person, then. And bashing down doors was starting to hurt my shoulder, so I learned an alternative."

"Of course, it's all above-board and noble."

"I wouldn't go that far. Now hush up, it's hard enough without distractions."

Casimir hushed up, and within a couple minutes, the lock yielded. Dan pushed the door open and gave the hairpins back to Casimir.

"You might want to unbend those," he said. "They're probably illegal to possess, in their current state."

"Duly noted," said Casimir, as the two of them slipped inside. "Shall we start at opposite ends, or stick together?"

Dan picked his way over to the threadbare armchair, watching his every step. "I'll start in here, you take the kitchen. We'll keep line of sight."

"More wisdom from Sir Lancelot," Casimir said, meandering into the kitchen. "Although it seems I was right about the place being picked clean."

"It was like this when it was occupied."

"Oh, dear, what a dreadful way to live," said Casimir, with considerable relish.

"You know, those were my sentiments exactly."

It took about five minutes to search the kitchen and living room, after which they moved back to the bedroom. Here, there was a little more clutter, a little worse of a smell, most of it coming from empty bottles. Dan took it upon himself to check under the bed while Casimir poked through the desk and wardrobe.

"Ah-hah," Casimir said suddenly. "So that's where you ran off to."

Dan scrambled out so fast he banged his head. "What? Who?"

From the back of the wardrobe, Casimir swept up a leather coat with a fur ruff and shook the dust off. He looked it over, smiling.

"I'd been wondering where this wound up," he said. The smile faded from his face as he examined it in greater detail. "Tsk, he's not been taking very good care of you at all, has he? No matter; it's nothing a little oil and a few stitches won't fix. Now, let's see if Mr Brouillard was clever enough..."
He twisted his fingers into some hidden slit near the waist of the coat, feeling about inside the lining. When that yielded nothing, he moved on to the sleeves, then under the collar. Here, he struck gold, pulling a business card from the hidden pocket. A grin spread across his face like sunrise.

"Daniel, I'm very happy to inform you that you were absolutely right," he said. He held up the card between two fingers. Something had been scribbled on the back of it. "You can always trust a drunkard's memory to fail."

Dan picked himself up off the floor and came over. Casimir handed him the card. In shaky, slanted letters, someone had written: Château de la Chasse, Ruisseau du Petit Moulin, Saint-Prix.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Dan.

"May I be the first to say: well done, Daniel."

"Not so badly done yourself, Casimir. Now, may I be the first to say: let's get out of here."

Casimir folded the coat over his arm and gestured to the doorway.

"Allons-y," he said, "mon ami."
Have you checked the tags lately? Now might be a good time.

Gav took one look at the address written on the back of the stolen card and adopted the smuggest expression Dan had ever seen him wear.

"Tremendous," he said. "You've really outdone yourself, B."

"What can I say?" said Dan, bouncing on his toes. "Every so often, I do make myself useful."

From the pantry, there came a pointed clearing of the throat. Dan rolled his eyes.

"Casimir helped," he said. "I notice you've not come back empty-handed, either, B."

Gav laid a protective hand on the stack of files at his elbow. "Quite the opposite, though it was like pulling teeth to get them."

"Anything useful?"

"Not so far, but I haven't looked in any great detail. I wanted to have some dinner in me first."

"Wise plan."

Gav craned his neck and called, "Cassie, what are you looking for in there?"

"Olive oil, my sweet!"

"It's on your nightstand."

Casimir popped his head out of the pantry and pressed a hand to his chest. "Why, of course it is, silly me. Bless your eyes, I'd be lost without you."

"What did you need it for?" Gav asked, while Casimir retrieved the item in question.

"Do you mean: why do I need it now, or why was it on my nightstand?" said Casimir. He dropped onto the sofa and pulled his leather coat onto his lap like it was a geriatric dog. "Because one would think the latter would be obvious, at least to persons of your relationship status."

"Hahah, sex, how hilariously unnecessary to mention," said Gav. "No, I meant right now."

"It's useful for dressing the leather," said Casimir, unfastening the lid on the bottle and setting it on the coffee table. "Which, though most don't know it, requires equal maintenance to one's own skin. You can see that Brouillard didn't know it; fortunately, the climate is not too dry, and it hasn't cracked irreparably. I'll need to repair a few stitches, as well, but that's trivial. Although—tsk, I don't know if I have matching thread, what a shame..."

"What sort has it got?"
Casimir rattled off a list of specifications considerably longer than seemed necessary, tugging off his
gloves and putting them aside. Hewithdrew a short-bristled paintbrush from the breast pocket of his
vest, dipped it into the oil, and carefully wiped off the excess before bringing it to the chafed elbow
of the coat.

"I could check, if you wanted," Gav offered. His gaze snagged on Casimir's mutilated hand, but his
face and voice showed no indication of it. "To see if I can hunt it up in your stores."

"No no, don't trouble yourself. There's plenty more pressing matters at hand. Oh, speaking of stores,
do feel free to help yourselves to anything in the kitchen."

"I'll very happily take you up on that," said Dan, heaving himself out of his seat. "Gav, do you want
anything?"

"I'll come and have a poke about with you."

The two of them raided the kitchen with practiced efficiency. There was plenty there to be getting on
with, including a multitude of fresh fruits and vegetables, an untouched loaf of sourdough bread,
several excellent cuts of meat in the icebox, and no fewer than twelve different wines and liquors.
Squirrelled away at the back of the pantry, hidden behind bags of rice and jars of spices, there was a
veritable stockpile of chocolates.

"He's got a sweet tooth, our Casimir," Dan remarked, in English.

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me one bit," said Gav. He reached back into the pantry, behind
even the chocolates, and picked up a half-litre brown bottle with a dropper-cap.

The label read, in French: **POISON: LAUDANUM. Normal Pharmacy of Champs-Élysées. Contains 45 ½ grains opium and 40% alcohol.**

It was about half empty. Dan winced. Gav raised an eyebrow at him, but he shook his head, so Gav
put the bottle back.

"At any rate, we'll not be having chocolates for dinner," said Dan.

"We could do."

"I somehow feel that'd go poorly for everyone involved."

In French, Gav called, "Cassie, what would you do if we ate all your chocolates?"

"I would weep an ocean and never invite you back."

"You did say we could help ourselves to anything."

"I never said there wouldn't be consequences!"

"What about a vegetable curry, how's that sit with everyone?" Dan asked, picking through the
spices.

"Sounds lovely," said Gav. "Cassie, vegetable curry?"

"I wasn't aware I was to be included in the proceedings."

"Of course you are, don't be silly," said Dan.
"Then I will eat absolutely anything that I don't have to cook."

"Explains the chocolates," Gav said. "You haven't got someone to do that for you?"

"I'm bored enough as it is, without having all the cooking and cleaning taken off my hands as well. I don't think I could stand it."

"What's the point of having money if you're not going to get servants?"

Dan shook his head. "You're horrendous. Grab a bag of rice from in there, would you? You're going to be my assistant."

"All right," Gav said gamely. "Lead on."

By the time they were done, the kitchen smelled only faintly of smoke, and they'd managed to pick up most of the aftermath of what could only be called a *detonation* of one of the rice bags. If Casimir had noticed, he hadn't minded; he was so thoroughly engrossed in his work with the coat that he didn't even look up when Dan set a steaming plate of vegetable curry on the table in front of him.

"That's for you, if you want it," Dan mentioned.

"You're a treasure; I'll get to it presently," said Casimir. The coat in his lap had acquired a glossy sheen, and the air was green with the smell of olives.

"You'd better," said Dan. "I didn't go to all the trouble of making it so you could let it get cold."

"Of course, of course. A few more popped stitches than I thought, though. If I don't have the proper thread, I'll simply have to redo the whole thing. . . ."

Gav dropped onto the sofa next to him and caught his wrist, pulling his hand away from the coat.

"It can wait 'til after dinner, Cassie," he said. "Set it aside and go wash up, you're absolutely slimy."

Casimir finally looked up. His mouth curled into a smile, and he poked Gav squarely in the forehead with the oil-wet brush.

"Anointed," he said.

"Disgusting," Gav uttered, shoving Casimir away and scrubbing at his forehead. Casimir's smile only grew.

"What do you mean, disgusting? It's good for the skin!"

He painted the back of Gav's hand. Gav squawked and flailed at him.

"Stop that!"

"But it will make you so soft and fragrant!"

"I'll make you soft and fragrant, give me that—"

He made a grab for the brush. Casimir wiped his other hand in Gav's hair.

"Good for your hair, too!" he chirped.
"Augh, stop it!"

Casimir laughed and relinquished the brush to him. Gav drew a long, slimy line from Casimir's forehead to the tip of his nose. Casimir took it gamely, still giggling.

"Thank you," he said.

"All right, children, quit making messes of each other and eat your dinner," said Dan. "Casimir, go and hang that thing up before it leaks everywhere."

"Yes, father," said Casimir, rolling his eyes. He draped the coat over his shoulders and got to his feet. As he went, Gav poked him in the ear with the brush. Casimir retaliated by sticking his whole hand down the back of Gav's shirt, eliciting another squeal.

"Oy," Dan said, scowling at them both. Casimir smiled and drifted off to his closet, while Gav squirmed and grumbled into his curry.

"I'll need a bath, at this rate," he said. "Absolutely horrendous."

"Use Casimir's, teach him not make messes."

"You're welcome to, if you want," Casimir called.

"Now you've taken all the fun out of it," said Gav. "But I will anyway, thank you."

Casimir came out grinning. "If you want company—"

"Hah-hah."

"I'm sure Daniel would be happy to accommodate!"

"Would you quit mucking about and come eat your dinner?" Dan said, fighting down a blush. "There's work to be done, after all."

"I suppose there is. But I do hope you'll keep me in mind, if you need an understudy for the role."

"I'm glad you're feeling better, Cassie," said Gav. "Now do really stop, before somebody throttles you."

"Don't threaten me with a good time," Casimir sighed.

When he sat back down, though, he picked a spot just slightly farther than arm's reach from Gav.

When dinner was over with, and all the dishes soaking in soapy water, the three of them at last got down to the files. Dan and Casimir split the stack, while Gav nestled into a quiet corner near the mannequin (and the dress) and flipped through invisible pages with his eyes closed.

After an hour, he got back up again, fidgeting and grumbling.

"Casimir, I'm going to use your bath," he declared. "I can't think when I'm slimy."

"Have fun, let us know if you want company," said Casimir.

"Hah-hah," Gav said, and shut himself in. Presently there came the sound of gushing water, and not
long after, tendrils of steam seeping between the door and its frame.

"I expect he'll be wanting a change of clothes," Dan remarked.

"He can use mine, if needs must," said Casimir. "We are of a size."

Dan tried to picture Gav in any of Casimir's opulent outfits, and gave up immediately.

"Perhaps just the undershirt," he said, mostly for his own benefit. Casimir gave him a knowing look, but didn't comment.

Although there was a great deal of information in the files, the most useful thing about them turned out to be what was missing. The file on Peake, for example, exclusively contained information about the Théâtre murders, with only the barest hints that he'd existed before they happened. Elyse's was similar. Ms Jenzen was not listed as a Ms at all, and the name on her file was not Karine, and two days ago Dan might have remarked on that; today, he kept quiet and tried not to pity her. Bones' file, contrary to all expectation, was as barren as his house.

From Casimir's half of the stack, they found that Miles had a few bookings for gambling and public drunkenness, Torrian bore a few write-ups for misconduct, and Chad, unsurprisingly, had more than once been caught hanging about in disreputable places. The previous owner of the Théâtre had accused Marquis of embezzling a considerable sum, which had never been followed up, and Blake's file contained several pages' worth of increasingly violent assaults against a multitude of men.

There was no file on Christophe at all.

"Hang on, that can't be right," Dan said, flipping through his stack again. "You haven't got the coroner's report on Christophe?"

"I don't think so." Casimir checked his half of the files and shook his head. "Perhaps Gavin held onto it?"

"If he has, he's hidden it somewhere, which would be extremely silly of him but not entirely out of character. We'll ask him once he's done with his bath."

"Sensible. Does he usually take this long?"

Startled, Dan checked his watch. Nearly an hour had slipped through his fingers, poured out and swallowed up by the files.

"Er... not really," he said. "But it's probably nothing to worry about. He might've just fallen asleep."

Casimir raised his eyebrows. "In which case, he might drown."

"Oh, shit. Um." He craned his neck and called, "Gav? All right in there?"

There was a heart-stopping moment of silence, a whimper, a gasp, and then—

"Daaaaaan!"

He shot across the room and burst into the bathroom, heart in his throat. His knees went out from under him and he caught himself on the sink.

"Oh, God!" he cried.
Gav was sat in the empty bathtub, covered in blood.

"It won't stop," he gasped, trembling. "It won't—they won't stop, I can't make them stop—"

Dan rushed to his side and took his fumbling hand. "All right, all right, just stay calm, B. We'll—we'll send for a doctor, and—"

"No! I don't want—where's Cassie, get Cassie!"

"Gav, you need a doctor!"

Slipping in his own blood, Gav drew his legs up to his chest, knees pinched tight together.

"I don't want anyone to see," he whimpered. "Please, Dan, please, I'll die, I'll die."

The door swung open again, and Casimir came to a crashing halt on the threshold. His eyes went wide as dinner plates, his face white as a sheet. His hands trembled at his sides.


Casimir said nothing, frozen where he stood. Blood trickled from the wounds on Gav's chest and stomach, drawing red rivers on the bottom of the tub.

"Casimir, can you help or not?" Dan snapped.

Slowly, fighting through the tremors like a horse through high winds, the fingers and thumb of his right hand pinched together. The trembling stopped. The horror faded from his expression.

"Yes," he said. "I can help."

With swift purpose, he laid out a pair of towels on the floor, onto which he and Dan placed Gav. Dan snatched up another towel and laid it over Gav's thighs and hips while Casimir examined the wounds.

"They won't all need stitches," he assured Gav. "Bandages will suffice for most. Daniel, in the lefthand cupboard of my desk, there is a bobbin of white thread. The needle should be with it. Get that and a bottle of vinegar from the kitchen."

"Thread, needle, vinegar, will do."

He hopped up and darted off. The items were easy to find, and he returned with them in less than a minute. Casimir drenched the needle in vinegar before threading it.

"This may sting a little, but I promise it will be over quickly," he said. "Try to take deep breaths. You bleed more slowly when you are calm."

As he picked out a wound to start with, Dan took Gav's hand.

"I'm scared," Gav said, shaking so hard his teeth chattered. "Dan, I'm scared."

"It's all right, B. You'll be all right. It's just a few—"

The second the needle pierced Gav's skin, he screamed and thrashed. Casimir cursed, yanking his hand back. Dan squeezed Gav's hand.

"I know, B," he said. "I know it hurts, but you've got to hold still."
"I can't, I can't, please, no, please—"

"Shh, shh, it's all right. Deep breaths, B, try to stay still."

Gav shook his head, hyperventilating. Casimir put an elbow on his shoulder to hold him down. Gav struck out at him in blind panic before the needle even touched him.

"No! No, no, please, no!" he gasped, writhing where he lay. Blood dribbled down his sides and soaked into the towels.

"Gav, come on, it'll be over quickly," Dan said, but Gav just kept whimpering and squirming, insensible.

Casimir got to his feet. "Stay with him," he ordered, and left the room.

A clatter rose from the kitchen, the thready howl of the gas stove. Dan held Gav's hand and stroked his hair, watching the towels on the floor turn red with blood.

"It'll be all right, B," he said, over and over. "You'll be fine. We're going to take care of you. Just breathe, my love, it's going to be all right."

Casimir returned with a glass of some clear liquid, tinged faintly brown. Just a whiff of it almost knocked Dan on his arse.

"What in God's name is that?" he demanded, while Casimir eased Gav upright.

"Gin and laudanum. We'll bandage the shallower wounds while we wait for it to take effect."

"The hell we will, you're not giving him that!"

"He's made it clear that—"

Gav snatched the glass out of his hand and downed the drink in one gulp. Immediately, he broke out in a fit of coughing that sent blood streaming down his sides and tears rolling down his face. Between coughs, he whimpered and gasped, clinging to Dan's hand and Casimir's wrist.

"You see?" said Casimir.

"Fuck off," Dan retorted.

"Go and make sure the kitchen doesn't burn down while the bandages boil. Gavin, my sweet, may I trim back some of this hair? It will make life easier for all of us to have it out of the way."

Gav nodded, still coughing. Casimir took a pair of scissors from his vest pocket and eased Gav back onto the floor. He shot a barbed look at Dan.

"I mean it," he said. "Go keep an eye on the stove. We'll call if we need you."

Dan clenched his teeth, squeezed Gav's hand one more time.

"I'll be just outside the door, B," he promised. "Shout if you need me."

Gav squeezed back before letting him go. Dan got to his feet while Casimir got to work with the scissors, trimming back the blood-matted hair on Gav's chest.

Lacking anything more helpful to do, Dan returned to the kitchen, washed the blood off his hands,
and settled in to wait.
Hangman (Reprise)

About half an hour after downing the gin-and-laudanum cocktail, Gav passed out cold. Most of his shallower wounds had been bandaged, but it took Casimir another half hour to stitch up the deeper ones. The towels on the floor were soaked through with blood by then. Once they'd cleaned Gav up, they fumbled him into a cotton bathrobe and settled him in Casimir's bed. They spent the next hour cleaning up the rest of the blood.

When it was all done with and Dan's hands were raw and pruny from scrubbing, he returned to the bedside. Sore in every joint, he lowered himself onto the bed by Gav's knees, took up his cold hand and kissed it.

"This is awfully familiar, isn't it," he said softly.

There was not a flicker of acknowledgement. Gav's breathing was slow and shallow, his skin pale as paper. Blood was seeping through the bandages, tracing out the patterns on his skin, the sigils and symbols, the gruesome artwork.

The inverted pentagram carved into the centre of his chest.

Dan looked away, swallowing down his horror. He turned just in time to see Casimir sidle round the corner from the main part of the flat, a cup of tea in each hand.

"May I join you?" he asked.

Dan gestured an invitation. Casimir handed him a cup of tea, then sat down on the other side of the bed. In the silence between them, Dan's pocket watch ticked, Paris muttered, and a drizzly rain began to trickle through the pipes. The tea cooled in Dan's hand, unattended.

"Did you know?" he said at last.

Casimir shook his head. "He was adamant that he not be seen unclothed. I assumed I knew why. Evidently, I was wrong."

"I don't understand this," said Dan. A headache throbbed in his temples and the base of his skull. "It's been well over a month, they should've healed by now. Is it because he's been picking at them? Or . . . could it have been the infection?"

"It could," Casimir allowed. "One would expect, if that were the case, for the lines to shallow and broaden. But—to my eye, at least—they look very sharp."

"You don't think he's been . . . ?"

"I can't say for certain. But this particular incident looks recent, especially considering the depth of the wounds. On the other hand, I cannot reconcile the neatness of the work with Gavin's obvious distress at its results."

Dan shook his head. "Neither can I, but I'll be damned if I know what else it could be."

"Interesting choice of words," Casimir said, with his eyes on the pentagram.

With a deep breath, knowing what sort of trouble it could get him in, Dan said, "He thinks it was meant for you."
Casimir tore his gaze off of Gav and raised an eyebrow.

"All of that business in the sewers," said Dan. "He thinks—or thought, I don't know—at one point, at least, he thought it was meant for you. And at one point, he thought you knew what they meant for you."

"I had guessed that they intended to kill me."

"He doesn't think they did intend to kill you."

"Are these those strange ideas you spoke of, back in Marseille?"

"Yes. Although—frankly, they're not seeming so strange anymore, by comparison."

Casimir chewed his lip. He turned his eyes back to Gav, brushed a fingertip over the stitched-up sigil just under his collarbone.

"I think they intended to replace me," he said at last.

"With who?"

"With what."

All Dan's hair stood on end. He dug his fingernails into his palms and shook himself.

"That's ludicrous, and I'm not having any of it," he said. "All this cult nonsense is—is just that: nonsense. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't do anything. They're just a pack of fools who've been...suckered in by a lunatic."

"To call Mr Peake a lunatic is an insult to madmen everywhere," said Casimir. "Whether or not other forces are afoot, it is clear that Peake's only defect of the mind is a thirst for power. If that is madness, then we are all mad."

"All?"

"Yes, of course."

"There's no of course and there's no all. Most people I've known are quite happy to live small lives. They're certainly not out there making cults and what-have-you. Personally, I'm much happier without power. It just makes for bigger messes."

Casimir gave him an odd look, but didn't say anything. The silence sifted down again. Dan sipped his tea, more out of habit than anything. Casimir kept his hand on Gav's shoulder, watching him through half-lidded eyes.

"Such a shame," he murmured, petting Gav's collarbone with his thumb. "Such a terrible shame."

Dan cleared his throat. Casimir yanked his hand back as though from an open flame. He flashed a smile.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Idle hands."

"If they need to be occupied, you could go and fix up that coat of yours."

"Ah. Yes, that's an idea. I think I—oh." Something that wasn't quite a giggle bubbled through his lips. "Oh, dear."
"What?"

He gestured to Gav's stitches. "It's the same kind of thread," he said. "As what I used for the coat."

"Is that a problem?"

"No. No, not a problem, just—funny. To think, I didn't know where to find it until . . . ."

"Casimir, are you feeling all right?"

He bit his lip and took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes, flexed the fingers of his mutilated hand.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I'm considering a gin-and-laudanum cocktail for myself," he said. "So no. I am not all right, but I will survive."

"I should certainly hope so. But, listen . . . er, thank you. For helping. For keeping your head."

Casimir shrugged. "It is rather firmly attached. Excuse me; I have an idle pair of hands that need occupation, and I should hate for them to wander."

Dan nodded, and Casimir left. With quiet reverence, Dan kissed Gav's hand again.

"I'm sorry, Gav," he murmured. "But we're getting you a doctor first thing in the morning."

For the third time in a week, Dan was woken in the middle of the night—but this time it was not by a sound or a presence, but by silence and absence.

He sat bolt upright in his chair. The bed was empty. He leapt up to search the flat. The bathroom was unoccupied. Casimir was asleep on the sofa. The kitchen was deserted.

The front door, when he checked it, was unlocked.

"Shit," he hissed, panic rising like boiling water in his gullet. "Shit, shit!"

Casimir sat up, wrapped in his coat and blinking.

"Daniel?" he croaked. "What's wrong?"

"He's gone. Gav's gone, I left the damn door unlocked and now he's fucking gone!"

"All right; calm down. What—"

"Calm down? Calm down? How can you expect me to calm down when—"

"Because panic will not help us find him." He got up, slipping his arms into the sleeves of the coat. "What time is it?"

Daniel fumbled for his pocket watch. Casimir fired up the gas lamps, filling the room with light.

"Half past one," said Dan. His hands were slick with sweat.

"Then he cannot have gone too far," said Casimir. "I recall the clock chiming midnight before I fell asleep; he has less than an hour and a half head start."
"But where would he have gone? He could be miles away by now!"

"He is only in a bathrobe. If the police haven't picked him up already, certainly he will have been remarkable enough to follow."

Something bit Dan's brain. He darted back into the bathroom. He clutched the doorknob so hard his knuckles cracked.

"His clothes are gone," he said. "He's left the robe, he's taken his clothes, how are we—"

A hand closed on his shoulder.

Casimir just barely dodged the punch.

Dan froze, trembling all over. He breathed deep through his nose, struggling to keep his temper under control. Hands raised, Casimir took a step back.

"My fault," he said softly. "That was my fault. I'm sorry."

"I don't care," Dan choked out. "How are we meant to find him?"

"I have an idea of where he may have gone; if he isn't there, we will think of something else."

"Where?"

Casimir took another step back, watching Dan's fists.

"The Théâtre," he said.

It was raining when they arrived, a slow drizzle that beaded on the brim of Dan's hat and fogged the light of the street lamps. The Théâtre stood bleak and ominous against the lowering clouds, glistening like feverish skin. Dan and Casimir ducked under the deeper shadows of the front awning.

"We'll go in this way," Dan said, watching a vagrant shuffle down the opposite side of the street. "I can pick the locks on these doors if I've got to, but the back one can only be opened from the inside."

"None of them were locked last time."

"I haven't got the time to gamble or argue. Keep an eye out."

As the vagrant moved away, Dan eased up to the door and pulled on the handle. It opened without a fuss, and he slipped inside, Casimir close on his heels. The door swung shut behind them, smothering the street lamps.

In the darkness of the lobby, light spilled across the dusty carpet from underneath the theatre doors.

"It seems we may have come to the right place," Casimir whispered.

Glaring, Dan pressed a finger to his lips. Casimir copied the gesture and nodded. With a deep breath, Dan set himself against his own spine and crept towards the doors. The carpet and the dust muffled his footsteps. The silence was an unabating roar in his ears, a piercing insect whine. He eased a door open with one hand. Light flooded out, engulfing him. Blinking, struggling for breath, he forged through into the theatre.
The stage was bathed in light, devoid of all players and hungry as an open maw. Thick shadows draped the house, hanging from the balconies and the boxes, dribbling like molten wax from the chandelier. The smell of sawdust and mildew encroached from every side, clawed appendages picking through the dark. A great black mass hung above the set, folded wings, uneasy slumber, a storm waiting to break.

Dan gulped. He made sure Casimir was still behind him before starting down the aisle.

The only sounds were the mutter of the gas lamps, the scuttling of rain through the pipes. Dan caught himself holding his breath more than once on the long creep through the hollow house. He couldn't unclench his teeth. His heart lodged in his throat and would not be swallowed.

With his eyes on the looming darkness, Dan eased up the creaking steps onto the stage. Casimir followed close behind him, silent as a shadow. Dust lay like fine snow across the stage, disturbed only by the comings and goings of their last visit. Light flowed back into the wings, picking out the walls and curtains, the boxes and ropes.

High, high above them, shrouded in the tenebrous silence, something moved.

Dan went rigid. His heart thundered like a locomotive. He stared into the rafters, blinded by the stage lights, sweating through his clothes. The stench of dust and rust and mildew wrapped clammy hands round his throat.

Casimir waved in Dan's peripheral vision, drawing his attention away from the inscrutable darkness overhead. He pointed to himself, then to the rafters; to Dan, and to the stage; and held up three fingers. Before Dan could do anything about it, he padded off into the wings and was swallowed by them. There was a faint, whispery sound, traveling upwards, lost to silence.

Dan pressed his fingernails into his palms and breathed deeply. Through the muddle of rain and gas lamps and his own heartbeat, he picked out the tinny, scissor-sharp ticking of his watch.

*Three minutes, two fifty-nine, two fifty-eight, two fifty-seven.*

The silence howled. The light pressed in like murky water. His ears rang, his vision blurred, his skin prickled with cold sweat.

*Two twenty-five, two twenty-four, two twenty-two.*

Metal creaked above him. His breath caught. Into the silence came a quiet murmur, distorted by distance. Another creak, closer to centre stage, closer to him, as the murmur carried on.

*One forty-nine, one forty-eight.*

The murmur resolved into Casimir's voice, drawing nearer as he crept along the catwalks. Someone, something, was up there with him, skittish or volatile, frightened or frightening. Dan could make out no words, though his ears ached with the strain of listening.

*One thirty-one, one thirty.*

A scuffle, a clang, a hideous choking sound.

Dan bolted for the nearest ladder.

The metal was slick and hot under his hands. He scrambled upward. The shadows clawed at his back. The choking grew louder. His feet slipped, his hands fumbled, he carried on. Miles of open air
yawned beneath his feet. He cursed through his teeth, arms burning, legs aching, bruising his elbows and knees on the hard metal.

He clambered up onto the catwalks and staggered to his feet. Two figures were centre stage.

Gav, bent to his task, heaving with both hands on a sturdy rope; and Casimir, clinging to the railing, feet kicking at empty air, with the rope cinched tight round his neck.

"Oy!" Dan shouted.

Gav's head snapped up. The stage lights glowed in his eyes like hellfire. He yanked on the rope. Casimir's choking went silent, his feet kicking all the harder.

Dan sprinted towards them. The catwalks shuddered. Gav held the line. Casimir's arms shook. Dan barrelled out over empty air. Metal clanged under his feet. Gav's hands were white-knuckled. So were Casimir's.

Gav bolted. Casimir's arms gave out. The rope pulled taut.

Dan caught it.

Heaving with all his might, he pulled Casimir up. A desperate hand clawed onto his wrist. A ladder rattled and screeched. Dan hauled Casimir over the railing. They collapsed in a heap on the catwalk. A terrible grinding rumble rose from below. Casimir tore the rope from his throat, coughing and gasping and sobbing. He clung to Dan like a drowning man, mashing his face to the catwalk, to the holes in the metal and the long, long drop below.

Something was rising from centre stage, from the point where the tracks in the dust stopped cold. Gav darted from the wings, moving all wrong, moving like someone else entirely. Footsteps thudded on wooden stairs.

Dan shoveled Casimir aside and ran for the nearest ladder.

Six times he nearly fell to his death, and six times saved himself in breathless terror. The thing at centre stage was a spiral staircase, perilously narrow. Dan rushed to it, tripped down a dizzying corkscrew into deeper perils. A foul stench rose up to meet him, filled his lungs like water and smeared his eyes, stuffed his throat with cotton. He staggered down into a blinding darkness. His feet met cold water. Running footsteps rang on stone. Dan ran after them.

"Gav!" he cried. His voice echoed, twisted and swirled through warren tunnels, gnawed by the mutter of running water. He saw a bloom of light and chased it.

Beset by exhaustion, breathing blood and flame, he stumbled out into a wide, round chamber. Light filtered down from street lamps above, painting the room in orange and grey. Water trickled down the walls, over the stumps of burnt-out candles on the floor. Dozens of tunnels pierced the perimeter like spokes on a wheel, each as black as the next, none showing a glimmer of where Gav had gone.

But on the raised dais in the centre of the room, there was a body. From the smell, it was several days old. From the wounds, it had been murdered.

From the shock of ginger hair, it was Chad.

Dan's knees gave out. He couldn't get back up. His head spun. Sparks swam across his vision. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. There were no more footsteps. There was no light to follow. There was no scrap of cloth, no scrapes on the walls, no distant screams. There was nothing to be
Gav was gone.

The tears came, slowly at first and then in a flood. He screamed through his teeth, beat his fists on the cold stone floor until they bled. Alone in the dark with death, he wept until his breath failed him, minutes or hours or days later.

And when, at last, the waters receded and his head broke the surface, he found Casimir at his side, not quite close enough to touch.

"We should not stay here," he said. His voice was little more than the rasp of a rusted hinge. His eyes were fixed on Chad's corpse.

"Where will we go?" Dan croaked.

"To my flat."

"We—we ought to tell someone. About James. And that Gav is missing, they—they can help us... ."

Casimir turned a dubious look on him. Dan's voice petered out. He swallowed, bit his lip, pulled himself together.

"We've got to tell someone about James," he said. "We can't just leave him here to rot."

"An anonymous tip?"

Dan sniffled, wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and nodded. By an immense effort of will, he got to his feet. Casimir started to get up, pained and unsteady. Dan offered his hand. Casimir took it.

"Thank you," he said.

"Do you need a doctor?"

He shook his head. "I'll survive."

"I'm sorry. I should have—"

Casimir held up a hand. "Later, Daniel."

"Right. Yes. You're right."

As they made their way out of the chamber, Casimir looked back. Softly, so softly that it might have been a trick of Dan's imagination, he spoke.

"Adieu, chatton," he said.

He did not speak again for the rest of the long journey back.
When Dan and Casimir arrived back at his building on the Champs Élysées, Casimir detoured them through the back of the lobby to a small room marked *Courtesy Telephone.* He waved to the night watchman, shut the door behind them, and gestured for Dan to take the phone.

"What, me?" Dan said.

He touched his own throat and shook his head. "Too distinctive," he said.

"Oh. Right. Er—what should I—"

"9th District Station."

"Right. And I'll—right."

He picked up the phone and, when the operator asked, requested the station. After a moment, the call connected. A bored, sleepy voice on the other end said, "9th District Police Station."

Dan took a deep breath. He spoke softly, slowly, and clearly, contorting his French through Punjabi accents; there was no chance he'd ever be mistaken for a Frenchman, but he could at least pass himself off as a different sort of foreigner.

"There is a dead body in the sewers near Montmartre Boulevard," he said. "It has been there several days. Someone should pick it up."

"Who is this?" the policeman demanded. "How did you find this body?"

Before Dan could stumble into a lie, Casimir plucked the telephone out of his hand and hung it up.

"That will do," he said.

"Oh," said Dan. "Right. I suppose it will. Should we go up?"

"Not yet. Wait a few minutes, at least."

"To keep our anonymity intact if the police come poking about?"

"Yes."

Nodding, Dan stuck his hands in his pockets and bounced on his toes. Casimir leaned up against the wall and watched the night watchman through the crack in the door.

"This feels illegal," Dan said, mostly to himself. "I don't know if it is, but it feels illegal. Have we done something illegal?"

Casimir shrugged.

"You don't know, or you don't care?"

"It hurts to talk," he said.
"Oh. Of course. Sorry, I'll—sorry."

He bit his lip and bounced on his toes some more, fiddled with the lint in his pockets. He leaned up to the other side of the door, but the crack was too small to see through.

"Keep talking," Casimir said.

"What?"

"As though you were on the telephone."

"Oh. Right. Er. . . ."

"Literally anything."

"Er, yes, of course," Dan said in English, at what he hoped was a reasonable volume and un-stilted cadence. "I know it's very late, and I am terribly sorry. One worries, you know, that's all."

Casimir nodded, eyes on the watchman. Dan counted back from ten to allow for a response.

"And I wish I hadn't woken you, and I'm sure I'll get an earful," he said. "But it's worth it to know you're all right. Mmhm. Yes, all right. I'll let you go. Good night, dear. I'll see you soon."

He raised his eyebrows at Casimir, who picked the phone up and dropped it back down with a loud ding. Dan held the door for him, and the two of them headed for the lift.

"Wife's pregnant, back home," Dan said to the watchman, sheepish and blushing. "You know how it is."

"Hm," said the watchman.

"Honestly, must you tell every single person we meet?" Casimir sighed. He took Dan's arm and hauled him off. Fortunately, as soon as the lift doors closed behind them, he let go again.

"So . . . what now?" Dan asked.

"Now," said Casimir, "we wait."

On the floor of Casimir's bathroom, buried beneath the bloodstained bathrobe, Dan found the missing files. One was marked Demarais, the other James. With shaking hands, he brought them back to the main room and lowered himself into the armchair. Casimir watched him in silence, huddled on the sofa with a hot cup of milk and honey, petting his own throat with careful, nervous fingers.

Dan opened up the files and placed them on the coffee table. Inside each one, halfway through the packet of papers, there was a photograph of the victim's torso, cleaned of blood and laid out on the autopsy table.

On each one, gruesome artwork had been carved into the skin, runes and sigils, an inverted pentagram.

Putting a hand over his eyes, Dan cursed through his teeth. His insides knotted up so tightly they threatened to rip him in half. His heart lodged in his throat. His lungs were full of blood.
"We've got to find him," he choked out. "He—he must've known, he must have . . . but God, why would he leave?"

"It's better that we wait," said Casimir. "He will come back here."

"Unless he's in bits! God Almighty, we can't leave him out there when he's been—been marked for death!"

"I don't think that's what it means."

"How could it not? What else could it possibly mean?"

"I couldn't tell you. All I know is that we stand no chance of finding him if we go."

"He could be hurt. He could be in danger. It's obvious, even he knew it, or else—or else why would he have hidden the files from us?"

Casimir sipped his drink, then set it aside. He pulled his coat closer about him.

"I am not convinced that Gavin was acting of his own volition," he said.

"What?"

"Nor were Christophe and Mrs James when they were induced to butcher themselves."

"You've lost your damn mind," Dan snarled.

"Which would you rather believe?" Casimir retorted. "That unseen forces are at work, or that Gavin sincerely attempted to murder me of his own accord?"

"I don't know! Maybe he knows something about you that I don't, and it made sense!"

"Do you think that there is any crime so heinous, any knowledge so vile, that it could drive Gavin to murder?"

"It could have been self-defence."

"He threw me off a catwalk so I couldn't fight while he strangled me."

Dan shut his mouth. He turned his face away, bit his lip, shut his eyes. He rubbed the scrapes and bruises on his hands, proof that regardless of what he wished, it had not been a dream.

"What happened up there?" he asked. "What made him do it?"

"I came too close," said Casimir.

"There must have been something else."

"There was nothing else."

"Did he say anything? Anything at all?"

"Not a word. I came too close, and the next thing I knew, there was a rope around my neck—then before I could do anything about it, he threw me over the railing."

"How?"
"What do you mean, how?"

"He's seven stone stopping wet. He can barely lift a full teakettle. How?"

"Since you are averse to my honest explanations, call it leverage. I was too preoccupied with removing the noose to fight with him over it."

A flash of memory assailed Dan—hands white-knuckled on a rusty railing, feet kicking at nothing while arms weakened. He buried his face in his hands and let out a shaking breath.

"No signs of a struggle," he whispered.

"Pardon?" said Casimir.

"That's how Miles was killed," Dan said, pushing his fingers up into his hair. "He tried to—to do it the way it was done to Miles. I'm almost certain."

"It's a good thing you were there, then."

"It's a good thing he gave you that knife back, or else it might have been the way Christophe went."

Casimir looked up sharply, frowning. "What knife?"

Silence came down like a heavy rain. Dan went cold to the bone. The blood drained from Casimir's face as realization dawned.

"Shit," he said softly.

"We've got to find him, Casimir," said Dan.

"How?"

"I don't know! You were meant to be the one who knew what to do!"

"Even my wits have an end, Daniel. If Gavin is alive, and himself, he will come back here. That is all I can give you."

"Then we tell the police! We have them look for him, get them to help!"

"And if they find him, do you think he will go quietly? Or will he fight? And how long do you think he will live if he does?"

"That isn't how it would happen. They'd help us, they'd—"

"They would beat him bloody and arrest him."

"Better that than him being murdered! Brouillard is still out there somewhere. He murdered Christophe, he murdered the whole James family, what's to stop him from doing the same Gav?"

"I believe he killed Chad. I believe he was instrumental in the deaths of the rest of the family, and in Christophe's death, but I don't believe he killed them himself."

"Then who did?"

"What, Daniel," Casimir said. "What killed them."

Dan shot to his feet. "I'm not staying here. You've lost your mind, and I've had enough of your—"
your lunacy. I'm going to find Gav before he gets hurt, before—before—"

"Before he hurts someone else?"

"Shut up! Shut up, don't look at me like that, he wouldn't, he couldn't!"

"He did."

"That doesn't count!"

"Because it was me?"

"Because that wasn't Gav!"

Casimir propped his cheek on his hand and raised his eyebrows. Dan's stomach dropped into his boots. His tongue tasted of bile, thick and dry in his mouth.

"I didn't mean it like that," he said.

"I think you did."

"Then whatever you've got is catching, and I ought to leave anyway!"

"You don't have to believe in anything you can't see. But you must accept that, whatever has happened to Gavin, he is more than capable of doing harm."

"No. No, that doesn't make any sense. That's not possible."

"It happened. You saw it with your own eyes."

"I don't know what I saw! Maybe it wasn't even Gav, maybe it was someone else entirely, and I just thought—it was dark and I wasn't clear-headed, I only saw it for a moment, it didn't even move like him, how am I—"

"It?"

Dan swallowed down the rest of his words. A trembling weakness wrapped round his limbs, sucking the vigour from him. He sank back into his chair, tears gathering in his eyes.

"What makes you think he'll come back?" he said, hollowed out, filling up with pain.

"Sooner or later, I believe he will be himself again. When he is, he will try to find you. Of this, I am certain."

"How is he meant to know I'm here, instead of back at our hotel room?"

He shrugged again. "It's a toss of the coin."

"Then one of us should go there, and the other stay here. I should—"

"I do not think that it would be wise for either of us to be alone," Casimir said softly. "Just in case he is not himself when he returns."

Dan's eyes flicked to the rising bruises on Casimir's neck. He looked away again, sickened.

"There was... an incident," he admitted. "A couple of days ago. He was sleepwalking. I think. He... stood over me with a knife, like he was waiting, and—when whatever he was waiting for didn't
happen, he tried to get out of the room again. He'd tried before, when he was sleepwalking, a few
days before that, I just thought—I just thought I was being paranoid, that there was nothing to
actually worry about."

"The night Mrs James died," Casimir said, in much the same tone. "When did he arrive back at your
hotel?"

"Oh, God no, you don't think—?"

"I think it is important to ask. He left here around nine o'clock or nine thirty."

"He was back by ten."

"Then it's doubtful he could have killed Chad. Certainly not the rest of the family."

"No. Certainly not. I suppose that's something of a relief."

"I don't know that I would go that far," said Casimir. "But it is at least not as bad as it could be."

There was a long silence. Casimir took up his drink again. Dan's pocket watch ticked. A cart
clattered past on the Champs Élysées below.

"Are you all right?" Dan asked.

"I'm alive," said Casimir. "I don't think I need a doctor."

"But are you all right?"

Casimir eyed him up. The corner of his mouth curled. He sipped his drink.

"I don't hold Gavin responsible for what happened," he said. "So you need not fear retaliation."

"That's good to know. Are you all right?"

The smile slid off Casimir's face, replaced with something dangerously close to anger. He turned to
stare out the window, nursing his drink, picking at the sleeve of his coat.

"We both know you don't care about me," he said. "You needn't pretend."

"Maybe you know that, but it's news to me. Perhaps you missed the bit where I saved your life."

"Implying you would have let a stranger die?"

"I don't have to know someone to care about them."

"Now you're just adding insult to injury."

"Cas, I'm not—"

"Stop it," Casimir snarled, slamming his fist down on the arm of the sofa hard enough to make Dan
jump.

Trembling with restrained violence, Casimir let out a slow breath and slugged down the rest of his
drink. He went to the kitchen and refilled his cup with gin. Dan watched him, the stiff pain in his
movements, the fury clenched between his teeth, the glistening eyes and frequent swallowing.

"Who hurt you?" Dan asked softly.
Casimir's only answer was to drain his cup and refill it again. Dan did not ask anything else.

By three in the morning, Casimir's gin was looking unbearably appealing. Casimir himself was dozing on the sofa, his coat wrapped round him for a meagre blanket. Dan had picked through all the files a second time, but found nothing of any help. He fished out Brouillard's card, with the name of the castle scribbled on the back of it. The front side only advertised the Théâtre.

"Five quid says it's not even where they've gone," he muttered to himself. "Twenty people don't cram in to a ruddy castle. Could be anything, really."

On the sofa, Casimir stirred. He yawned, stretched, resettled his head on the arm and spoke with his eyes closed.

"What are you muttering about?" he asked.

"Brouillard's card. I don't think it's going to be much help finding him. Or any of them."

The corner of Casimir's mouth pulled up. "Still on the case, even now."

"It's not like I've got anything better to do."

"You could sleep."

"The hell I could."

Casimir yawned again. "Perhaps not without assistance. They make things for that, you know."

"Gin and laudanum?"

"It works wonders for me."

"No thank—"

He broke off, realization hitting him like a punch in the gut. Casimir cracked an eye open.

"What?"

"How long should he have stayed asleep?" Dan asked quietly.

Casimir opened the other eye and sat up. "A few hours," he said. "At least two, not more than four."

"It's been almost six."

"I'm not certain I grasp the significance."

"He was sleepwalking. You put him to sleep, and he—sleepwalked. That's why he didn't seem like himself, that's why all of this happened."

"Although I suspect you are missing some important details, I think you are broadly correct. Inducing unconsciousness may have been unwise; but how was I to know?"

"I'm not blaming you."

"You were working your way up to it."
"I did tell you not to give him the laudanum."

"I didn't give it to him. I offered it, and he took it."

"If you hadn't—no, sorry, no." Dan took a deep breath and let it out again. "You were stopping him from bleeding to death. That's more important. You couldn't have known, I—I should have been watching him more closely, I should have known."

Casimir put his head to the side. "What a strange and unpleasant life you must lead. Regardless of the situation, you always find a way to blame yourself."

"Well—it's usually my fault, isn't it."

"No."

"It's certainly not anybody else's!"

"Some things are no one's fault, Daniel. Some things simply happen."

Before Dan could think of a response, the doorknob turned.

He and Casimir leapt to their feet. Dan's heart clawed up into his throat. His blood turned to quicksilver, his knees to jelly. The door swung open.

Dripping wet, eyes lowered, hands limp at his sides, Gav shambled in. The door drifted shut behind him. He stopped in his tracks, unsteady, struggling to breathe. He was pale as death. There was blood soaking through his shirt. There was blood on his hands.

"Oh, God!" Dan cried. "Are you hurt? Is—"

Casimir put out an arm to hold him back. His face was grim, his eyes fixed on Gav.

"That isn't his blood," he said.

The floor dropped out from under Dan. His ears filled with roaring. His vision narrowed down to a tunnel as his lungs failed to inflate.

Dazed and swaying, Gav raised his eyes. Blood dripped from his fingertips, as slow and steady as the ticking of a watch. When he spoke, it was nothing but a hoarse murmur, tumbling from a clumsy tongue and numb lips.

He said: "I've just killed Brouillard."

END OF ACT II

Chapter End Notes

And so, we come to the end of the second act at last. There will be a brief intermission while the stage is set for the final act, with the performance to resume on August 10th.

In the mean time, enjoy this musical interlude.
If you are reading this story after completion, this is a mandatory rest stop (I know you don't want to; do it anyway). Visit the restroom, stretch, grab a drink and a snack. The show is far from over.
Act Three

Chapter Notes

It's good to be back.

The only sound in Casimir's flat was the ticking of Dan's pocket watch.

Morning peeked through the gaps in the curtains. The air was still and hot and close. The three of them sat arrayed round the coffee table in grim silence; Casimir with an undrunk glass of gin, Dan with his hands clenched on the upholstery, Gav scrubbed raw and dressed in a set of Casimir's clothes. He hadn't spoken since making that terrible proclamation, *I've just killed Brouillard*—although that was partially due to Casimir's insistence that everything else must wait until after all of the blood was cleaned up.

Paris woke, cracking the eggshell silence of the flat. It was Dan who finally broke it.

"We need to know what happened," he said. His voice was rusted with disuse, tremulous.

Gav gulped and put his head down. His hands were clasped in his lap, white-knuckled and shaking. Dan's insides writhed like a pit of snakes. He swallowed down his revulsion—at the deed, at the circumstance, at himself—and carried on.

"If—if there's a body to be found, the police will find it. Someone might have seen, or heard something, or . . . something. They might already be on their way."

"We are not turning him in," Casimir said, quietly and with unshakeable conviction.

"Of course we're not turning him in," Dan snapped. "We're going to work out when we need to start running and how thoroughly we've got to cover our tracks."

"If he wants to turn *himself* in, however, then—"

"Then he'll need a good knock on the head."

"Daniel, if we cover this up, we become as guilty as he is."

"Fine! We'll all go Hell together."

Casimir turned to Gav. "Gavin, my sweet, I defer to your preference. If you want me to go to the police, I will, regardless of what Daniel says."

"No you won't," said Dan.

"It is not for us to decide, whether or not the police should be involved. It is entirely up to Gavin. If he wishes to tell us what happened, I will gladly hear it; if he wants my help, I will gladly give it; and if his conscience demands that we go to the police, then I will go."

"You wouldn't make it to the door."

Casimir raised his eyebrows. "Would you kill me?"
"To keep Gav safe? I'd tear your fucking throat out."

"Dan, stop," Gav said, choked with misery.

"I mean it! Look, if you can't or won't or don't know how to say what happened last night, then I won't force you to—I won't even ask you to—but I'll be damned before I'll let you go to prison!"

"You don't understand. You don't—you can't—"

"Nobody here understands, but of the three of us, Casimir's got the least right to decide what to do about it. If you're mad, I'll go mad with you, and if you're a murderer, then so am I. I am not letting you go to prison."

"I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me!" Gav wailed, and buried his face in his hands. He dug his fingernails into his scalp, his shoulders shaking with restrained sobs. Dan's heart tried to eat itself in his chest. He had to look away.

"The best way to prevent that is to understand the nature of the beast," Casimir said gently. "If you can tell us what happened, we may be able to help you. If it is simply that you killed him, for no other reason than that you wanted to, then prison may be the better option; but I doubt that it is so. The decision is yours, my sweet."

"Awfully selfish of you, to put that decision completely on him," Dan said. "Didn't see you having too many difficulties with decisions when it came to cleaning up the blood."

"I was buying us the time to make a decision," Casimir retorted. "If I could take the burden of choice from Gavin's shoulders, I would do it; but it is not my choice to make. Nor is it yours."

"If you're too scared to stick with it, then we'll very happily be rid of you. I'm sure you can lie yourself clear of any charges—or failing that, bribe and fuck your way out."

"Yes, undoubtedly. It's unfortunate that you have no similar recourse for being so frightened of losing Gavin that you deny him his rights."

"Stop it," Gavin whispered. "Both of you, stop it, please, I can't. . . ."

Dan bit his tongue on further objections and resettled himself in his seat. Gav sniffled, wiped his nose, and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"I . . . I'll tell you everything," he said. "But—just you, Cassie. I can't do it if . . . if Dan's here. I'm sorry, Dan, I just—I can't. I couldn't bear it."

"Daniel, if you wouldn't mind waiting outside," said Casimir. He had eyes for Gav alone.

Dan took a deep breath and said, "No. I'm sorry, Gav, but no. If it's going to be said, I need to hear it."

"Dan, please," Gav begged. "I don't want you to hear, I don't—I don't want you caught up in it."

"I'm already caught up in it, B. The sooner we get this bit over with, the sooner we can move forward."

And I don't want to leave you alone with this bastard, he didn't say, no matter how much he wanted to.

Gav buried his face in his hands, sniffling and trembling. Some distant bell tower chimed six o'clock.
People were moving about in neighbouring flats, floorboards creaking under shuffling feet, groggy voices, the whistle of kettles and the smell of half a dozen breakfasts. Carts clattered by on the street below, postmen and milkmen and paper-boys, the day-birds leaving for work, the night-owls and street-walkers and drunks stumbling home. Casimir still had not touched his gin, swirling it idly in his glass, round and round, round and round, cool and clear and crisp as an autumn morning.

"It's all . . . vague," Gav said, wrapping his arms round his waist without uncurling at all. "It's like a dream. I—I know there was a . . . brothel, or whorehouse, something like that. It was late. Raining when I got there. He was . . . sleeping, I think. He was sleeping when I found him. I took—folded up all my clothes, and put them away somewhere, and—and killed him."

"How?" Casimir asked.

"I don't know," Gav moaned. "I don't know, just—there was blood, and a horrible smell, I—I could smell the alcohol, I don't—"

"So you cut him open. Was he still alive, when you did?"

"I don't know! I don't know anything, it's all just—red, it's all just messy and red and I can't—I can't—"

"All right. What did you do once he was dead? Did you come directly back here?"

Gav shook his head, paling even further. "No. I—I wrapped him up in the bedsheets. And some in the carpet, there was blood on that, too, and . . . I got dressed again. In—in his clothes, there was nowhere to wash off the blood, and it had gone dry by the time I—he must not have been wearing them, when . . . ."

"What did you do with the body?"

"I took it. I took it away. In . . . pieces. It was too heavy to carry, so—so in pieces."

"Where are the pieces now?"

He gulped. "They're in the Seine. It was dark, I was close enough, I just—"

"Where did you throw them in?"

"I don't know."

"It's very important, Gavin. Dead men float. Where did you throw him in?"

Gav squeezed his eyes shut. He trembled where he sat. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"The bridge near Grenelle Quay. There was no one about, no one—no one saw."

"Were there boats at the quay?"

"I think so. Yes."

"How many?"

"Three."

"What kind of boats were they? It's possible someone was aboard one, and saw you about your business without you seeing them."
"Couple of ferries and a barge. I don't think someone could hide on them, but I can't say for certain."

"What were their names?"

Gav's brow furrowed, his eyes moving behind their lids. "The Captain Fracasse, the Signac, and—I can't see a name the barge."

"You're doing very well, Gavin. What did you do with his clothes?"

"Used them to wipe up the room. Then them into the river, as well."

"Back in your own clothes, I presume."

"Yes."

"Was it still raining?"

"No. It started again just before I got to the Champs Élysées."

"Good. Do you remember what happened at the Théâtre?"

He frowned. His eyes squeezed tighter shut. His breathing sped up again.

"No. No, I—I don't even—I didn't know I even went to the Théâtre, what happened at the Théâtre?"

"You tried to kill me," said Casimir. "Do you remember that?"

"What? No, I didn't, I couldn't have! I—there was only—it's so dark, it's so muddled, there were stairs and ropes and—and some thing, some horrible shrunken thing, I don't know. I don't know; it doesn't make any sense!"

"You went to the Théâtre," Dan said, as gently as he could. "You were up in the catwalks. When . . . when Casimir went up there to get you, you—I wish there were an easier way to say it, but you really did try to kill him. I think . . . the way Miles was killed. With a rope round his neck, thrown over the side of the catwalk. You ran down some—some secret passage or something, down into the sewers. I think it was the same room where they took you, after the—well, you know. Er . . . and we found James' body down there. On the—in the middle."

"Oh, God, no," Gav whispered.

"You didn't do it!" Dan added hurriedly. "We don't—he'd been dead for a few days. You—we had eyes on you, or near enough, during the time he was killed. It was almost certainly Brouillard, who. . .."

Pained, Gav pressed his forehead to his knees. If Dan could have died by force of will alone, he would have done it. Casimir watched the two of them. When neither of them continued, he picked the conversation up.

"Would you like to know what I think about all this, Gavin?" he said.

A shrug. Casimir continued on, avuncular in nature, just short of pitying.

"I don't think you killed Brouillard."

Gav's head snapped up. "I—I did, though. I did, I've just told you!"
"You've just confirmed what I had suspected might be the case. Certainly, your hands returned stained with blood, but you, Gavin, you didn't kill him. Whether or not the police would believe that is a different matter—and it complicates things significantly that you were acting of your own accord when you disposed of the body."

"What are you talking about, of course I wasn't—I didn't, I wasn't myself until I got back here!"

"I can't help you if you lie to me, Gavin."

There was a moment of trembling silence, and then Gav burst out, "I panicked. I didn't know what else to do, I didn't—I wasn't thinking right, I was off my head, I—"

"No, no, you were thinking very well. You were thorough. You have made yourself difficult to trace. The issue, of course, is that—well, if we do go to the police, and it does come to a trial, it may look poorly for you. Madmen, after all, don't clean up after themselves."

Gav shut his eyes again, bit his lip until it turned white. Dan squirmed, too sick to keep watching but too nervous to look away.

"Which leads me to my final question," Casimir went on, "and by far the most important: what deal did you make?"

The effect on Gav was immediate and remarkable. He looked as though Casimir had pulled a firearm on him. His hands clenched so tight his knuckles popped. He shrank back in his chair, trembling head to toe.

"I don't . . . know what you mean. I don't know what you mean by that, what—what do you mean, deal?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I don't! I never—there was no—I never made any deals!"

"Gav," Dan said, as gently as he could. Gav let out a miserable moan and curled up, pulling on his hair.

"He said he could make it stop," he croaked. "He said—he could make it stop hurting, if I—he said if I—if I let him in, if I consented, then I wouldn't have to die, and . . . it hurt so much, and I was—I couldn't—I said yes. I said yes, and then there was a gunshot, and I don't remember anything else until I was waking up in hospital, and—and ever since, there's been this thing in my chest, this thing on fire, and I can't—I didn't mean to use it, it was just so—when Mrs James and the children died, I just wanted—just to be able to keep working, just to find who did it, just so I could think, but it keeps getting bigger, and worse, and hungrier, and I can't. . . ."

He trailed off, wracked with such tremors that he could scarcely breathe. Casimir steepled his fingers and pressed them to his lips, considering.

"Do you think you're mad, Gavin?" he asked.

A jerky nod of the head.

"I don't," said Casimir. "For whatever that's worth to you. I don't believe you're mad and I don't believe you killed Brouillard; and, therefore, I don't believe you should be committed or arrested. If you would like to be, I will not stop you, but I don't believe you should be. If you decide that you don't want to involve the authorities, the choice comes down to this: does your passenger provide
sufficient benefits that you are willing to negotiate the consequences of keeping him?"

Gav remained motionless for so long that Dan began to suspect he was having a moment—but at long, long last, he shook his head.

"Then we must remove him from you posthaste," said Casimir. "I have some ideas of how it can be done, but it will not be easy, or quick. In the meantime, you absolutely must not, under any circumstances, engage his services again. What happened last night was the collection of a debt, and if we are to succeed in our enterprise, the scales must remain balanced."

"How do you know?" Gav whispered. "How do you know any of this?"

"I made some tremendous mistakes in my youth," said Casimir. "The effects of which still accompany me. If you are mad, then so am I; but I have seen things that madness alone cannot explain, that no doctor can cure, and that no prison on this earth can hold. I will help you, if you want me to. I cannot save you, but I will help you."

Gav sniffled. He kept his head down. Tears dripped from the end of his nose.

"We'll have to tell Gabriel something," he said. His voice was choked, miserable "We've got to— Dan's promised to write letters, every week, we'll have to tell her something, or—"

"You let me worry about Gabriel," said Dan, although his stomach was in his boots. "We've got a few days before that becomes an issue, anyway. Right now, let's just . . . get through the right now."

"I can't," Gav moaned. His fingers dug into his sides. "I can't do this, I can't. . . ."

"Do you want us to go to the police?" Dan asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

With barely a moment's pause, Gav shook his head. Dan pursed his lips.

"Do you need us to go to the police?"

Another shake of the head.

"If I ask in English," Dan said quietly, "does your answer change?"

This time, the pause was much longer. Gav struggled with himself, fine tremors chasing through his body. At last, he shook his head.

With a final steadying breath, Dan made his decision.

He got up slowly, watching Gav and Casimir both in his peripheral vision. He forced himself to turn his back and walk into the kitchen, smothering his thoughts like a pot lid on a grease fire. His hands shook. His head spun. He braced himself on the counter the moment he got to it. His throat was so dry he couldn't swallow. Exhaustion filled his bones with lead shot, flaked rust into his blood and wore his muscles threadbare.

"Dan?" Gav said.

Dan ignored him. He took down a glass from the cabinets. He popped the stopper out of the gin bottle.

"Dan!"

Heedless, he filled the glass up to the top and set the bottle aside with a thunk. When he spoke, he
spoke to the glass.

"I am going to get very drunk," he said. "Because it's the only way I can manage the level of sheer insanity that the two of you have reached. I'm going to get drunk, and all three of us madmen are going to come up with a plan for how the fuck we're meant to deal with this, and I'll hope like hell it makes more sense by the time I sober up."

Before anything could be said about it, he raised the glass to his lips and drained the whole thing. The gin scalded his sinuses, burned his throat and warmed his belly. He slammed the glass down, coughing, shaking the bees out of his nose. While his eyes were still watering, he poured himself another glass and drained half of that, too. Only then did he turn back, braced for the pain on Gav's face—but not for the amusement on Casimir's.

Dan drained his second glass and snatched up the bottle instead. His breath was flecked with blue flame.

"Let's get cracking," he said.
A Plan

When at last the alcoholic haze cleared, Dan found himself with a splitting hangover, a mouth full of cotton, and a long fuzzy patch in his memory. He was sore all over, aching in every joint and muscle, with bruises on his elbows and knees and scabby scrapes on his hands—all from the Théâtre, he prayed, dear God let him not have done anything horrible while he was drunk. . . .

Slowly, taking care not to agitate the sloshing pain in his head, Dan sat up. Casimir's flat was dim, the curtains drawn and the gas lamps turned down. He was in the bed, clothed but without his shoes or jacket. A lone figure sat in the common room, a silhouette in the dim light. Dan squinted, battling his blurred vision. The figure turned its head, bringing a distinctive nose into profile.

"He's awake," Gav said.

There was a mumble, a yawn, and Casimir sat up from the divan. "Is he going to throw up?"

"Not immediately," said Dan. Raising his voice hurt, made his head spin. He tightened his throat and squeezed his eyes shut.

In the other room, Casimir and Gav had a brief, quiet conversation. Casimir went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, while Gav came and settled on the foot of the bed. Dan risked looking at him. He was haggard, pale, sat with his elbows on his knees, and his head down. The sickness swelled in Dan's stomach, the full-body ache sinking its teeth into his joints. He pinched the bridge of his nose and averted his eyes.

"I'm really not happy with you," Gav said quietly.

"I know," said Dan. "I know, and I'm sorry. I don't know what I—no, I just wasn't thinking at all. I didn't do anything horrible, did I? Only there's sort of a—a fuzzy patch."

Gav shook his head. "Just sat and drank the whole day away. It's past midnight, by the by. A whole day, gone. We could've used your help."

"Christ alive," Dan muttered. Gav winced. A vice pressed Dan's sternum to his spine. "I'm sorry. I s'pose I just . . . got to the end of my rope. And apparently there's a drunk down there. It won't happen—"

Gav held up a hand. "Don't bother."

"Not 'til all this is done with, then," said Dan, pleading."I'll do better. You've got so much to deal with already, it—it isn't fair of me to be dragging this up, as well. I'll find a way to keep it together."

"D'you know, I actually don't mind so much," said Gav, cracking a wry smile. "I'd rather be dealing with this. It reduces to a problem already solved. Or at least solved enough. As opposed to every other bloody thing going on right now."

In the kitchen, the kettle whistled. Casimir tended to it. Dan rubbed his moustache. He would've liked nothing better than to lie down and go directly back to sleep, preferably for several days. Failing that, he would have reached out to Gav, held him, reassured him, felt the beating of his heart and the swell of his breath.

He doubted it would go over well.
"Is there a plan?" he asked.

Gav scoffed. "If you can call it that."

Casimir came in from the kitchen and set a steaming cup of tea on the nightstand.

"Ginger," he said. "To help settle your stomach."

"Er . . . thank you," said Dan. His addled brain was having difficulty making the switch between English and French.

With a nod, Casimir backed off and leaned up against the wall. "Has he been brought up to speed?"

"Not yet," said Gav.

"Would you like to do the honours, or should I?"

"I'll start," Gav said, rubbing his temple. "I may not be able to finish."

"At your leisure, then."

Gav took a deep breath and sighed it back out. Dan picked up the cup of tea, just to have something warm to hold onto. The porcelain was painfully hot against his palms, but he gritted his teeth and bore it.

"It's a three-part plan," said Gav. "The first part's the most important, but probably the most difficult. We've got to work out what this . . . thing is, in me. Which will hopefully give us some insight into how we're meant to get rid of it."

"I've sent out some feelers," Casimir said. "We should hear back in the morning, or afternoon at the latest."

Dan pursed his lips, frowning. "I'm not sure I like should."

"Nobody likes should, but I don't want to make promises I can't keep."

"Should is fine," said Gav. "It's better than might."

"By a long shot," Dan agreed. "Who did these feelers go out to?"

"Acquaintances, friends of friends," said Casimir.

"I meant their professions."

"Ah, I see. Psychics, mystics, a priest or two."

"No doctors?"

"One doctor. I only know one I trust enough."

"And yet, you know multiple trustworthy psychics?"

"Trustworthy, no. I would say rather efficiently manipulable."

"Hmm," said Dan, dissatisfied but unable to collect his thoughts well enough to form a coherent objection. "Fine, Part One seems workable. What's Part Two?"
"Part Two boils down to don't get caught," said Gav. "By the—the police, or . . ."

Casimir stepped in again. "Peake's followers. It seems likely that they will be out for blood."

"Shit," said Dan, wincing. "It does, at that. I don't suppose they know you're involved, Casimir?"

"I have decided to assume that they do. There are certain precautions that can be taken. We may have to relocate at some point, but for the time being, I think we are safe here. At the very least, we have survived the first day. There was nothing in the papers, which is a remarkably good sign."

"That, or it's being hushed up by the police."

"Also a possibility, but they have proven to be a leaky establishment in the past. A better bet is that anything that was discovered was not deemed newsworthy—so far."

"So far," Gav said.

"That's the kicker, all right," said Dan. "So: get information and lay low until we can get you . . . in order. It's not terrifically detailed, but it'll do."

Gav shook his head. "You haven't heard Part Three yet."

"What's Part Three?" Dan said, his stomach sinking.

Gav looked to Casimir. Casimir inclined his head. When he spoke, he kept his voice low and his eyes averted.

"In order to ensure that Gavin is not convicted, we must either ensure that the crime is never discovered, or we must find someone to take the blame. The second is considerably easier than the first. We have chosen Mr. Peake as our someone."

Dan stared at him. Gav put his head in his hands and gulped. Taking slow, deep breaths, Dan put his tea aside and folded his hands in his lap.

"Mr Dubois, have you completely taken leave of your senses?" he asked quietly.

"Peake is the ideal candidate," said Casimir. "He has already killed one man and attempted to kill another, and would certainly be executed for that. He also orchestrated the events that led, however indirectly, to Brouillard's death. He is close to Gavin's height and build, such that any witness could be persuaded that they are easily mistakable on a dark and rainy night. If we bungle a complete coverup, we all go to prison; it is a much simpler matter to deflect blame."

"Which, if we bungle it, will not only result in our arrests and possible executions, but also a mistrial that allows Peake to walk free," Dan snapped, though the vehemence sent a lance of pain through his head.

Casimir shrugged. "If we are all dead or in prison, it will hardly matter whether or not Peake goes free."

"I think it might matter to anyone else he decides to murder."

"Regardless, I think our chances of success are higher."

"Are you a gambling man, Casimir?"

"Sometimes."
"It shows," Dan sneered.

"I agree with him, Dan," Gav said into his hands. "I don't like it, but I think it's our best bet."

Dan swallowed down the first words that came to his tongue. He picked his tea back up and sipped it, scalding away the lingering syllables. His pulse pounded behind his eyes like a boxing glove on a piston. He took another sip of tea, waiting for the tart ginger to overwhelm the stale taste of gin.

"Why?" he asked.

Curling further into himself, Gav shook his head. Dan clenched his teeth and looked to Casimir.

"Why?" he insisted. "What makes this necessary?"

"Gavin believes that his attempted disposal of the remains was ineffective, and that the scene was not sufficiently tidied. He is not convinced that he was not observed. He doesn’t know who saw him enter, both outside the establishment and within it. He does believe, however, that these things can be accounted for."

"He believes that?"

"We do, then. It is easy enough to say that Peake could wear a false nose and speak in a false accent; easier still for the two of us to say we can account for Gavin's whereabouts for the entire night."

"Perjury, you mean?"

"No, not at all. Phrased properly, it can remain entirely true. We do know where he was. We were with him in my flat until we fell asleep. We did not see or hear him leave, and he was there in the morning. We can account for his whereabouts for the entire night. That is all, to the letter, true."

Dan stared at him. "That's... hideous."

"Thank you," said Casimir, inclining his head.

"That wasn’t a compliment. And I don’t care if it's not technically lying, and neither will the courts."

"If we're already being tried for covering up a murder, I doubt a little perjury will tip the scales one way or another. Caught is caught, and not is not. I am determined to maintain not, no matter the price."

"You don't have a conscience?"

"The luxury of conscience is reserved for when lives are not on the line." He put his head to the side, watching Dan much too closely. "As a soldier, you must understand that."

Dan's throat constricted. Before he could choke out a response, Gav did it for him.

"Don't bring that up," he said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

Casimir conceded. "I simply meant that your life, Gavin, is worth more to me than a clean conscience. I could conceivably live with perjury, and certainly with framing a guilty man for a murder he caused, however indirectly. I would never forgive myself if I allowed you to be executed."

"You're in it to save your own skin, and nothing else," said Dan.
"If that were the case, Mr Gruchy, I would have turned him in the moment he arrived on my doorstep covered in another man's blood," Casimir said coldly. "More than that, I would have gone to the police when he tried, very nearly successfully, to murder me. I made my decision twenty hours ago. When are you going to make yours?"

"I made it six years ago," Dan retorted. "If we fuck up covering it up, we ruin ourselves. If we fuck up pinning it on Peake, we ruin ourselves and let a murderer walk free. I'd throw Peake to the wolves in a heartbeat, but Gav's already said he doesn't want anyone else getting hurt because of him, so I'm inclined to pick the path with the least potential for collateral damage. That is something they teach you in the army."

Casimir pursed his lips, glanced at Gav, and let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Very well," he said. "Being the one amongst us with the least at stake, I will defer to your preference. Unless, of course, Gavin's preference differs, and I am called upon to break the tie."

Something between a laugh and a sob hitched Gav's breath.

"It always comes back to me, doesn't it," he said, morose. "I don't know. I don't know, and at this point, I hardly care. I'm so tired."

"Have you slept?" Dan asked.

"Of course I haven't slept, how could you expect me to sleep?"

"All right! All right. Rest, then; spend a handful of hours not doing anything. If it's been a whole day already, and nobody's turned up—has anybody turned up?"

"No one," said Casimir.

"Then we've probably got until morning, at least. I've wasted the whole day, it's my turn to be up and about all night."

"Unless you're too hungover," Gav muttered.

"I've managed before, I'll manage now. Casimir, have you slept?"

"Not in so many words, no."

"That's a shame, because I doubt you'll get the chance any time soon. We ought to have both of us keeping eyes on Gav, especially if he's unconscious."

Gav lurched to his feet and stalked away. He posted up by the window, folding his arms and glaring out through a gap in the curtains. Dan was seized by the impulse to dump the scalding cup of tea all over himself, just so the pain outside would match the pain inside.

"Stupid fucking idiot," he cursed at himself.

"Sometimes, there are no right words," said Casimir, keeping his voice low.

"Piss off."

"I'm only trying to help."

"Then you're failing miserably." He dropped to a whisper and hissed out, "And your story doesn't damn well match up, and I'm onto you."
Casimir raised an eyebrow. "In what way?"

"First you're saying, oh, we're not turning him in, but then it's entirely up to Gavin, and then this stupid, elaborate plan to cover it up, but it's still whatever Gavin decides. Which is it, Dubois? Are you protecting him at all costs, or are you leaving it up to him?"

"I don't see how those are mutually exclusive."

"I don't see how they're not!"

With a shrug, he said, "I wouldn't let him choose wrong."

Disgusted, Dan abandoned his tea on the nightstand and went after Gav. Being upright left him dizzy, and every step made his head throb. He hadn't had enough of the tea to do his stomach any good, either.

Before he even got within arm's reach, Gav was shrinking away. Dan stopped where he was, stuffed his hands in his pockets and bit his lip until the pain had sharpened his thoughts sufficiently.

"I didn't mean anything by it," he said softly, in English.

Gav kept his face turned away. "It's nothing you said. You're right, anyway, I shouldn't—I can't be left unsupervised. I've stayed awake for just that reason."

"I'm sorry," said Dan.

"Why? What've you got to be sorry for?"

"If I hadn't been—well, drunk—I might've been able to help supervise. So you could've slept."

"I don't want to sleep. Not ever again, if I can help it."

"Somehow doubt that'd work out well."

Gav snorted. "I reckon if it kills me, at least I won't have to worry about anything anymore."

"Yes, but it would be very upsetting for the rest of us," said Dan, put out. "Besides, I doubt it would go that way. I'd rather have you sleeping predictably, when we've got eyes on you, than passing out on your feet when nobody's looking."

Downcast, Gav wrapped his arms round himself, still not facing Dan.

"I don't want to hurt either of you," he said.

"I don't want you to hurt anyone, B, but if you're going to, I'd rather it was me."

"Dan, please."

"This'll all look less dire once you've had some rest. The two of us can handle you."

"You really, demonstrably can't."

"We weren't prepared then, and we were separated, besides. And I reckon it's got a momentum to it, whatever it is, and if we catch you early, it'll be that much easier to stop."

"You've got absolutely no basis for that whatsoever."
"I was locked in a room with you whilst you were sleepwalking, twice, once when you were armed, and never got a scratch on me. What's your evidence to the contrary?"

A shiver chased through Gav like a ripple on a pond. He lifted his head to stare out the window again. A stripe of lamplight painted his face through the curtains, dripping from his eye to his chin. His fingers dug into his sides, buckled with the force of his grip.


He broke off, shaking his head like a horse beset by flies. He clenched his teeth and let out a slow breath through his nose.

"I live with this thing," he said, sickened. "I don't need evidence."

Dan braced himself. Slowly, he approached and reached out, stopping only when Gav flinched. When he didn't pull away, Dan touched his arm, as gently as he could. Gav trembled under his hand, taut as a piano wire.

"What do you need?" Dan asked.

Faking a smile, Gav shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Are chains and manacles an option?"

"Knowing Casimir? Probably."

He actually cracked up at that, ducking his head to hide the grin. Dan put an arm round his shoulders and drew him close, kissed his temple, squeezed his biceps.

"That's a nice change," he said. "That's a much better face."

"This reckless compassion's going to be the end of you, B."

"If that's the hill I die on, then so be it."

Gav leaned his head on Dan's shoulder. "I love you," he murmured.

"I love you as well, B."

From the bedroom, Casimir slunk out like a cat in the presence of strangers who had offered food.

"Was I requested?" he said.

"Near enough," said Gav. He sniffled. "We wondered if you had—chains and manacles and things."

"Why on earth would I have anything like that? I'm astonished you'd even inquire. I'm speechless."

"But do you?"

"Of course."

"Are they up to snuff for less recreational uses?"

"Not long-term, but they should suffice for temporary restraint. Conceivably, one could escape them silently, but we could put a bell on you."

"I suppose you have one of them, too," said Dan.
"Not yet. For tonight, we shall simply have to be watchful—although presumably, none of it will be necessary, if the scales are indeed balanced."

"Rather not take the chance," said Gav. "At this point, it's either coffee or sleep, and since you haven't got any coffee, I think I've got to sleep."

"The bed is yours. Do you have a preference for who does the honours?"

"You'd know how to work the things better than Dan would, so you, I suppose."

"I promise I shall be very gentle. Make your bedtime preparations, then, while I retrieve the items in question."

"Thank you, Cassie."

He bowed an elaborate bow and slipped off to his closet. Gav leaned against Dan's side, still hugging himself, but markedly less taut.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Dan asked softly.

"It's the best we've got. Better than leaving me loose, anyway."

"I meant in terms of— I dunno, if there's a fire, or something."

Gav raised an eyebrow at him. Dan shrugged.

"Just a thought."

"Oh, Dan."

Something went *thunk* in Casimir's closet, followed by a string of colourful, if muffled, cursing.

"What about in terms of leaving him and me alone?" Dan asked.

"I trust you not to do any colluding."

"I'm more concerned about the temptation to knock his teeth in."

"You'll manage somehow. If all else fails, just ask him to mend the hem on your jacket. He's much more agreeable when he's sewing."

"Is he? Cheers, that's good to know."

The two of them stood in silence while Casimir continued to root through his closet. Dan rubbed Gav's arm, and Gav rested his head on Dan's shoulder. He smelled of Casimir's soaps, of potpourri and lavender and skin scrubbed too hard. His beard was starting to grow back in, stubble catching against the sleeve of Dan's shirt. His breath came slow and steady. He yawned, finishing with a canine squeal at the back of his throat and eyes too heavy to open. Dan squeezed him and kissed his hair.

"Let's put you to bed, B," he said.
By three a.m., Dan was flagging. There was no sleep less restful than a drunken one, not to mention the aggregated exhaustion of the hangover. He would've killed for a coffee, as even Casimir's strongest tea couldn't get him properly up to speed. As thin as his patience was, he'd resorted to the sewing trick early on, and while it had worked wonders, Casimir was nearly done with his task already.

The only good news lay with Gav, sound asleep in Casimir's bed. There was a padded leather restraint round one of his ankles, with the other end affixed to the bedpost. While it hindered his ability to get under the covers properly, it was at least a warm night. His faint snores drifted through the flat, soporific. Dan thought, longingly and at length, about joining him in bed and leaving Casimir to his own devices for the rest of the night.

"There we are," Casimir said, setting aside his needle and thread. He sat back and shook out his hand, wincing. "A little flimsier than anticipated, but none the worse for wear."

"Thank you," said Dan. "Gav's been picking on me relentlessly for looking like a vagrant."

"It wasn't quite that bad. Here, you can have it back."

Casimir tossed the jacket to him. Dan fumbled the catch and had to go behind the couch to retrieve the jacket. While he dusted it off and inspected the new needlework, Casimir stretched his hands, making faces and soft noises of pain.

"All right there?" Dan asked, settling back into his seat.

"Sore, that's all," said Casimir. "Evidently, dangling from a catwalk is a touch strenuous on the hands."

"Ah. Yes, I can see how it would be."

Casimir looked over his shoulder at Gav, who was still fast asleep. He rubbed his throat and shook his head, then got to his feet.

"I think I'll make another pot of tea. Daniel, would you care for a cup?"

"Please."

With a nod, Casimir shuffled off to the kitchen. Dan sat and listened to the ticking of his pocket watch until it was drowned out by the rumble of the kettle, and then to the gentle murmur of Paris when Casimir poured out the tea. Gav shifted in the bed, and Dan's heart leapt into his throat—but nothing came of it, and all was peaceful again by the time Casimir returned with two cups of tea.

"Thank you," Dan said, accepting one from him.

Casimir resumed his seat in the armchair and cradled his own cup in his hands. "My pleasure. I'm sorry I haven't any coffee for you."

Dan shrugged. Another three minutes passed without either of them speaking.

"Aren't you hot?" Dan said at last.

Frowning, Casimir asked, "What do you mean?"
Dan gestured. "With the coat. It seems like the weather's too hot for it."

"Ah. It isn't about heat so much as . . . warmth. Security, one might say."

"I'm guessing it means something to you, then."

"Yes."

"May I ask what?"

Casimir mulled it over before answering. When he did, he kept his eyes down, his fingers idly petting the coat's sleeve.

"It was the only birthday present I ever received," he said quietly. "I was fourteen. It was everything my family could muster. Now it's all I have left of them, apart from a few small keepsakes."

"I'm sorry," said Dan. "Were you close?"

"In some ways. Regardless, it's . . . nice to be reminded of where I came from. There is a certain peace of mind in it."

"Sensible enough, I suppose."

"Whether it is sensible or not, it is the case."

"True. Yes. Er . . . look, if you're not too wound up . . ."

"Not at all. I am glad of any distraction. I should hate to fall asleep and leave you alone at your post."

"All right, then. I have a question."

"Just the one? Gracious."

"I don't know how you've got the energy to keep being sarcastic."

"Some things are intrinsic. Ask your question, although I can't guarantee an honest answer."

"Honestly, I wasn't expecting one." He took a deep breath, watching Casimir in his peripheral vision. "It's this: do you understand why I got upset with you earlier?"

"Shortly after you woke up? Yes, of course I do."

"Tell me why you think it is."

Casimir frowned at him, sipped his tea, and rolled his eyes.

"You dislike not being in control of the situation," he said. "And you especially dislike me having any say in it whatsoever."

"No, that's not even remotely it."

"Isn't it?"

"Fine, that's one-tenth of it."

"Are you going to tell me the other nine-tenths?"
Dan set down his teacup and gave Casimir his undivided attention. Casimir avoided meeting his eyes, wearing that self-deprecating smile, his hands tight on his cup.

"It's a cruel and hateful thing," Dan said, "to make it seem as though someone has a choice when you've no intention of actually giving him one. To . . . twist and manipulate a person into going the route that you picked out for him. That isn't how you're meant to treat your friends. Certainly not ones who trust you as much as Gav does."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I suspect nobody ever has. Maybe I hope nobody ever has, because it would make you simply ignorant instead of a bastard."

Casimir huffed out a breath, shaking his head and turning away. He sipped his tea. His eyes were distant, his face drawn.

"I have found, in my brief yet storied life, that the explicit elimination of choice provokes violence," he said. "And disagreements over choice, especially when the stakes are this high. It is . . . safer, to make it seem as though the dangerous party generated the optimal solution on his own. Violence does not even enter his mind. The illusion of freedom empowers him to tolerate his allies, rather than generating conflict with them."

"Did you honestly expect it to come to violence?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because less than forty-eight hours ago, he strangled me for no better reason than that I was within arm's reach. Of course I expected violence. Why didn't you?"

"Because it's Gav, he wouldn't—" Dan cut himself off. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, reminding himself to breathe. "I suppose because I'm biased in his favour."

"I can't begrudge you that. You have, after all, lived many years with him, the majority, presumably, non-violent."

"Well," said Dan, uncomfortable, "from his end, yes."

Casimir looked him over, concern and caution chasing each other across his face. "Should I ask?"

"Probably not."

"Do you want me to ask?"

"No, I don't think so."

He nodded and sipped his tea. Dan followed suit. Outside, a drunk shouted obscenities into the air. Somebody yelled at him to shut up, which prompted only further obscenities. He moved away down the block, his shouts growing more distant until they faded into the background roar.

"Are you still upset with me?" Casimir asked.

"Rather, yes. I understand where you were coming from, but that doesn't really make it any less vile."
"I could . . . try being more direct?" Casimir hazarded. "In the future?"

"I think that would be an appropriate step to take, yes," said Dan. "Although an apology would be in order, as well."

Casimir winced. "The difficulty with apologies is that they bring to light the initial wrongdoing."

"You can bring it to light yourself, or I can do it for you."

"Goodness, Daniel, such immediate hypocrisy," said Casimir, propping his head on his hand. "Turning the very manipulations we discuss upon me."

"I'm not. There's no right or wrong answer. You can apologize to him, or I can tell him what you were playing at. I'll represent your reasoning as best I can, but I'm not going to keep this a secret from him. Sorry, but I don't trust you not to try it again, and I'm not going to leave Gav unawares."

"You understand that, by doing so, you place me in a considerable amount of danger."

"Some danger, and I'm willing to accept responsibility for that. I'll do my best to see to it that you don't get hurt."

"While also doing your best to ensure that I will not repeat this particular manipulation by significantly increasing the risk of trying it."

"If you can't play nicely, I'm going to take away your toys," said Dan.

Casimir cracked a smile and shook his head. His fist was clenched, his leg jittering.

"Yes, father," he said, sarcastic.

Behind him, with scarcely a sound, Gav sat up in the bed.

Dan's blood turned to ice. The back of his neck prickled. A creeping fog of dread filled his skull. Casimir frowned at him—then, following his gaze, froze where he sat.

Silence filled the flat like murky water. Dan's pocket watch ticked, as loud and sharp as breaking bones. Gav swayed, a ship riding a low swell. His eyes were open, his face expressionless. If he was breathing, Dan couldn't see it in the dim light.

Gav turned to swing his legs off the bed. Dan held his breath. The chain and manacle caught with a deafening clank. Gav stopped.

Tick, tick, tick, went the pocket watch. Gav stared through the far wall. Springs creaked in the armchair as Casimir breathed. The gas lamps fluttered like moth wings.

Gav's leg shifted back six inches. The chain whispered, shh. The leg jerked on it—clank. Dan jumped. The chain and manacle held. Gav's position and attitude remained unchanged, only his leg in motion.

Shh-clank! The motion repeated, unnaturally precise. Dan gritted his teeth, swallowing down screams. His hands were slick with sweat, his insides slimy with dread.

Shh-clank, again, and again, shh-clank, shh-clank, shh-clank.

Like clockwork, over and over, Gav jerked on the restraint. Dan took a deep breath, watching the padded cuff bite into his ankle every time the chain pulled taut.
"Go back to sleep, Gav," he called, though his voice shook horribly.

Shh-clank, shh-clank, shh—

All movement ceased. Five seconds passed, utter stillness, utter silence.

Gav raised his head and looked right at him.

Dan's heart stopped. His ribs constricted round his lungs like a python. An arrow of panic struck through his throat, into his spine, crackling with blue electricity. Cold sweat broke out over his whole body. Every hair he had stood up on end. One thought screamed out amidst the roiling fog in his head.

*That isn't Gav.*

The eyes burned. The shoulders were hunched, the jaw set all wrong, the hands splayed and tense on the bedsheets. Without breaking eye-contact, he jerked on the restraint again.

Sh-clank, sh-clank, sh-clank, sh-clank.

Dan struggled to breathe. He couldn't look away. Liquid fire ran down his spine, yanking at his legs, filling his ears with primal screams.

"Do not run," Casimir said quietly.

The eyes stayed fixed on Dan. The mechanical struggling did not skip a single beat. Dan's pulse thundered in his ears. He shook from head to toe. His blood was quicksilver. His legs bundled themselves beneath him, coiled to leap.

"Daniel, do not run," Casimir insisted.

Sh-clank, sh-clank, sh-clank, unblinking, unwavering, ravenous.

"Then what the *fuck* am I meant to do?" Dan wheezed.

Instead of answering, Casimir lifted his chin and called out to Gav.

"Your body's had a busy few days, my friend," he said. "If you keep riding it this hard, you're going to break it."

Sh-clank, sh—

Gav froze again, but did not look away from Dan. His expression did not change. His fingers twitched on the bedsheets. His toes curled.

"And that would be a terrible shame, wouldn't it?" Casimir went on. "Especially so early in the game."

Five seconds passed, ten, twenty. The pounding of Dan's heart did not lessen, the pressure of Gav's attention did not abate. The air was choked with dust, sweltering.

Gav turned back. He pulled his free leg up into the bed. He sat for another five seconds before laying down. He stared at the ceiling for ten before his eyes closed. His chest swelled with a slow, deep breath. His body relaxed back into slumber.

At last, the tension drained out of the room, like water from a bathtub. Dan sagged against the couch,
sucking down gasps of air. His head spun and his stomach churned. The full-body soreness of the hangover seeped out through his muscles again, more sour than ever. He rubbed his face, trying not to notice how his hands were shaking, how dry was his throat.

"Christ alive," he muttered.

"I think . . . two, in the future," Casimir said faintly. "Two restraints would be better than one."

"Yes," said Dan. "That seems like a very wise idea."

Gav noticed something was wrong the moment he woke up in the morning, but he refrained from saying anything about it until Dan and Casimir had finished their breakfasts and everyone had drunk at least one cup of tea.

"Would someone care to tell me what happened last night?" he asked.

Dan and Casimir glanced at each other over the breakfast table. Casimir gestured. Dan took a deep breath as a weight settled on his shoulders.

"Well, the good news is, the restraint did its job!" he said, aiming for levity and falling miserably short.

Gav rubbed his face, pained. He propped his head on his hand and shut his eyes. He looked like he might be sick.

"No one was hurt," Dan assured him. "It was a bit . . . unsettling, but the worst to come of it was probably a few bruises on your ankle."

"Silver linings," Gav muttered.

"How is that ankle, by the way?"

"It's fine."

"Gav."

He rolled his eyes, stuck his leg out, and pulled up the cuff of his trousers. His ankle was red, marked with minor friction burns and just beginning to darken with bruises.

"It's fine," he said again.

"Could be worse," Dan allowed.

Gav tucked his foot back under his chair. His eyes were distant, unfocused. He made no move to touch his breakfast. Dan was on the verge of nudging him about it when he spoke again.

"Why is this happening?" he mumbled.

"I don't know, B. I wish I could tell you."

"If I may?" said Casimir.

"Please," said Gav.
"It would appear that the scales are, perhaps, not as balanced as we thought. That is my only hypothesis, but I think it is sufficient explanation."

"What does that entail?"

"I don't know. It's something to bring up when the experts arrive."

"Do we know when those experts will be arriving?"

"The ones who would know about imbalanced scales, no. However, we did receive a response from a doctor friend of mine by the morning post, which I'm certain Daniel is pleased about."

"I wouldn't go that far," said Dan. "Slightly relieved, at best."

"At any rate, I assume we will hear back from others later on," Casimir said. "Dr Dufresne is the earliest bird amongst them by far."

"Do you trust him?" Gav asked.

"I trust him as much as I trust anyone, which is to say, I trust that I have sufficient torque on his arm and sufficient coinage for his pockets, whichever is required."

Dan gave Casimir a hard look. Casimir made puppy-eyes back at him, to absolutely no avail. Defeated, Casimir hung his head and sighed.

"And speaking of," he said. "I . . . wanted to apologize to you, Gavin. For my behaviour these past few days. I have been less than honest with you, in—for entirely self-serving purposes, and—"

"I don't care," Gav interrupted.

"Understandably, you are upset with me; I promise it won't—"

"I don't care. If manipulation's necessary, then manipulate me. Whatever it takes."

"What if it isn't necessary?" said Dan.

Gav put his elbow on the table and shoved his fingers into his hair, eyes closed, face drawn. Unattended, his other hand scratched at his chest.

"Take a wild guess, Dan," he said.
Dufresne arrived shortly after lunch, and just before the tension in Casimir's flat became unbearable. He was a short man of east Asian descent, clean-shaven, who carried with him a black doctor's bag and a perpetually petulant air.

"Well, here we are again," he sighed when Casimir opened the door to him.

"I sincerely appreciate you coming on such short notice, Dr Dufresne," said Casimir. "I understand that you are very busy."

"Business keeps food on the table, so I guess I can't complain. Even though I'm missing my lunch to come see you. What's the point in keeping food on my table if I can't enjoy it?"

"Hopefully it will be a brief visit, and you may return to your lunch posthaste. Please, come in."

He stood aside, and Dufresne entered. His face got markedly less sour as he took in the opulence of Casimir's flat.

"This place is nice," he said, wandering to the couch. "Much nicer than the last place you dragged me out to."

"Variety is the spice of life," said Casimir. "Could I offer you a cup of tea? Perhaps a croissant?"

"Sure! Hey, if it's going to be tea and croissants in a nice place like this, you can call me more often, Mr Dubois."

"I will very happily bear that in mind. Meanwhile, allow me to introduce Mr Free and Mr Gruchy. Free, Gruchy, this is Dr Dufresne."

They all shook hands, mumbling niceties.

"I shall leave it to them to explain the nature of the problem," Casimir went on. "Discretion is, of course, of the utmost importance, doctor."

"Of course, of course," Dufresne sighed. "Because you never have any business for me that's aboveboard. Just once, Mr Dubois, just once I'd like to be called out for something that isn't shady. A cold. A sunburn. Lingering childhood trauma?"

Casimir smiled with a mouth full of razors. "Black, green, or herbal tea?"

"Oh, green," said Dufresne, waving a hand. He turned to Gav and Dan as Casimir moved off. "So, gentlemen, what's the trouble?"

Gav looked to Dan. Dan cleared his throat and scooted up to the front of the couch.

"Er, well, it started about . . . what, five or six weeks ago?"

"Six," said Gav.

"Right. There was a—a traumatic incident, of sorts, ended with him in hospital. Terrible fever, bedridden, the whole nine yards. We had about a month of not much trouble, apart from, you know, standard exhaustion and . . . perhaps some melancholy, nothing excessive. Then—wait, no, one more important thing about that incident, er, there was a fit involved, a seizure of some sort. It hasn't
happened again since then—well, not to the same extent, there's been maybe one brief, er, moment."

Gav frowned. "There has? When?"

"At the Théâtre, when we were . . . looking for James?"

"Oh. I wish you'd told me sooner."

"I thought you knew."

"Yes, well, I've also been having significant troubles with my memory, haven't I," said Gav, strained.

"Hmm," said Dufresne, stroking his chin. "Have there been other psychological symptoms? You know, outbursts of anger, erratic behaviour, sleep disturbances, that kind of thing?"

"Definitely sleep disturbances," said Dan. "Sleepwalking, mainly."

"Hm, hm, I see."

"And . . . maybe the occasional outburst. Although that could just be the stress, because I've been having them, too."

Dufresne sucked in a breath through his teeth and nodded. "Sure, sounds like it's been very stressful for everybody involved. That never helps. Relaxation is important for a healthy mind, spirit, and body!"

"So I've been told," Dan said dryly.

"And this incident you mentioned—that was with the theatre group, right? It was all over the papers."

Dan stared at him, his stomach sinking. Gav shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. In the kitchen, the kettle whistled.

"About a month ago, Detective Free wound up in hospital?" Dufresne went on, as though they might have forgotten. "I always did wonder what actually happened down there. Say, do you think I could do a brief physical examination? Nothing invasive, I just want to—"

"No," said Gav.

"Really? Because if there were infections, then—"

"He said no," Dan interrupted.

"Gentlemen, it is desperately unfair of you to refuse an examination," Casimir called from the kitchen. "He is a doctor, after all. You cannot expect him to make a diagnosis based upon nothing."

"No, no, it's fine, I wouldn't want to make anyone uncomfortable," said Dufresne. "Besides, I think I have a pretty good handle on what it is already. Have you contacted a priest?"

"Have we what?" Dan cried.

"I've asked for assistance, but no one has replied yet," said Casimir, returning to lean on the armchair. "If you have anyone you could recommend, we would sincerely appreciate it."

"I might be able to point you to a few good people, sure."
"Hang on, wait just one moment, what for?" Dan said.

"Oh, because he's possessed," said Dufresne, cocking a thumb at Gav.

Dan floundered. Gav pressed his knuckles to his mouth and looked somewhere else. With a smile, Casimir inclined his head.

"That was what I had suspected. Still, it's nice to have a professional's opinion."

"Your medical opinion is that he's possessed?" said Dan. "That's what you, a medical doctor, have decided upon as a diagnosis?"

"Yes, absolutely," said Dufresne. "It's as important to keep your spirit healthy as the rest of you. A sickly soul makes a sickly body, you know."

"You have got to be joking."

"No! Why would I joke about something this serious? Listen, I'm sure everything will be fine. You just need a priest or two, one little exorcism, and then everything will be back to normal! I know a couple guys, they're really good, they'll take care of you."

"Done this a lot, have you?"

"I don't know about a lot, but they did a great job with me."

Gav's head snapped up. Casimir raised his eyebrows, fighting down a smile.

"With you," said Dan. "As in, with you, being possessed."

"Oh, sure, for years. It was awful. All these thoughts that weren't mine, speaking in tongues, awful impulses, it really gets to you after a while. But I'm all clean now! Only one ghost in my body, and it's, well, mine, hahah."

"You can't think of any other physical, medical reason why all of this might be happening?" Dan pressed.

"Why do you need one?"

"Mr Gruchy is remarkably stubborn with matters of spirituality," said Casimir. "When the sun is up, at least."

"Now look here—"

"B," Gav said quietly.

"No! Absolutely not. I'm not having any of it. You're not possessed, we're not doing any damn exorcisms, we're going to get a second opinion from an actual medical professional so you can actually get well!"

"I'm an actual medical professional," said Dufresne, pouting.

"The wait list for other doctors is considerably longer," said Casimir. "Not to mention the time necessary to find someone adequately discrete. I won't say you don't have the time, but I would suggest that, in the interim, we explore other options."

"Both of you are absolutely out of your damn minds," Dan spat. "And I'll not have you dragging
Free any farther into your delusions."

"Has he always been this vehement about it?" Dufresne asked Casimir.

"When the sun is up."

"Stop saying that! It isn't real, none of this possession shit is real, and you're only going to make it worse by pretending like it is! Something is physically, medically wrong, and it needs to be medically addressed so he doesn't fucking die!"

"Gruchy, stop," said Gav.

"Don't you dare."

"I agree with him, B."

"Well, stop it at once."

"I'd rather be possessed than mad. Being possessed can be fixed."

"You're not possessed and you're not mad. This is fixable, but only if we work on the actual problem."

"Where have you been hiding these objections, Mr Gruchy?" Casimir inquired. "You have had ample opportunity to voice them before now."

"And I have been, but nobody's been listening to me!"

"Oh, wow, hey, look at the time, I really should be going," said Dufresne. "Business to run, and all that. Uh, the Albain brothers are your guys, if you wind up going that way. Glad I could help, I'll bill you later, good afternoon!"

He all but sprinted to the door, flinging obsequious excuses over his shoulder. When he had gone, a lull swirled in his wake. Dan squeezed his temples. He could have used a nap, or, failing that, a drink.

Casimir tutted and shook his head. "And without even drinking his tea."

"This is not the time for jokes," Dan snapped. "I've had it up to here with your manipulations, Dubois."

"Who or what have I manipulated, Daniel?" he asked, spreading his hands.

"You're telling me it's a coincidence that the one doctor you trust just so happens to believe he was possessed? You're pushing your damned agenda so hard it's a wonder you haven't thrown your back out."

Casimir raised his eyebrows. "If you don't want my help, you're free to go at any time. I'm certain you'd get by just fine on your own."

"I'm sure we would!"

"Dan, for Ch—for crying out loud, stop it," said Gav, choking on the words.

"I don't know how he's managed to convince you—"
"He hasn't! I convinced him!"

"And what if all this exorcism shit fails? Are you going to listen to me then, or are you just going to dig in deeper? What would it take to show you that you're wrong?"

"What would it take to show you that I'm not?"

"I'm sure I'd know it if I saw it."

"One might point out that you have seen it," said Casimir. "Upon multiple occasions. Including last night."

"I've seen nothing that requires the existence of—of fucking ghosts. I'm putting my foot down on all this supernatural shit. I've put up with it too long already."

"Regardless—"

"Stop, Cassie," Gav said, exhausted. "Just . . . let it go."

Casimir chewed his lip, let out a breath, and inclined his head.

"Perhaps we have all been cooped up inside for too long," he said. "I could use some fresh air. Either or both of you are welcome to come with me, or not, if you need a break from me more than a change of location."

"How about both?" said Dan.

"Certainly acceptable, although I'm afraid I have but one key to the flat, and I should hate to force anyone to loiter in the corridor."

"Where are you planning on going, Dan?" Gav asked.

"I don't know. Post office, maybe? I need to get cracking on that letter to Gabriel if it's going to make it to her in time."

"And Cassie, what about you?"

"I ought to put in an appearance at the Red Ravine. While they are used to me vanishing from time to time, they will come poking about after a few days."

"Fine," said Gav. "I'll stay here, then."

"Hang on, what?" Dan said.

"You can lock the door behind you. Do, actually, lock the door behind you."

"Why can't you come along with me? It'll do you some good to be out in the open air for a bit."

"I've had more than enough of open air, thank you."

"Look, it's the middle of the day, I'll be right next to you, nothing's going to happen."

"I don't want to be seen," Gav said, once again spitting out the words as though they had lodged in his throat.

"D'you want me to stay here with you? I can just as easily write—"
"I would like ten fucking minutes alone."

Dan raised his hands in surrender. "All right! Understood. I think the post office is just down the block, anyway, so . . . I won't be far off, if you need me."

"Whereas I will likely not return for several hours," said Casimir. "But, likewise, if you need me, you will know where to find me. Daniel, if it is agreeable to you, I shall leave the key with you."

"I won't object."

Casimir fished it out of his pocket and handed it over. He collected his hat and coat, fiddled with his gloves, and sighed longingly at the tea abandoned on the kitchen countertop.

On his way out, just past the threshold, he turned back.

"There is one thing, Gavin."

"What is it?" said Gav.

Casimir hesitated before saying, "There is a man by the name of Lucien who may come calling. If he does, tell him that any business he has can be addressed with me, at the Red Ravine. Don't strike up a conversation with him, and don't let him in."

"Why not?"

"Because he is a consummate opportunist, and you are his type."

Gav's eyes narrowed. "Are you expecting him?"

"Not in so many words, but he has a habit of turning up at inconvenient times, so I thought I should warn you, just in case."

"All right. I'll keep an eye out."

Some of the tension eased from Casimir's shoulders. With a nod, he shut the door and walked away.

"Shall I go now, too?" Dan asked. "Only we've not really had the chance to talk without him in the room, and—"

"I'll have my ten minutes first, please," said Gav, still watching the closed door.

"Right. Then . . . I'll see you soon, I s'pose. I love you."

"Mm. Love you as well."

"Er, before I go, though. I'm about ninety percent sure that Lucien fellow is his sponsor. I ran into him once, at the Ravin Rouge."

"And what was your opinion?"

"That he was a parasite in gentleman's clothing, and exactly the sort of unsavoury character who buys his friends and lovers—and who'd sell them at half cost."

Gav nodded. "Good to know. Thanks, Dan, love you. I'll see you shortly."

"I love you, as well. Have a good ten minutes. I'll . . . lock the door behind me. Just in case."
Gav didn't respond, lost in thought. Discomfited, Dan took his leave.

He triple-checked that the door was locked before he walked away.

The letter to Gabriel turned out to be much less of an ordeal than Dan had anticipated. Tempering honesty with discretion constituted the largest difficulty of correspondence; it turned out that telling dishonest truths was much easier. Once he got going, the flow of it was natural, and he was finished in less than ten minutes. Because he was already in a sneaky frame of mind, he wrote out a second copy of the letter, with six or seven crossed-out misspellings, to give himself a reasonably good excuse to keep a copy on hand—and then whenever Gabriel's reply arrived, he wouldn't have to worry about remembering what he had and hadn't told her.

He read it through one more time before sealing it up and sending it.

Dearest Gabriel,

Things have grown significantly more complicated here, although I'm happy to report that we were both of us wrong about what the trouble was. I can't go into much detail for you, unfortunately, but suffice it to say that things are being worked out, nobody's being blackmailed, and there have, mercifully, been no illicit trysts. That's not to say "all is well," because, of course, we've only just now gotten back on the James case and there's an awful lot to be done there, but we've got a few leads worth pursuing and have cleared out the clutter—though we haven't quite managed to escape from Dubois yet (God knows I'm trying).

That said, because of the complexity of the thing, we'll most likely be here for a while longer. I don't have a good idea of how long, just yet, but if you wanted to wrap up your business in London and take your month, now would be as good a time as any. Hopefully Free's letters have reached our clientele by now, and they've paid you as they should—and if not, let us know right away so he can pin their ears back for them.

(He's well on board with your taking full commission, by the way. Don't ask me how I convinced him, because all I did was repeat what you told me. It seems to have worked, anyway.)

Speaking of things you told me, I really must extend my sincerest thanks for that conversation we had. I've been making a terrible fool of myself, as per usual, but I might have done much worse without your wisdom and insight. It's hard going, trying to accept the limits of people's trust, harder still to accept that there are things I'm never going to understand—although I'm probably the last one to work that out.

Anyway, thank you. If there's anything I—or we—can do, please don't hesitate to let us know.

Yours,

—D. Gruchy

Satisfied with its plausibility, and finding it generally unobjectionable, Dan sealed it, stamped it, and set it loose. He folded up the duplicate and tucked it into his pocket for safekeeping.
As he made his way back down the Champs Élysées, a worm of doubt wriggled into his ear. Maybe, he thought, he should have been more honest. The situation was incredibly dire, and there was no denying that they needed all the help they could get. More than that, he desperately needed somebody sensible to stand by him against Casimir's onslaught of superstition. Gabriel was the ideal candidate, being both the most sensible person Dan knew and one of the very few who seemed immune to Casimir's charms. He wouldn't even have needed to tell her exactly what was happening, just dropped a few hints that things were going badly and that her help was needed. He could go back to the post office and send her a telegram, he wouldn't even have to tell Gav, or at least not until she showed up . . .

The worm doubled back on itself, mouthing at its own tail. If Gabriel did show up, what would happen then? Was it even conceivable that she'd help them, or would her implacable sense of justice take her directly to the police? There was no question that she'd throw Gav and Casimir's plan out the window, and possibly Casimir along with it (silver linings). He couldn't imagine she'd have much sympathy for any of them, not with the amount of skulking and lying and covering up that had already been done.

Or, worse yet, what if she heard all Gav and Casimir's possession nonsense and believed it?

Consumed by these unpleasant musings, Dan only came to when he washed up on Casimir's doorstep. He shook himself and composed his face before putting the key in the lock. As an afterthought, he knocked.

"B, it's me," he called.

"Yes, fine, good, come in."

There was something nervous in his voice, so Dan slipped inside and shut the door quickly behind him. At first glance, the flat was empty. Dan's heart leapt into his throat. Before it could catapult him into a full-blown panic, Gav crept out from the bedroom alcove, wearing the dress. It was unlaced, hanging shapelessly on his torso. Dan pressed a hand to his heart and sagged.

"Oof, thought you'd vanished on me," he said. He wasn't sure where he ought to look, or not look, so he pinned his gaze on Gav's ear and hoped for the best. "Everything all right?"

"It's—it's fine. Everything's fine, for now. I just—d'you know, I just feel a bit more myself, when. . . . It just seemed like it might help."

"Sensible enough. Er, d'you want a hand lacing it up, or. . . ?"

"If you don't mind," said Gav, blushing. "Only it's—sort of a two-person job, really, isn't it."

"So I've gathered." Dan set aside his hat and jacket and went to him. He planted a kiss on Gav's forehead before slipping behind him and turning his attention to the dress. "How tight d'you want it?"

"Not that tight," Gav said over his shoulder. "Have you done this before?"

Dan tugged the laces out and tucked the slip back in where it had bunched. "Only once. Sarah and I got invited to a very fancy party for—something or other, I don't remember. Even then, the dress was nowhere near this lush—and rented, besides. And she was pregnant, so I was encouraged to be extremely gentle with the corsetry."

"Well, I'm not, so you haven't got to be that careful."
He gave a few cursory tugs at the laces and kissed Gav's ear. "How's that?"

"Still falling off me."

"I want you to be able to breathe."

"I reckon I can't do nearly as much harm if I can't breathe."

"Gav—"

"Just keep going. I'll tell you if it hurts."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Promise."

Gav sighed and rolled his eyes. "I promise."

"Thank you," said Dan, and kissed the back of his neck. He tightened the dress until the back panels were about an inch apart. "Is that good?"

"I'll do," said Gav.

After tying the laces, Dan kissed the back of Gav's neck again, and then a third time, slipping his arms round Gav's waist. Gav leaned back against him and draped his fingers over Dan's wrists. With a chaste kiss on the cheek, Dan settled in, breathing the smell of him, feeling his warmth. The constant clamour of the city outside came muted through the curtains. Gav was unsteady on his feet, his head bowed, his hands cold.

"You think I'm mad, don't you," he said at last.

Dan rested their heads together and closed his eyes, floating on the slow waves of Gav's breath. The bright blue beading on the front of the dress dug into his wrists and hands. He didn't squeeze, much as he wanted to. No matter the strength of his arms, they could not pull Gav from his melancholy, and it was worthless to try.

"I think it's not impossible," he admitted. "I don't think it's what this is, but... it's a damn sight more likely than all that possession bollocks."

"Then what do you think it is?"

"Hell if I know, but I reckon it's got something to do with that fever you had."

"So you think I've cooked my brains."

"I wouldn't say it quite like that, but—yes, I think there might have been some damage done, on top of all the lingering unpleasantness from what happened in the sewers, on top of the years of accumulated stress and trauma, and all of that rolled together has made a mess of things, that's all. I'm sure it's fixable, it's just... a lot. It's just an awful lot."

"Then you believe I killed Brouillard myself," Gav said quietly.

"Well—well no, I didn't say that, I don't—look, who's to say he's even dead, really, is he?"
"I say it," Gav snapped, whirling round and shoving Dan off of him. "I say it, 'cos I was there! I say it 'cos I've had to play the bloody maid for this—this thing, you've got no idea what it's put me through, what I've had to do for fear of being fucking hanged!"

"All right, volume, B, keep the volume down," said Dan, patting the air and casting nervous glances at the walls. "I'm sorry, I'd forgotten that—that component of it. I believe you. I believe you, and I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"Sorry doesn't fix it, Dan. Sorry doesn't put anything right."

Pain shot through Dan's heart. It was all he could do to keep from flinching. "I know, I know. I just don't know what else to say."

"Say you'll stand by me," said Gav, tearful and fragile. "Say you'll believe me about all of it, and not just the bits that make sense to you. Say that you'll help me, Dan."

He struggled with himself for longer than he would have liked, sweet lies chasing bitter truths across his tongue. He stepped forward, carefully, and took Gav's face in his hands. With his thumbs, he wiped the tears from Gav's cheeks.

"I'm with you," he said. "I believe you. And I will help you."

Gav sniffled and tipped forward until he could rest his forehead on Dan's collarbone.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Dan folded him in his arms and prayed that someone, somehow, could turn his lies to truth.
I strongly advise you, if you are triggered by rape, misogyny, self harm/injury, or graphic violence, to check out the chapter summary here. This chapter makes me nauseous, so ... just take care of yourselves, friends.

For the next twenty-four hours, all was quiet. Gav slept peacefully through the night, manacled hand and foot to the bedposts. Dan passed out just after midnight, unable to keep his eyes open any longer, and didn't wake until nearly noon. Nothing catastrophic came of it, for which he considered himself extremely lucky.

Likewise, there was still nothing in the papers suggesting the police had discovered Brouillard's murder. Dan allowed himself the faintest, thinnest sliver of hope that perhaps they never would.

"By the by," Casimir mentioned over lunch. "I have heard back from another of my contacts; a psychic by the name of Sandrine Rousseau. She has offered to conduct a séance, that we may better understand the nature of the beast."

"When?" Gav asked.

"Tonight, if it's convenient."

"And where will this séance be held?" said Dan.

"She has a small practice in Saint-Ouen that she prefers to use. It gives her what they call the home-turf advantage. I think it is a suitable location."

"Fine," said Gav. "Special preparations?"

"None, unless you wish to make any for yourself."

"I wouldn't even know where to start. Dan, are you coming along, or not?"

"Of course I'm coming, why wouldn't I?"

Gav shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask."

"If I may, I have one special preparation, or rather, request, before we go," said Casimir. "I would very much appreciate it, Gavin, if you would give me back my knife."

Frowning, Gav said, "What knife?"

Evening came before they managed to find Casimir's knife, although they were at least assured that it was nowhere on Gav's person. The cab ride to Saint-Ouen was stuffy and tense. Dan couldn't tell if it was the stagnant evening air that left him sweating, or nerves about what was to come.
They were dropped on the curb outside of a small, cottage-like building, about two blocks from the cemetery. Its shutters were painted in bright colours, baubles of glass and ribbon dangling from the eaves. A large sign by the door proclaimed: **MADAME SANDRINE: CLAIRVOYANT, PSYCHIC, MEDIUM. All questions answered, none turned away. Inquire within for rates & fees. No pets allowed.**

"No pets?" Dan said, while Casimir rapped on the door.

"Perhaps she's allergic," said Gav.

"Could well be, I'm just wondering who brings their pet to a psychic."

The door flew open to reveal a woman whose sheer gaudiness made Casimir look positively restrained. He sketched an exaggerated bow and kissed her hand, which she countered with a motherly smack on the head.

"You are always making such an immense fool of yourself," she scolded. "Say hello first, you animal."

"Good evening, Mrs Sandrine," he said dutifully.

"Good evening, Mr Dubois. You are early."

"I hope we haven't interrupted anything?"

"Of course not; I knew you would be. Come in, bring your friends."

She breezed back inside. Casimir beckoned over his shoulder before following.

"Am I the only person in the world who doesn't like him?" Dan wondered.

"No," said Gav, ushering him towards the door. "Gabriel doesn't, either."

The interior of the cottage was about what Dan had expected. There were knockoff Persian rugs, candles and incense, occult bric-a-brac crammed onto every horizontal surface. In the centre of the front room, a round wooden table had been set, draped in maroon velvet and topped with a pewter candelabrum. Four chairs were arrayed round it, each with its own hideously tacky cushion. A huge grey-and-white cat lazed on the windowsill, twitching its tail and watching the lot of them with mistrustful green eyes.

"Don't mind Maurice, he hates everyone," said Sandrine. "So! Mr Free and Mr Gruchy, was it? A pleasure to meet you; I am Sandrine. Forgive me for not shaking hands, but I must keep my spiritual energies as clean as possible, a fact of which Mr Dubois seems to be entirely ignorant."

"How was I to know?" he asked, pressing a hand to his chest. "I sincerely apologize. We will certainly not hold it against you if you require additional cleansing before we begin."

She waved him off. "I doubt it will cause any issue; and besides, I was given to understand this was a somewhat urgent matter?"

"An hour one way or another will make little difference," said Casimir. "But yes, expediency is desirable."

"Good, because I've already made tea, and I would have hated to sacrifice it. Which one of them is it?"
"Mr Free."

"You'd think she could work that one out on her own, if she's any good," Dan muttered.

"If you're not going to take this seriously, you can leave," said Gav.

"What's there to take seriously? The whole bloody place is a carnival attraction!"

"I do speak English, you know," Sandrine shot over her shoulder, thickly accented but perfectly intelligible. Dan went red from his toes to his scalp and bit down hard on his tongue.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"Mr Gruchy, I deal with many worse things than skeptics on every day," she said. She brought a tray of tea to the table and slipped back into French. "Now, everyone come and have a seat, and I shall explain the procedure."

Dan slunk to the table and slouched down in one of the chairs. The others joined him, and over a few cups of jasmine tea, Sandrine walked them through the séance.

It was, he gathered, a relatively simple affair with lots of silly bells and whistles. Underneath all the candles and incense and sage, the jargon and the multitudinous pointless precautions, it boiled down to: join hands, place a call, and hope somebody answered—and if they did, ask them questions until one side or the other hung up.

Since nobody had any questions (or at least, none they were willing to ask aloud), Sandrine cleared up the tea set and made her preparations. Casimir was tasked with lighting the various candles, while she wandered about with a burning bundle of sage, filling the air with smoke.

"In the event that things go horribly wrong," she mentioned, wafting over Dan's shoulder, "there are several bottles of holy water by the window. Note their positions, please; they may save your life."

"Right," said Dan, doing his damnest not to roll his eyes.

The last thing Sandrine did in preparation for the séance was to put the cat out. He yowled and lashed his tail and dug his claws into her arms, all to no avail. When she'd shut the door behind him, she turned out the gas lamps, leaving the room illuminated only by the candles on the table and the lamplight spilling through the windows. She returned to the table and laid her hands upon it, palms up.

"So," she said. "Shall we begin?"

"The time is as right as it will ever be," said Casimir. He took her hand and held his other out to Gav, who accepted it gingerly.

"Mr Gruchy, if you please?" Sandrine prompted.

"Oh, right," said Dan. He took her hand, then Gav's. The candle flames fluttered. Sandrine shut her eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

"Now that our circle is complete," she said, "we may begin. I must caution you all again: no matter what you see or hear tonight, do not break this circle until I give the word. Your lives may depend upon it."

Since her eyes were closed, Dan went ahead and rolled his. Gav kicked him under the table.
"I am now reaching out to the spiritual realm," Sandrine went on. "I am parting the veil which separates our world from the Beyond. I know that one of you has attached to Mr Free; we would like to speak with you, to help you receive that which you seek, so that you may pass on. Speak with us, spirit. We mean you no harm."

A velvety silence fell. The candles shivered from four winds of breath. The smell of sage choked the air. Sandrine's fingers were cold and small and soft in Dan's, her grip firm. Gav clutched his other hand, warm as a fresh cup of tea, holding just a little too tightly.

"I feel a presence," said Sandrine. "I feel one of you here with us. Can you reach out to us? Can you tell me your name?"

Outside, a cart trundled past. Maurice the cat yowled and scratched at the door. Sandrine's head turned this way and that, searching, listening.

"If you are willing to speak," she called to the air, "give us a sign."

Gav scoffed through his nose. The candles flickered. Sandrine's head snapped up, her eyes flying open. Dan nudged Gav with his foot.

"Stop that," he said.

"Stop what?" said Gav.

Dan rolled his eyes and shook his head. Sandrine carried on.

"Was that you?" she asked. When met by silence, she said, "Speak your name, spirit, that we may know you better."

"No thanks," said Gav. Dan kicked him again. "Ow, what?"

"You were all for this an hour ago, you could at least pretend to take it seriously."

"I am taking it seriously! You're the one who's not taking it seriously."

"Quiet, please," said Sandrine. Her eyes lingered on Gav, gleaming. "Spirit, we have come to negotiate. We have sought you on peaceful terms, and you have refused us. Therefore, I charge you, by the powers vested in me, appear before us and speak!"

Her words rang off the walls. Dan held his breath. Gav's hand trembled in his. Casimir watched the air. Sandrine stared into the candle flames, grim.

Gav's breath hitched.

Dan squeezed his hand, heart leaping into his throat. Gav shook his head, blinking, and cleared his throat.

"I don't... feel quite—"

His eyes rolled back in his head. His hand clenched like a vice on Dan's. He fell back in his chair, seizing so hard it rattled the table.

"Gav—!"

"Don't let go," Sandrine commanded, digging her fingernails into his hand.
Dan struggled. "He could die!"

The candles flared brighter and snuffed out. Gav stilled, his head tilted all the way back, mouth gaping, eyes wide. His chest rose with a slow, rattling breath. His hand had not unclenched from Dan's.

His eyes flicked over. Dan's whole arm broke out in gooseflesh. Gav's mouth curled into a horrible smile.

"That's right, Dan," he said, in a voice that wasn't his. "Let go."

"Mr Gruchy, Mr Dubois, whatever you do, do not let go," Sandrine said. Her voice shook.

Gav sat up like a thing on strings. His eyes were fixed on Dan, his mouth contorted by the smile. His grip on Dan's hand was numbingly tight.

"You're not going to listen to her, are you, Dan?" he asked. "What does she know, anyway? It's all hocus-pocus and mumbo-jumbo, you don't believe any of that. Let go."

"What is your name, creature?" Sandrine said.

Gav leaned in towards Dan, showing teeth. Dan shrank back, pulled by a primal terror at the base of his skull.

"It's all fake," Gav whispered. "All a big production, isn't it."

"I have charged you to answer, creature, you must answer. What is your name?"

"Let's go home, Dan," he said, his voice low and hypnotic. "Let's go home and forget all about this. We'll spend the whole day in bed together, won't that be lovely. All you've got to do is let go."

Dan gulped, clenched his teeth, and squeezed with both hands.

"Who the fuck are you?" he said.

The horrible grin widened. Candlelight flickered in Gav's eyes—except that all the candles were out, so what was it?

"Dan, Danny boy," Gav purred. "You don't recognize your own Gav? How horrible. I'm wounded, Dan. I'm absolutely shattered."

"Demon!" Sandrine spat. "What is your name?"

As the weight of Gav's attention shifted off of him, Dan sucked down a breath. Sandrine's hand shook. Dan held it tightly, gritting his teeth against the pain when her fingernails dug into the back of his hand.

"My name's Gav," said Gav. "Or near enough."

"Then it is not your name, demon, and you will not be called by it. What is your name?"

"Rumpelstiltskin."

"I will ask a third time, and you will answer me with the truth. What is your name?"

Gav hummed to himself, waggling his head, eyes cast to the ceiling. Sandrine held firm, staring him
"Orphineaus," he ground out. "My turn, my turn! D'you want to know how I killed Brouillard?"

"This is not an exchange, demon. You are trapped here by my power, and you will answer only my questions."

"With my cock in his arse," he said, relishing every word. "I put a knife through his throat to hear him choke, and then I cut him open and fucked him raw to watch him jiggle."

Dan gagged. A high, wild laugh burst from Gav's mouth. The crushing, freezing attention came down on him again like an ocean.

"I pretended it was you. You'd look so fucking good like that, writhing and choking and begging with my hands buried in your guts and my—"

"If you are going to be uncouth, you cannot sit with me," Casimir said.

Gav—the thing piloting Gav—pulled up short, blinking. It turned, slowly, as though it hadn't realized Casimir was there. Dan swallowed, so sick he could barely breathe.

"What?" it said, incredulous.

"That sort of talk is inappropriate," said Casimir. "You may save it for later, when you are not at the table."

"Do you have any idea who you're talking to, boy?"

"Yes, you just told us. Nonetheless, I demand at least a measure of courtesy in conversation, to wit: no rape and murder at the table."

"I'll rip your cock off and stuff it down your gullet."

"No thank you. If you want to talk about Brouillard, I admit to being curious as to why you killed him."

"Why? Because he used me. They all used me. Crammed me in the head of that snivelling little boy just to see if they could, had me rip him apart from the inside just to see if they could, and I did it, I did it all with a smile. Such a visceral mess I made of him, such—"

"Yes yes, it was spectacular."

Orphineaus ground Gav's teeth. His knuckles popped as its grip tightened ever further.

"Then they stuffed me into this fucking poofter," it growled. "And abandoned me. They replaced me. Called up some cringing imp for the bitch, and gave her the children to ruin, too! I would have done it better. It was mine to do, it was mine by rights. They disrespected me, and I'll kill every last fucking one of them for it, one by one. I'll eat their fucking hearts and—"

"That will suffice, thank you."

"And fuck their corpses bloody, except I'll leave one of the cunts alive to carry my—"

"I said that's enough," Casimir snapped.

"Sore spot, boy?" Orphineaus said, the grin mangling Gav's face again. "Couldn't beat the faggot out
of you, so they tried to fuck it out instead. How sweet was your sister's cunt?"

"Shut up," Dan cut in, on the verge of throwing up. Orphinaeus rounded on him like a cobra, ten times as venomous.

"You've had your fair share of cunts, too, haven't you," it said. "Though none compares to this tight little arse. Think how much better it'd be if you got drunk and beat him first. Whiskey makes your dick soft, but nothing gets you harder than a bit of cowering."

"Quiet, demon," Sandrine commanded.

"Oh, and you," said Orphinaeus. "Little Miss Bossy. You'll keep me entertained for hours and hours."

"Silence!"

"Weeh, silence!" it mocked, and laughed. "Make me, bitch. Oh no, you can't, 'cos you've got no real power at all! You are good for something, though, there's a hole for each of us if—"

"Not at the table," Casimir interrupted.

"Fuck your table!"

The wood split down the middle. The candelabrum jumped. The flesh on Dan's hand tried to crawl up his arm. He was half off his chair from leaning away.

"I'm sure you would," Casimir said dryly. "I think we've gotten everything we needed. You may go."

Gav's lip curled. "I'm not going anywhere, love. You're not getting rid of me, now nor ever. You'll be sucking my cock in Hell."

"You'll have to wait your turn; I'm all booked up. Back to sleep, little one, we're finished."

"Little?" Orphinaeus roared. The candles burst into flame, so hot and ravenous that it melted half the wax down in a second. "Let go your disgusting ugly hand, I'll show you how fucking little I am!"

"You let go," said Casimir.

"Mr Dubois, I would advise you to stop antagonizing it," Sandrine said.

"Absolutely not. I demand proof of his power, about which he has so confidently boasted. Break the circle yourself, Orphinaeus, if we are as powerless against you as you claim. Or, if you can't, go back to sleep and let the grown-ups talk."

Gav's hands tightened again. There was an ugly pop and one of his fingers went gammy. Dan flinched, bile rising up his throat.

Slowly, Orphinaeus turned to him.

"Break the circle, you said?" it purred. "I don't know about circles, those aren't my forte. But I've got so good at breaking little boys. You saw what I did to Christophe, yeah?"

Dan couldn't look away, trapped by its gaze. It grinned that horrific grin, contorting Gav's face in ways it wasn't meant to go.
"D'you want to see what I can do to Gavvy?" it asked.

"No," Dan blurted.

Gav's arm twisted sharply. There was an awful snap. His grip failed, his hand twitching like a crushed insect. Dan forgot how to breathe. Orphinaeus licked its teeth.

"Doesn't hurt me a bit," it said. "But ohh, Danny boy, you should hear the way he's screaming."

"In the name of God our Father," Sandrine began, her voice trembling. "By the power—"

"That's right, run crying to daddy," Orphinaeus said. "What if I bite his wet little tongue off, Dan?"

"By the power of Heaven, I banish you back to—"

"Idle threats, my darling bitch! Mine aren't."

"—the pit of Hell from whence you came. From this meeting you are dismissed, for—"

Gav's tongue lolled out. The jaws opened wide, teeth glistening in the half-light. The eyes blazed, locked with Dan's, furious and hateful and laughing—

Dan let go.

Something slammed into his chest. His back hit the wall. Stars swarmed his vision. Wood splintered, Sandrine screamed, the room plunged into darkness. Dan struggled to get upright. The world spun round him. A crazed laugh tore from Gav's throat. Two eyes like stage lights ignited in the darkness.

"My turn, my turn!" Orphinaeus snarled.

It leapt across the room in a single bound and cannoned into Dan. They hit the floor. A hand clenched round his throat. It bashed his head against the ground, throttling him. He grabbed its wrist, kicked out, struggled. Orphinaeus only bore down harder, clenching his hips between its thighs, strangling the breath out of him with monstrous strength.

"Gav—!" he choked.

"Gavvy's gone, oh-Danny-boy!" it leered down at him. "But you're gonna look so fucking good, writhing on his cock."

His vision narrowed on its hideous face. The ruined hand tore at his clothes. He couldn't breathe. The strength bled from his body in gouts. Orphinaeus rutted against him, spittle dripping from its tongue onto his face.

Sandrine slammed it over the head with the candelabrum.

Gav went sprawling. Dan sucked down a breath. His neck was ablaze with pain. His head spun. He rolled onto his side, coughing so hard it made him gag.

"Mr Dubois, my holy water, please," said Sandrine, holding the candelabrum like a cricket bat. She snatched the bottle out of the air as it was thrown to her and uncorked it with her teeth. "This may sting a little. The power of Christ—"

Orphinaeus threw itself upon her like a rabid dog. The candelabrum flailed. They crashed to the floor. The bottle shattered, spraying water everywhere. Orphinaeus yelped, recoiled, snarled obscenities and fell upon her with renewed fervour. It tore her dress open, grabbed her by the corset
and shook her. Fingernails clawed at her breasts, snapping jaws lunged for her throat. She clubbed it with the candelabrum again. It struck her across the face. She went limp.

"Naughty bitch," it said, laughing.

Dan scrambled to his feet. His knees wobbled. He caught himself against the wall. Before he could stagger more than a step towards Sandrine, Casimir appeared from the darkness and hauled Orphinaeus off of her. It rounded on him, wild with fury. An elbow caught him in the head and sent him staggering backwards.

As though by magic, a knife appeared in his hand.

"No!" Dan screamed.

Casimir's focus wavered for an instant. Orphinaeus went for him. The blade flashed. Blood spattered on Gav's face.

Casimir crumpled, clutching his throat.

Slowly, inexorably, Orphinaeus turned. The force of its attention smote Dan like a river in flood, pinning him to the wall. The knife gleamed in its hand, wicked and cold and bloodied. Light glowed from its eyes, its grinning mouth, the symbols carved into Gav's chest and stomach.

"Just you and me now, Danny boy," it purred, oozing towards him. "We're gonna have so much fun together. Gonna rip you open and fuck you to death. Gonna—"

It stopped, mere feet from Dan. Its eye twitched. The grin slid off its face. It shook its head, swaying where it stood.

"Stop that," it said. "Be quiet, and watch—"

The light in its eyes flickered, a flame beset by gusting winds. It staggered towards him. Dan leapt sideways. The knife plunged into the wall. Orphinaeus snarled, swatting at a swarm of invisible insects.

"Stop doing that!"

"Gav?" Dan breathed.

Orphinaeus hurled itself at the sound. The blade ripped across Dan's arm. He scrambled back. Orphinaeus stumbled to a stop. It pawed at Gav's face, shook itself like a dog. The knife fell from its hand and stuck in the floor.

"Stop—showing me—stop it—stop!"

Its fingers plunged into Gav's eye. It howled in pain. The light flickered and went out, the inhuman thunder bled from its voice. Whatever infernal shadow had filled the house evaporated, letting light spill through the windows once more.

Gav sank to the floor, weeping and gasping and wailing in agony.

Dan started for him, stopped, stepped back. To his right, Sandrine let out a low moan. Her head lolled, her fingers twitched. To his left, Casimir propped himself up on his elbow, his hand pressed to a deep gash just above his collarbone.
Dan shucked off his jacket, darted over to cover Sandrine's bared chest with it, then crept to Gav's side.

"No," Gav gasped, crawling away from him. Blood rolled down one side of his face, tears down the other. "No, no, no—"

Dan knelt down and gathered him into his arms, shaking so hard he could barely breathe. The cut on his arm stung. His sleeve was plastered to him, sticky and hot. His skin crawled. His heart ached.

"It wasn't you, B," he said, rocking Gav like a child while he wept. "I believe you. I believe you. It wasn't you."

Casimir picked himself up, unsteady. His shirt was soaked with blood.

"I am calling a doctor," he said, and tottered from the room. In Dan's arms, Gav shuddered. Dan kissed his hair and squeezed him.

Only then did he feel the blood soaking through Gav's shirt, too.
Temporary Fix

An hour later, things had settled.

Dr Dufresne had taken Gav to another room of the house, with a pair of shady-looking priests in attendance to ensure there was not a repeat performance. Dan had been banished for hovering and subsequently was forced to submit to four stitches in his arm, courtesy of Casimir. In the intervening time, Casimir had apparently sewn up his own shoulder, a harrowing prospect for which Dan did not envy him. It was unclear whether the lingering scent of grain alcohol was from sterilization or anaesthesia.

Sandrine had changed clothes, settled in an armchair with Maurice the cat in her lap, and had not moved or spoken in over half an hour. Eventually, the guilt gnawing Dan's bones got the better of him, and he was forced to slink over and puddle in a nearby chair. Sandrine watched him, eagle-eyed, only glancing away to keep tabs on Casimir, who was cleaning up the blood on the floor.

"I'm sorry," Dan said. "I am . . . so, dreadfully sorry, about all of this."

Sandrine's lips pinched together. Her grip on Maurice tightened, ever so slightly.

"I don't blame you," she said. "As you were a skeptic, you couldn't have understood the danger of our enterprise. You had no real reason to believe that I could prevent the demon from further injuring Mr Free. Your actions, while perilously unwise, were . . . honest. This was not your fault."

"But I let go, even though you told me not to a dozen times. None of this would've happened if I hadn't."

"That is true; but if you had been excluded from the proceedings, you would not have had the opportunity. I still don't blame you."

"I can't say I wasn't given the option to stay home."

"I suspect you were not given a good enough reason," Sandrine said, with a sharp eye on Casimir. "Certain parties have demonstrated a disastrous proclivity for reticence."

"You know, now that you mention it, I'm not too terribly pleased with him, either."

"I get the sensation I am being referred to," said Casimir, although he kept his eyes on his work.

"Referred to, yes; invited to join, no," Sandrine said icily.

"It is very unfair of you to blame me for this," he said anyway.

"You lied to me, and very nearly got four people killed because of it. You were well aware that the possessing entity was demonic in nature; with the markings on his body, it was impossible to mistake."

"I am not experienced with the spiritual or the arcane. I had presumed that ghosts and demons were of a similar—"

"You knew," she spat, "and you lied."

With a sigh, Casimir hung his head. "I knew," he admitted, "and I lied. I didn't think you would agree to help if you knew the truth. Daniel can attest to our desperation in—"
"You lost every ounce of my sympathy the second you pulled a knife on Free," Dan said. "Especially considering you had us running mad searching for the damn thing all day. So don't come to me looking for backup."

Casimir turned a piteous expression on him, on hands and knees, up to his wrists in blood-pink suds. "First of all, it's a different knife, and secondly, it was a reflex action. I wouldn't have hurt him."

Just then, a hammering came at the front door, and a bubbly young voice called out, "Sandy? Sandy, are you there?"

Sandrine lifted her head and called back, "I am! The door is open; come in."

The door swung wide and three young women piled in. The first was short and sprightly, filled with youthful vigour; the second was slender, imperious, with platinum-blond hair so pale it was almost white; and the third was a towering statue of a woman who looked like she could pop Dan's head clean off just by squeezing his neck in her elbow. Sandrine's relief upon seeing them was palpable.

"Oh, Sandy, Sandy, you poor thing!" the youngest cried, zipping to her like a hummingbird to nectar. "I've never seen you so pale, oh, it must have been so awful!"

"It was among the worst," Sandrine admitted. "But I made it through intact and mostly unharmed, so I will recover."

"Mostly?" the pale one said, arching a brow.

"A few scratches, a knock on the head. Minor injuries, by comparison."

"Huh," said the third. "I'd hate to see the other guy. Who're these two?"

Sandrine waved a languid hand. "This is Mr Gruchy. Mr Gruchy, my friends Miss Rose, Miss Schnee, and Miss Xiao Long."

"Er, a pleasure," said Dan. He rose politely, but did not shake any hands, pinned down by suspicious glares.

"And that," Sandrine continued, venomous, "is Mr Dubois."

All three of them turned. Casimir flashed a smile and waved a bloodied hand.

"Good evening, ladies," he said.

"Oh," said Miss Schnee, in a voice like an arctic wind. "So that's Dubois."

Miss Rose put an arm round Sandrine's shoulders. Miss Xiao Long cracked her knuckles and her neck. The smile slid off Casimir's face and fell into the suds below.

"Perhaps I should be on my way," he said.

Miss Xiao Long smiled a vicious smile. "What a great idea!"

She strode across the room and hoisted him up by the collar of his coat. Without so much as slowing, she dragged him to the door and quite literally threw him out onto the street. She slammed the door, dusted off her hands, and turned to Dan.

"This one can stay, Yang," said Sandrine, amused. "He's been a gentleman."
"You're sure? He looks sketchy."

"Thus far he has been kind and courteous, and I'm not one to punish good behaviour. He can stay until Dr Dufresne and the Brothers Albain finish with the afflicted."

"Afflicted?" said Miss Rose, frowning. "Afflicted with what? With the demon? *Oops*, I forgot I'm not supposed to mention—oh, or, um, that is—"

"Why doesn't Mr Gruchy go back to stay with the menfolk?" Miss Schnee said. "Now that you won't be left alone, his gentlemanly duties seem discharged."

Dan had a moment of consternation, tempted to point out that Gav wasn't *menfolk*, but decided against it. That particular fact was barely any of his business, let alone the business of total strangers.

"They kicked me out," he said instead. "For . . . hovering. It happens every time Free's in hospital, which luckily isn't too often. Or hasn't been, up until lately. Nurses hate me, hahah."

"We could go check on him together!" Miss Rose chirped. "You seem really worried about him, and I bet they won't kick you out if I'm with you, or at least I could, kind of, you know, weigh you down so you don't hover. Right?"

"I would appreciate that, yes," said Dan, perplexed. "Thank you."

She leapt up at once and flitted to him, swept up his hand and hauled him off with astonishing strength. Dan tripped over himself trying to keep from dislocating his shoulder.

"Oh!" he said, as she dragged him from the room. "All right, lead on!"

"They're in the sanctuary," Sandrine called after them.

"I figured!" Miss Rose responded. As she pulled Dan into a short corridor, she turned to him. "It isn't *really* a sanctuary. Most holy people hate Sandy. I think they'd burn her at the stake if that kind of thing was still *done*, you know? Witchcraft and everything, or at least that's what they call it. Except Sandy calls it that, too, so I guess that's what it is."

"Er . . . right?"

Before they got to the intricate door at the end of the corridor, Dr Dufresne stepped out of it. He looked considerably more haggard than when he had gone in. When he saw Dan and Miss Rose approaching, his face twisted with discomfort.

"Oh, good good, great, just the man I was hoping to see," he said through his teeth. "And—your friend here is . . . ?"

"Ruby Rose," she said, dropping Dan's hand to offer hers to Dufresne. "I'm a friend of Sandrine's, she called us all over because apparently it was *awfully* bad and then of course she was surrounded by *men* afterwards and you know how terrible that is. Or I guess you probably don't. It's very terrible. Now you know!"

"Sure, sure," said Dufresne. Rather than shaking her hand, he fooled with his kerchief. "We're not letting anyone see the uh—the patient, right now, though, so the two of you should probably head back where you came from."

"I will tear your arms off your body if you try and stop me," said Dan.
"With one exception, we're not letting anyone see him right now," said Dufresne, sweating.

"And why not?"

"His condition is, um, it's a little. . . ."

Dan glowered. Dufresne backed up against the door, raising his hands.

"Well," he said, "uh, the good news is, there was almost no damage to the eyelid or socket!"

A sick, slow dread filled Dan's stomach. He clenched his teeth and his fists, fighting down nausea. Dufresne cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head.

"The—the bad news is, um. The eye itself was . . . uh, non-recoverable. But! But because everything else made it through in such good shape, it'll be really easy to get a—like a glass one, to replace it, so he doesn't have to wear an eyepatch forever! So that's good! And—but also, you know, there were all the other injuries, hahah, not insignificant, he really shouldn't have visitors but especially not, uh, visitors of the female persuasion, um—hey, wait a second, no no no—"

Dan pushed past him and into the room, ignoring his startled protests. Inside, Gav was sat up on a table, shirtless and downcast and vacant. Dan's blood boiled.

"For God's sake, at least let him keep his dignity," he snapped. For the second time in as many hours, he shucked off his jacket and gave it over, although it took a considerable amount of finagling to get Gav's arms through the sleeves, especially with the splint on his wrist. The cuts on his body had been bandaged afresh. A thick wad of gauze covered his right eye, strapped in place by more bandages that circled his head. He didn't look at Dan once, didn't so much as acknowledge his existence. Dan buttoned his jacket round Gav, covering his chest as best he could, and held him by the shoulders at arm's length.

Despite the intervening time, and against all hope, the contact still made his skin crawl.

"There, that's a little less exposed," he said. "Honestly, is a shred of decency too much to expect?"

"It is most unfortunate, Mr Gruchy, but sometimes decency must yield to necessity."

Dan whipped round. The two priests were standing against the wall behind him, their hands tucked neatly into their sleeves. One was a few inches taller than the other, and one had a narrower face, and there the differences ended. They both had a vulpine look about them, glittering eyes and twitching ears and the sense of secret machinery turning in their heads. Both wore such identical expressions of supercilious distaste that he couldn't guess which one had spoken.

"I'm beyond curious to hear what part of this you think is necessary," Dan said to the space between their heads.

"Too much time under wraps causes wounds to fester," said the taller one. "Being exposed to the open air allows the causative malaise to disperse. Dr Dufresne could explain it much better than I, if you require a more thorough explanation. Fennec and I are simply here to oversee, and ensure that the entity does not attempt to cause further harm."

"I'll be sure he gets aired out regularly at home, then. Speaking of which, I think we'd better be going."

The two exchanged a glance.
"We believe that would be . . . unwise, at this time," the taller one said. "Indeed, it would be unwise to take Mr Free anywhere at all, by yourself. His situation is, how shall I put it, *delicate*, spiritually speaking. At any moment, he could be overwhelmed."

"That isn't going to happen," Dan said, fighting down the fear, the revulsion. He kept one hand firm on Gav's shoulder. "He's stronger than this thing, whatever it is. Demonstrably."

The shorter brother, Fennec, inclined his head. "Certainly. It is a tiring fight, however, and we try to be sensitive to that fact. He has earned a rest."

"Well—yes, of course."

"And he will need his strength for the days to come," Fennec said. "Wouldn't you say so, Corsac?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Are the two of you going somewhere with all this?" Dan cut in, more sharply than was called for. The brothers turned back to him.

"Yes," said Fennec. "In both a figurative and a literal sense."

"We think it would be wisest to bring him back to our church," said Corsac. "The entity's power will be considerably lessened within its walls. It will also be that much easier to conduct the exorcism there, with the Lord's light so directly shined upon us. You are, of course, welcome to accompany him, if you so desire it; but equally welcome to entrust us with his care while you recover yourself elsewhere."

"I'm not leaving him," Dan said. *With you,* he did not say, but he thought it very loudly.

"Your devotion is admirable. With that being the case, I see no reason to linger here any longer. Unless you had any final business to conduct, Fennec?"

"Not I," said Fennec. "Dr Dufresne, are you finished with the patient?"

"Me?" Dufresne squeaked, as though he himself hadn't noticed he was in the room (Dan certainly hadn't). "Um—no, I think I'm all done. Hey, guys, really, thanks so much for coming along—oh, did I ever introduce you? I don't think I introduced everybody, hahah. Mr Gruchy, these are my, uh, my friends, The Reverend Fennec Albain and The Very Reverend Corsac Albain. Uh, fellas, this is Mr Gruchy."

"It is a pleasure," they said in unison, bowing their heads.

"They uh, they did my . . . you know," Dufresne added. "They're really good, very professional, you're in good hands, hahah. Anyway, I should really be going.

He spun on his heel and darted out. The Albain brothers watched him go with tepid amusement. Before the door could swing to, Miss Rose poked her head in.

"Everything going all right in here?" she asked. "Need any help or anything?"

"No, we are well equipped to handle the situation," said Fennec. "We certainly do not require the prying eyes of young ladies, whose virtue may be corrupted."

Miss Rose went pink, frowning. "Whose what may be what?"
"My brother is concerned for your spiritual well being, my dear," Corsac said, crossing to the door. "Entities like the one parasitising Mr Free have a penchant for pretty young women. We would hate for anything unpleasant to happen to you. Please, rejoin the others; we have the situation well under control."

"Well—all right, but if you change your minds, I can—"

He shut the door in her face. She kept talking.

"—help . . . out. Or not. I guess."

With a dejected sigh, she scuffed away down the corridor. Corsac turned his attention back to Dan.

"Speaking of safety, it would be wise to move Mr Free to our church as soon as possible. We have a carriage waiting outside; if you have no further business here and would like to accompany us, we can leave right away."

Dan thought of Casimir, thrown out on his ear with bloodied soap all over his hands, a gash in his shoulder, and a slurry of alcohol and lies on his tongue.

"No further business," he said. "Let's go."

The church was about as friendly and likeable as the Albain brothers themselves, which was to say: not at all, but trying very hard to be.

Stained glass windows had turned a murky brown in the lamplight, and the white walls were more bland than holy. The pews were polished, the cushions clean, the floors swept. All the Bibles in view were pristine, unopened. The vaulted ceiling was dry and splintery, lacking the rosewater soaking of even a year's worth of hymnals. All the candles were unburnt, their wicks as white as their wax. There was a smell of soap and wood varnish. The eternal clamour of Paris was muffled, distant, like a conversation through a closed door.

Dan sat on a pew, hands clasped, elbows on his knees, trying to remember what he'd come here for.

He'd left Gav in the chambers upstairs, securely locked away with Corsac Albain standing guard outside his door. Wherever Gav had gone inside his own head, he hadn't come back yet. Dan had done his best to make him comfortable, put him to bed and spoke hollow comforts to him, but none of it had seemed to get through. Leaving him was like having his fingernails torn off, but he hadn't been given much of a choice in the matter. The Albains insisted it was much too dangerous for anyone to stay with him. Even within the confines of the church, they couldn't guarantee that his passenger wouldn't seize control again, especially with the boundaries having been weakened by the séance.

And so Dan had left him. Fennec had shown him to another room and shut him in with kind and empty words. For an hour or two, Dan had pretended to sleep. When the church filled with silence and his head filled with noise in equal measure, he had slipped from his room, crept down the stairs, and settled in here. For another hour, he had soaked in the silence, hoping that it would trickle into his ears and flush out everything between them.

It hadn't.

Sighing, he rubbed his eyes. His bones were full of lead. The cut on his arm stung and burned.
Someone had stuck a key in his back and turned it until it jammed. Every muscle ached. His lungs would only fill halfway. There was a pint of cold vinegar in his stomach, sloshing uneasily every time he moved. The church was just as cold, just as hollow, just as empty.

"When was the last time you were here?" Dan mumbled to his shoes, his temples pinched between his thumbs. "All these people, still singing your bloody name for things that happened almost nineteen hundred years ago 'cos you've given them nothing else since. I reckon anyone would get tired of hearing the same things that many times, though, so I s'pose I can't blame you for hooking it. I was starting to think we made you up, d'you know. Fairy tales. And maybe we did, too, 'cos if I'd never heard of you, I might've dreamed up a God, with the things I've seen. Just for peace of mind."

The quiet yielded nothing to him. His words drifted down through the night and disappeared, like letters into the sea. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, fighting down nausea, biting back tears.

"How many times has this happened?" he asked. "How many good people have died 'cos you couldn't be arsed to show up? Why has some—some clerk in a frock got to beg and scrape and plead to drag the thing out, when you could've stopped it getting into him in the first place? How does this happen? How do you let this happen?"

If the barren walls could hear him, they could not or would not answer. No breath stirred amongst the immaculate pews. Stained-glass angels looked on in anguished silence, mouthless and frozen in shards of holy light. Tears dripped from the end of Dan's nose and spattered on the stone floor, like blood thinned by the rain. He could barely breathe, choking out words to empty air.

"I know that Gav isn't a good man—a good person, and I'm certainly not one, but—please. If there is an ounce of mercy left in you, if there is a scrap of love left for us, please, come back. Just for one night. Just for one moment. Please, help him."

There was no response. Dan buried his face in his hands, trembling head to foot with the pressure of the sobs building in his chest.

From the direction of the stairs, there came a quiet knocking.

Dan sat up, struggling to pull himself together. Corsac Albain was stood in the doorway, wearing his stole and a horribly pitying expression.

"I hope I am not interrupting," he said. "I noticed that you had left, and wanted to make certain that nothing was amiss."

"Everything is amiss, but I appreciate your concern," Dan managed. Corsac pursed his lips, glanced round the room, and took a step in. "May I sit with you?"

"It's your church, I reckon you can sit wherever you want."

He inclined his head, then shuffled across the way to settle on the other side of Dan's pew. He folded his hands in his lap, considering the cross behind the pulpit.

"I overheard some of the things you said," he mentioned. "I could certainly forget them, if you wished it, but likewise I could provide some answers."

"No, thank you. I've heard what holy men have got to say about the issues I have with the—the business, and it's answered nothing."
"Very well. If you decide that you would like to have a conversation about it, I will be happy to engage you. In the mean time, may I ask you a question?"

"It's your church."

"I am more interested in respecting your wishes than in satisfying my curiosity."

The irritation crawling under Dan's skin lost its steam and died. It was replaced with a deep ache, an inescapable exhaustion. He wiped the tears off his face and clasped his hands between his knees.

"Fine. Ask, then."

"Thank you. It's this: if you have so little faith in God, and so little faith in men of God, then why are you here?"

Dan shrugged. "Because I haven't got anything else," he said.
Evocation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the morning, no one was dead, and no further injuries had occurred, and therefore Dan was forced to call the relocation a success. Once the sun was fully up, he was allowed to bring Gav his breakfast, although Fennec Albain loitered just outside the door. Ostensibly, he was taking over the watch from Corsac to allow him to sleep. Dan suspected it was solely for the purpose of eavesdropping.

"Morning, B," he said, easing his way over to Gav's bed. "How—how are you feeling?"

"Been better," Gav mumbled. He was sitting up, at least, although he was pale and waxen.

"I'm sure. We've got one of those priests just outside the door, if you think you might need one, and I've brought breakfast, if you're feeling up to it."

Gav gestured. "You can leave it on the table."

"I would, only I've brought mine up, as well. I thought we'd—"

"You haven't got to do this," Gav interrupted. His voice was quiet, hollow, his eyes—his eye downcast.

Dan plopped the breakfast tray on the table and sat down. "I'm doing it anyway. Come and have breakfast. I'm not leaving 'til you do."

With much sighing and wincing, Gav extracted himself from the bed. He shuffled to the table and sank into the chair farthest from Dan as though every movement was excruciatingly painful. Dan bit his tongue, wary of driving him off. When Gav had settled in, Dan passed a plate of plain toast and a cup of tea across to him.

"Hopefully that won't be too hard on your stomach," he said. "I know I'm still feeling a bit sick, can't imagine it's much better for you."

Gav didn't answer. He ate mechanically, staring through the table. The only hint of expression on his face was faint lines of pain.

Dan lasted five minutes before the silence became unbearable. He set down his toast, wiped the crumbs off his fingers, and set his clasped hands on the table.

"Do you know what happened last night?" he asked, as gently as he could.

Gav shrugged. Faint pain was joined by fear. His lip quivered and his blinking became more rapid.

"D'you want me to tell you," Dan said, "or would you rather not know?"

"I know enough."

Chewing his lip, Dan struggled with himself before speaking again. "You saved my life."

"You make it sound as though it was on purpose."
"Wasn't it?"

"I was barely conscious. It just happened. The things he was thinking of, and you were so—it just
happened. I didn't do anything."

"Whether you meant to or not, you still saved me, and I'm still incredibly grateful and immensely
proud."

"Why?" Gav said bitterly.

"Why? What—what d'you mean, why?"

"I know what happened back there."

"That really doesn't explain anything, B. Not from where I'm sitting."

Gav swallowed, looking sicker by the minute. He hugged himself and turned his face away,
shrinking under his bandages.

"It wasn't enough," he whispered, watching the door as though he could see Fennec Albain's prying
ear poking through it. "I—I killed them. Both of them, I—"

"Who, Dubois and the psychic? They're still alive."

His head snapped up. A tear slid down his cheek. The muscles in his jaw worked as he clenched his
teeth.

"Are they?" His voice was hard, accusatory.

"Unless something's happened in the last eight hours, yes. They're both alive and in one piece, B,
that's God's honest truth."

Gav shuddered. A sneer pulled at his lip. He scrubbed it off with the back of his hand.

"But I remember," he mumbled, his eye searching some invisible image. "I remember the blood, and
the—and they . . . fell, both of them, I remember."

"There was rather a lot of blood, yes, and both of them did end up on the floor. But they weren't
dead."

"Then where are they?"

"At home, presumably. Madame Sandrine was none too pleased with Dubois. She had a gaggle of
her girlfriends come over, and they threw him out on his ear." A flash of inspiration struck, and he
asked, "D'you remember him saying he'd send for a doctor, right afterwards?"

Gav's darting eye stilled, his brow furrowed. Some of the tension eased from his shoulders.

"Yes," he said. "Now you mention it, yes. I couldn't tell what he was saying, but it's his voice. It's
just. . . ."

"I promise nobody died. It was terrifying, it was bloody horrific, but nobody died."

Shaking his head, Gav mumbled something under his breath.

" Didn't quite catch that, B. What'd you say?"
"I still hurt you," he said. "All three of you."

"All three of us got hurt, but it wasn't you. It was that—that thing."

"You haven't got to feed my delusions."

"I'm not feeding your delusions, I believe you. It's not you and you're not it, and the sooner we can get it out of you, the better. I watched the damn thing break your wrist and gouge your eye out, for Christ's sake!"

Gav flinched. "I wish you wouldn't."

"Sorry. Er . . . sorry. I only meant—I'm convinced. Everything I thought I knew is out the bloody window, but I'm convinced."

"Oh, B," Gav sighed.

A lull overtook them. Gav picked at his toast. Dan nursed his tea. There were plenty of things he wanted to say, but none of them with Fennec Albain skulking outside the door.

"At least now we know how Christophe and the Jameses were killed," he said instead.

"Do we?"

"I reckon so. The thing said it'd killed Christophe, and implied that the same, er, technique was used for Mrs James."

"What technique?"

"Well. Considering they were both similarly . . . marked, and considering what happened last night, presumably whatever was—was put in them picked up the reins and did it. Sort of an inside-job, sort of a thing. So, you know, when it comes right down to it, you were right. It was the wife. In a—in a manner of speaking."

"And then Brouillard drops in to do whatever she wasn't physically capable of doing to herself," Gav said, distant. "Yes. Explains the minimal wiping-up in Mrs James' study. Explains why he wasn't covered in blood after Christophe. Might even explain what happened to James himself."

"Does it?"

"Mm."

"Could you explain it to me, then?"

"Balanced scales. It's all about balanced scales, and the deaths all come in pairs. Luna and Christophe. James and his wife—and the two children, but I reckon they were collateral damage. Give a murder, get a murder."

Dan shuddered. "Bloody hell. But then, did they kill Luna specifically to get at Christophe?"

"Could've been multipurpose. Could've been serendipity. Could've been they were . . . ."

"Were what?" said Dan, more to keep Gav talking than because he genuinely wanted to know.

Gav stared into his tea, watching something much farther away as it played out. His face twitched. He shook his head.
"I don't know. It's all baseless conjecture, anyway."

"I promise I won't tell anyone if you're wrong."

"You might go on operating under wrong assumptions."

"If I might, then so could you. B, please, let's not do this one the usual way, it went so poorly last time."

With a wince, Gav turned his face away. He fought with himself for a good ten seconds before he caved.

"If they were planning on putting it in Dubois, they would've had to get it out of Christophe first," he mumbled.

"Funny you should mention that, 'cos Dubois also thinks that it was probably all meant for him. He said—if I'm recalling correctly—that he thinks they intended to replace him. And when I asked with who, he said, with what', which seemed like lunacy at the time, but . . . it doesn't, as much, now. It could go some way towards explaining why Peake figured you and him were interchangeable, at the end."

Frowning, Gav asked, "When did you have this conversation?"

"After your, er . . . the incident in the tub. You were unconscious at the time."

The suspicion eased from Gav's face, and he nodded. "Is he here?"

"Ah, that'd be a no," said Dan. "Being that he pulled a bloody knife on you, I didn't bother retrieving him after he'd been thrown out."

"B, you can't blame him for trying to defend himself."

"I can, I have, and I'll go on doing it, thanks."

"I've got a bump on my head the size of my fist from where that bitch hit me with a—"

"That what?" Dan cried.

"What? Why're you looking at me like that? I was only saying that the psychic lamped me in the head, so I don't know why you're going after Dubois when he didn't even hurt me!"

"You called her a bitch."

"I never!"

"You did, just now."

"I—" He broke off. His eye went glassy. The fingers of his injured hand twitched.

Dan shifted his centre of balance, slid his legs in close to the chair and gauged the distance to the door. His pulse pounded in his neck and wrists and feet. His stomach bunched up under his lungs.

"I s'pose I did, didn't I," Gav said numbly. "What a horrible thing to say."

"That's all right, B," said Dan, fighting to keep his voice level. "Sometimes things slip out."
"I think—maybe you'd better go, Gruchy. I think maybe you ought to leave now."

Dan shoved his chair back from the table and stood. "Don't have to tell me twice. Hang in there, we'll get this fixed soon, eat the rest of your breakfast."

He backed away, found the wall with his shoulder and fumbled for the door. Without taking his eyes off Gav, he turned the knob. It thunked to a halt before it had moved half an inch. Dan's heart clawed up his throat, trying to escape.

"Mr Albain, could you please unlock the door?" he called. The doorknob was slimy under his hand. His shirt was full of needle-toed ants.

Gav's fingers twitched again, then his eye, then his head. A shiver ran through him. He shrugged it off. The movement was profoundly, fundamentally wrong.

Click, went the door, and Dan shoved out fast enough to bowl Fennec Albain to the ground outside. He slammed the door behind him and threw his full weight against it.

Something hit the other side so hard that the wood splintered.

"Lock it lock it lock it!" Dan squealed, buffeted by a furious assault. Fennec leapt up and lent his shoulder to the cause. Together, they wrestled the door into its frame. The moment Fennec turned the key in the lock, the gale-force battering stopped.

Dan's heart pounded in his ears. He and Fennec stood still, panting. The splintered wood creaked as it settled into place.

"Dan?" Gav said, piteous and frightened. "Are you out there? I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"Ah," said Fennec, sounding relieved. "It seems the lapse was brief. However—"

Dan shook his head, sick to his stomach and burning in his skin. "That's not Free."

"Dan, please," he begged. He sounded so near that his head must have been pressed to the door. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Please don't leave me alone again, I can't stand it."

"He doesn't call me Dan, you stupid animal," Dan snarled.

Fennec stared at him, startled. Chagrin crept in to replace fury, and Dan shrugged.

Before he could mumble out a word of explanation, the door buckled as though struck with a battering ram. Dan and Fennec were both knocked onto their back foot, and both jammed their shoulders right back against the door.

"Open up, Danny boy," Orphinaeus growled. "We've got unfinished business, you and I."

In a blind terror, Dan retorted, "Go straight back to Hell!"

"Don't communicate with it, Mr Gruchy," said Fennec.

Orphinaeus threw itself against the door again. The force of the blow bruised Dan's shoulder to the bone. Dust and splinters rained on his head from the topmost hinge.

"Bloody hell!" he squeaked.

"Gonna make you beg," Orphinaeus panted, rabid. "Gonna make you bleed!"
Another impact against the door. The top hinge ripped loose with a tortured squeal. Fennec grabbed Dan by the lapel and dragged him back, shoved him up against the far wall and held him there with a hand on his chest.

"Stay behind me." He lifted his head and called, "Corsac! We're out of time!"

The door bashed against its frame. Fennec stood firm between it and Dan, fumbling for something in his belt. At the next blow, the middle hinge tore loose. Dan pressed himself against the wall. Every fibre of his being screamed at him to run. Only Fennec's hand kept him from doing it.

With a BANG like a gunshot, the door crashed down. Orphinaeus leapt through it, bloodied and feral. Fennec whipped a silver cross from his belt and thrust it forward like a burning brand. The noonday sun caught it, blinding.

"Back!" he roared.

Orphinaeus cringed, flinging up its hands to shield itself. It stumbled back a step, gnashing its teeth like a wild dog. A blazing eye turned on Fennec. The voice spilled through Gav's lips like boiling tar.

"Cheap tricks, altar boy. You don't have shit on me."

It lurched forward. Fennec brandished the cross, and again, Orphinaeus flinched.

"I said back, demon, by the power of Heaven!"

The words struck it harder than Sandrine's candelabrum. It staggered, snarling in pain, swatting at the air like a flood of burning embers was pouring down upon it.

"They don't take your kind up there, altar boy! I know where your filthy—"

"On your knees, demon. Your words have no power here."

"Kinky sod," it leered, and licked its teeth. "You get tired of little—"

"Kneel!"

The cross flashed like lightning, like a dagger in the dark. Orphinaeus dropped as though the roof had fallen on it. Down the corridor, another door flew open and Corsac rushed out, bearing a Bible and a bottle and another silver cross. He leapt to Fennec's side, holding the line between Orphinaeus and Dan. He thrust the cross forward. With a yelp of pain, Orphinaeus convulsed. It fell onto its back, legs kicking, shielding its face with both arms.

"Orphinaeus, steed of Hades, centipede of the Pit!" Corsac boomed. "By your name, I have mastery over you. By the light of Heaven, you have no power here!"

"Tell that to Gavvy, you limp-dicked fuck," it said, glaring at him through its arms. "I'll shove that fucking cross so far up your arse—"

"Silence, fiend," said Fennec. Orphinaeus choked like he'd grabbed it by the throat. Fennec held out a hand and Corsac placed the Bible in it. "You'll soon be back in Hell where you belong."

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," Corsac began.

Orphinaeus skittered back into the room like a cockroach, slavering and twitching. It clambered onto
the table. Dishes and unfinished breakfast scattered everywhere. Corsac and Fennec followed it inside, synchronous as clockwork. Corsac kept speaking, with such forceful command that it struck at Dan's chest like the roar of cannon-fire.

"Most glorious Prince of the Heavenly Armies, Saint Michael the Archangel—"

"Dead!" Orphinaeus screeched. "He's dead, they're all dead!"

"—Defend us in our battle against principalities and powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places!"

"Nobody's coming to help you! Grifter, swindler!"

"Come to the assistance of men whom God has created to His likeness," said Corsac, "and whom He has redeemed at great price from the tyranny of the Devil!"

Orphinaeus hurled itself at him. With a sweep of his silver cross, Fennec smote it to the ground. The cross sang like a tuning fork. The walls were a struck church bell, filling the air with ringing.

"You were never free!" Orphinaeus howled, muffled by the noise. Corsac's voice boomed out in retaliation, a peal of thunder in the storm.

"Behold the Cross of the Lord! Flee, bands of enemies!"

Again it leapt at him, and again Fennec swatted it like a fly. Dan's vision blurred. The glass in the windows splintered. Fennec's voice cut through, clear and resounding.

"The Lion of the tribe of Juda, the offspring of David, hath conquered."

"May Thy mercy, Lord, descend upon us," said Corsac.

Orphinaeus screamed, a sound like tortured metal and roaring flame.

"As great as our hope in Thee!" Fennec returned.

The scream petered out, strained vocal cords and emptied lungs. Orphinaeus' back arched, its eyes and mouth gaping. Its heels kicked and its hands flailed, its chest heaved with desperate breaths.

When the next scream came, it was Gav's voice.

Dan lurched forward, yanked by a string wrapped round his heart. Fennec whirled, cross at the ready. It glowed in his hand with a red-hot light, curling smoke from between his fingers. Orphinaeus surged towards him. Corsac flicked the bottle at it. The thin spray of water hit it like a jet of flame, sending it reeling back, clawing at its face. Fennec shoved the Bible into Dan's hands and turned his attention back to Orphinaeus. The soft leather binding was blistering hot. Dan yelped and dropped the book, whereupon it burst into flame. It was ash before it hit the ground, a dervish of embers whirling through the room. As Fennec brought his cross to bear, Gav collapsed again.

"It hurts," he gasped, writhing on the floor. "Dan, please, make them stop, it hurts, it hurts—!"

Dan clenched his teeth and his fists. It took every ounce of his willpower to stay put. He couldn't look away; if he moved, it would be to run to Gav. If he spoke, it would only be to intervene.

"We drive you from us, Orphinaeus!" Corsac cried.

Gav convulsed, screaming. Blood dribbled from his nose, from under the bandages on his eye. He
crawled away from the Albains, weeping and gasping, reaching out blindly.

"Please, Dan, please. . . ."

Fennec swung the cross like a claymore. Gav slammed into the wall, howling in agony. Corsac carried on. The holy water was boiling in its bottle, sloshing all over his hand.

"We drive you from us, unclean spirits, all satanic powers, all infernal invaders, all wicked legions!"

Another convulsion, another tortured cry. Black ichor spilled from his mouth, tears streamed down his cheek. Together, the Albains raised their crosses and their voices, as rigid and merciless as Death itself.

"In the Name and by the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Orphinaeus screamed out. The ringing rose to a deafening shriek. Dan clapped his hands over his ears, driven to his knees by the force of it. The windows exploded. The smell of burning flesh choked the air. In blind terror, deafening pain, he huddled on the floor until, at last, like the passing of a terrible storm, it ended.

Prying his eyes open, he saw Gav, seizing so violently that only his head and heels touched the floor. Dan staggered to him, dropped to his knees at his side. Blood covered his face, dribbling from his nose. More of the black vomit spurted between his clenched teeth, gritty as coffee grounds. Dan hauled him over onto his side, unable to hear the gurgle in his breath but knowing damn well it was there.

Go for a doctor! he shouted over his shoulder. His own voice was muffled, underwater. Fennec didn't even look up, nursing a hand blistered by heat. Corsac barely spared a glance.

He's bleeding internally, he needs a doctor! Dan insisted. He was crying. He couldn't breathe. Corsac touched Fennec's shoulder, spoke a word to him, and strode out. Dan held Gav for uncounted minutes while the seizure ripped through him, wiping the blood and sick from his face, until it subsided to an erratic twitching. With burned fingers, he kept track of Gav's racing pulse. With ringing ears, he listened to the pained rattle of his breath.

"I'm so sorry, Gav," he murmured. "I'm so sorry. It's all over now. You're going to be all right."

When the doctor finally arrived, they had to drag Dan out.

Chapter End Notes

I got the exorcism prayer from [here]. It actually goes on for approximately 3,000 more words so, obviously, I didn't include the whole thing.
The very moment the door opened, Casimir pulled Gav inside, swept him into his arms, and spun him round like a dancer.

"Oh, Gavin my sweet, you have no idea how worried I've been about you!" he cried. He took Gav's shoulders and held him out at arm's length. "A whole week, trapped with holy men, it must have been horrific, how ever did you survive?"

"I missed you, too, Cassie," Gav said, smiling.

Dan stepped inside and nudged the door closed behind him. "How did you know where we've been?"

"Daniel, Daniel, I know everything. Surely, you must have realized this by now. I was concerned I might have to rescue you—tell me they weren't filling your poor heads with threats of hellfire, these people always go on and on about one's private life, as though the worst things a person can do are to dress improperly and love men."

"They were more warnings than threats," said Dan, fidgeting. "A few . . . perhaps slightly too on-the-nose, but at least they promised to keep everything confidential."

"Let me guess: eschew your friends, beg forgiveness, marry a woman, give effusive thanks, wear only trousers—never forgetting to give thanks and beg forgiveness—or else you'll burn?"

"Essentially."

"Hideous and idiotic. Even if God cared a fig for—"

"Could we move on, please?" Gav interrupted, strained.

Casimir sketched a bow. "Of course; I don't mean to belabour the point. Make yourselves at home, please, the both of you. Is there anything I can get you? Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"Breakfast we've had, but tea would be lovely," said Gav.

"Tea! A wondrous idea, give me but a moment and it shall be done." He kissed each of Gav's cheeks and swept away—not to the kitchen, but to the bedroom. "Oh my little cabbage, do wake up, it's time to go!"

In his bed, a very disheveled man heaved himself upright. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be one of the regulars of the Ravin Rouge—the name David swam up from a drunken soup of memory, although Dan couldn't be sure how accurate it was.

"You're not serious," maybe-David grumbled.

" Entirely. I have company, and you have to leave. Get dressed and be on your way, or I shall throw you out naked."

With another gritty utterance, the man caught Casimir by the head and pulled him in close. Dan cleared his throat and wandered to the sitting area. A pile of letters and newspapers sat on the coffee table. He extracted the paper nearest to the top and dropped into the armchair with it.

"You're blushing," Gav said, settling on the divan.
"Bloody embarrassing, innit," he mumbled. "Could've kicked the fellow out before we got here, at least."

"Oh, no, that'd be completely out of the question."

"Why not?"

Gav smirked at him. "Cos then he wouldn't've got to see you turn pink."

"I'm glad you're feeling well," said Dan, glaring at him.

"What? I'll bet you five quid that's why."

"I'm not saying you're *wrong.*"

"You're not still upset with him, are you?"

"Of course I'm still bloody upset with him. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm not upset with him, and of the two of us, I've got more right to be."

"I reckon you're just relieved he's not dead. Once that wears off, you'll come round."

A sound that was not at all conducive to the de-pinkening of Dan's cheeks spilled out from the bedroom. He shook the paper open and buried his face in it. Though he stayed in there for several minutes, he scarcely read a single word. It was only when Casimir's guest stumped out of the flat that he emerged again.

"There now," Casimir sighed, wafting into the kitchen. "Where were we? There was to be tea, I think. My sincerest apologies for the delay, he's an absolute leech. One must use a crowbar to pry him loose. Black tea for the both of you, or something else?"

"That's fine, thank you," said Dan.

Gav didn't answer at all. Pale and gaunt, he sat staring through Dan's chest, swaying with every breath he took. Dan's heart leapt into his throat.

"Gav? What's wrong?"

A trembling hand pointed. "Front page, B," he said.

Dan flipped the paper over. His heart dropped out of his throat and plunged into his boots. His stomach churned in its wake.

In bold type, printed like a banner across the top of the front page, was the headline: *ANOTHER BODY!*

And beneath that, slightly smaller: *Fifth Dismembered Corpse Found In Seine,* with the third line reading: *Police Sniff While The Nose of London Runs!*

"Bloody hell," Dan whispered, pressing his knuckles to his lips.

"Is something the matter?" Casimir asked.

Dan mustered his bravest face and stiffest upper lip. "All right. No, it's all right, nothing's lost just yet. It's not ideal, but it's—workable. No need to panic."
"Is it something in the paper? Have they found him?"

"Gav, are you still with us?" Dan asked, heedless.

Though it seemed a Herculean effort, Gav mumbled, "I'm still here."

"Good," said Dan. "Good. Right. Really it's—it's quite a long reprieve we got, isn't it. Nearly twelve whole days! And at least we've managed to take care of the... the major issue in the mean time. At least we can focus on this now."

"Less," said Gav.

"What?"

"That's Monday's paper."

Dan checked. Indeed, the paper was two days old.

"Damn it all," he hissed. "I should've been looking out for it. Should've at least gone back to the hotel, I mean, you told me to go back to the hotel!"

"It's fine, Dan."

"It's not fine!"

"Maybe it was for the best you didn't. Might've run into the police there. I don't suppose it'll take them too much longer to find us, now that we're back to our old haunts."

"Don't talk like that. We don't know how much they know. There's no need for panic—or despair. We've just got to keep our heads."

From behind the armchair, there came a soft tsk. Dan nearly jumped clean out of his skin.

"Well, it was bound to happen sooner or later," Casimir sighed, regarding the front page. "What did I say? Dead men float."

"The I-told-you-so's are really, supremely unnecessary at this time," Dan snapped.

"Necessary or not, there they are."

"Don't you have tea to be making?"

Casimir pressed a hand to his chest and bowed deeply. "Yes, my lord, right away. Feel free to peruse the rest of the mail while I do; there may be return correspondence from another of my contacts, whose help we must surely need now more than ever. I haven't been keeping up with any of it, I'm afraid; much too busy being a drunken, lying whore."

"Piss off," Dan muttered, but only once Casimir was already out of earshot.

Mechanically, Gav picked up the first letter on the pile. Dan followed suit, lacking anything better to do and in desperate need of something to occupy his hands. If he sat idle for too long, the panic seething in his chest would surely boil over.

About halfway down the stack, beneath Monday's paper, he found a letter addressed not to Casimir, but to Free & Gruchy, at the address of the cottage in Marseille—and more strangely, the handwriting seemed to be Dan's own. The envelope was uncommonly heavy, the stamp American.
Equal parts puzzled and wary, he tore the short end open and peered inside. As soon as he registered what the contents were, his unease evaporated, replaced by something much lighter.

"What are you smiling about over there?" Gav asked.

"Was I?" said Dan, startled. "Maybe it's something to smile about, then. Jones sent our return envelope back, and it's got—"

He tipped the contents into his palm. They gleamed and clinked, musical.

"Three silver American dollars in it," he said.

Gav let out a noise that was just a hair shy of a laugh. "Well, I'll be! Is that the exchange rate these days?"

"Haven't the foggiest, sorry."

"Is there a letter?"

Dan peeked inside the envelope again. "Yes, actually. Some paper clippings, as well, that's odd. What's he got to say about it, let's see here. . . ."

Although it looked like it had been written by a schoolboy—from the atrocious spelling right down to the shaky and sometimes backwards letters—the contents were enough to knock Dan on his arse.

Too:  Free an  Grucky

Yall mite hav you a dam proBlem. Won gud tern an all a that. Loock into:

-Brutherhud of  Ifemra

-Burnard Burns, MatheW+Ashly Hullem, Jole Hayman

-Railmen murder, LovelockNeV.Addum, Jaims, Broos (itWas NOT""""VagaBond""""shit NO MATTER WUT ANY BODY SAYED I NO BETER )

-This dam thing fi yall seent  it:

And then a symbol, clumsily drawn: infinity cut with a (backwards) diagonal slash.

Cud Be nothin But I Wont my mony Back if yall ignor it an  pet killt .

Jones.

Ps An yall are luckie I sint yall any tihngBecus yall Were RONG (it Wus not GOLD it Wus SILVEReven if it Wus Wear yall sayed) let aloene 3 holl dolars so Do Not Come Plain.

Jones.
"Good grief," Dan said. He handed over the letter. "Look at this, B."

Gav's eyebrows climbed up to his hairline. "Good grief." And then, as his face went slack and his eye went wide, "Good grief."

"And these paper clippings—they're all to do with the business at the Théâtre, it's got to be three or four different articles—and he's gone through and circled bits! How'd he get these, all the bloody way out there?"

"C'est quoi tout ces bavardages?" Casimir asked, picking his way back from the kitchen again.

"Sorry," said Gav, turning to him. "We've just had some very strange correspondence. There's this fellow in America, made something of a name for himself by—well, look, you know the Vagabond case?"

Casimir blinked and shook his head. He settled on the arm of the couch, looking between the two of them. "No. Who or what is a Vagabond?"

"Technically, it was a who, but no one would blame you for saying what," said Dan. "Man by the name of Haywood posed as a sheriff's deputy and killed at least five, possibly as many as twelve people across three states."

Casimir recoiled. "Twelve people?"

"I know, it's horrific. It's not even like he just shot them, either; apparently he did some unprintably profane things to the bodies. I'd call him a lunatic, but it'd be a disgrace to proper madmen."

"For the record, most sensible people don't think it was twelve," Gav put in. "The safer money's on five or six."

"Apparently he claimed upwards of fifty, but nobody believes that. That sort's always stroking themselves."

"Trying to distract from how utterly pathetic they actually are. Anyway, Jones—another deputy—caught and hanged him, and the papers went absolutely wild over it. They've been hounding him ever since, and we've been keeping an—keeping up with his work, just to see if he lives up to himself. We might've sent him a little nudge of help on a case, and apparently he's decided to nudge back."

"I see," said Casimir. "Is that why you seem so startled?"

"That's putting it mildly, I'm shaken to my damn roots," said Dan. "He must've had some—some mix-up with some cult or other, and thinks it might be the same one we've run up against. And frankly, I think he's onto something, because I've seen that symbol before, or something like it. It was painted on the back of the set at the Théâtre."

Gav frowned at the letter, reading it over again. "That's . . . unpleasant. I think we'd better follow this up, Dan. I think we'd better follow this up right away."

"Would you care for some assistance?" said Casimir.

"If you're willing to provide it. I'm at a bit of a loss as to where to even start."
"I might have an idea or two, but—do you think I could keep the letter? For reference, that's all; I should hate to dig too deeply in the wrong spot, as it were."

"It's in English."

"I'm sure I can make do."

"Have it, then," said Gav, passing it over. Casimir took it from him gingerly, folded it back up, and tucked it into his breast pocket.

"Casimir, when was the last time you ate anything?" Dan asked.

He looked down at his trembling hands. Clasping them on his thigh, he flashed a smile.

"I may have forgotten my breakfast," he said.

"Forgotten, or substituted with alcohol?"

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

"Honestly," said Gav, rolling his eye. "I don't know how you live like this."

"It has its charms. Regardless, we can cover more ground if we split up. Perhaps you and Daniel should come at it from the aboveboard angle, while I see what I can find from underneath."

"Do you really think any of your contacts will know anything about an American cult?" Gav asked.

"I don't know; perhaps it has international branches."

"I suppose Peake did manage to rope in a fair number of locals. Certainly someone on the underside of society would be more likely to know about it than someone up top."

"There; you've found your way to my line of thinking exactly."

"All right, but before any of that," said Dan. "I'd like to have my tea, and you, Casimir, are going to eat a real breakfast, and we're all going to sit down and make a solid plan for how to go about this without drawing undue attention to ourselves. Right?"

"Right," said Gav, sobering. "Right. Yes. The last thing we need is attention. It's been damnably odd behaviour from all of us for quite some time, someone's bound to notice if they take it into their heads to look. We'll just . . . hope nobody's had that idea yet."

"If the paper's to be believed, popular opinion has it that we've just got cold feet about the whole thing. That, at least, there's precedent for."

Gav bristled. "I've never gotten cold feet in my life!"

"B, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but they've never been warm."

"I think perhaps Daniel refers to the aftermath of Christophe's death, correct?" Casimir said. "A certain leave of absence following the appearance of, how shall I put it, profaned remains is to be expected. Ridiculed, perhaps, but expected. There are certain angles from which even the truth is not inherently incriminating."

"Let's avoid it, nonetheless," said Dan. "Still, it might benefit us to pay the police a visit, if one or the other of us can think up a good enough reason why we've been missing for nearly two weeks."
"And why we haven't come back in one piece," Gav muttered, picking at the splint on his wrist.

"That—could be a perfectly serviceable excuse, though, couldn't it! Look, we'll work it out over tea. It'll be all right, Gav."

Gav took a deep breath and sighed it out again.

"When all else fails, at least we've still got tea," he said.

"My God!" Lieutenant Durant cried, leaping from his chair. "Where in the hell have you two been? And what's happened to you?"

With a wince, Gav held up his uninjured hand. "All in good time, Lieutenant. Our leave of absence, though unfortunate, was necessary; and I assure you, there's a perfectly good explanation."

"I should hope so! I'll have you know I have no less than three—three!—witnesses who place you at the same whorehouse where Brouillard was last seen, on the very night he was last seen!"

"Yes, witness testimony can be shockingly unreliable, can't it," said Gav. "Shall we sit?"

Durant fumed, but settled back into his chair. Gav sat down across from him, and Dan followed suit.

"It is only due to a profound respect for your reputation that I am not already having you arrested," Durant said through his teeth, "so this had better be good."

"Lieutenant, it is, as they say, airtight," said Gav. "But first: are you a discreet man?"

"Only in that it is up to my discretion whom I shall arrest."

"Point taken. Then I'll cut straight to the chase: I was at a certain gentlemen's club on the night of the latest murder, from approximately ten o'clock on the night of the 30th to just past six in the morning on May the first, and there are no less than twelve people who can confirm it."

"Are there," Durant said flatly.

"Disappointing, I know, but I can give you their names and addresses, if you require them."

"Yes, I certainly do."

Without missing a beat, Gav plucked up a pen from Durant's desk. "May I?"

Begrudgingly, Durant fished out a piece of paper and shoved it at him. Gav wrote out the list and passed it back.

"There you are. Feel free to contact any or all of them."

"Hmph. And what, dare I ask, were you doing at this gentlemen's club?"

"Detective work, Lieutenant Durant. One of their regulars has made himself suspicious, especially as regards this mess with the theatre troupe."

"His name?"
“Dubois.”

Durant shut his eyes and rubbed his temple. Despite everything, Dan found himself biting back a smile.

“I see you know the man,” he said. “You’ve been on his trail, as well?”

“He has made himself suspicious before,” said Durant, guarded. “He has also made a habit of seducing my officers—or bribing them, whichever happens to be more inconvenient at the time. Some days I almost miss Gabriel.”

“Such a shame you fired her,” said Gav. “I’ll add bribing and seducing police officers to my list of suspicious behaviour from Mr Dubois, that’s a good one.”

“Hardly the most suspicious I’ve seen. What happened to your eye and your wrist?”

Gav stiffened. “That’s a rather personal question, Lieutenant.”

“Personally, I think they look like defensive wounds.”

“One could call it that. Do you remember Mr Peake, of the theatre troupe?”

“Vaguely.”

“We ran into him a few nights ago. He tried to kill us, presumably because we’re getting too close to catching him. We’ve been laying low ever since.”

“Where?”

“The Croc Blanc Chapel, in Saint-Ouen.”

“Can anyone confirm this?”

“Several people, including my physician, Dr Franklin Dufresne. I can add his information to your list, if you would like.”

“Add all of them,” said Durant, pushing the paper back at him. Gav complied. Durant watched him like a hawk, tight-jawed and scowling.

“And there you are again,” Gav said. “Is there anything else, Lieutenant, or may we be on our way? We only stopped by to assure you that we weren’t dead or on the run.”

“I ought to detain you,” Durant said under his breath, reading over the list. “Until we’ve spoken to every one of your witnesses. Have you a lawyer?”

“One can be gotten,” said Dan, because Gav had gone pale as milk and was clenching his fist in his lap. “Are you detaining us, Lieutenant?”

Durant drummed his fingers on the desk. He chewed his tongue. He wrinkled his nose at the list and slapped it down on the table.

“Not today,” he ground out. “But if I can’t find you the next time I come looking for you, regardless of where you’ve gone, I will put out a warrant. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir, perfectly clear,” said Dan. “Thank you for your trust. We won’t betray it.”
"Something damnably strange is going on, and the only thing I like less than a murder is a strange one. I hold out some faint hope that leaving you loose will get this mess solved more quickly than locking you up, if only because it will be easier for you to incriminate yourselves when loose. It would be quite a feather in my cap, if I were to catch the Nose of London for the most sensational string of murders Paris has ever seen."

"You'd make Captain for certain," Gav drawled, though his fist was white-knuckled in his lap. "Since we aren't being detained, we'll be on our way. Keep in touch, Lieutenant. We ought to have your mess cleaned up for you soon. Good afternoon."

Durant turned red. Gav got to his feet and Dan followed suit.

"Good afternoon," Durant growled. "I will be in touch."

"We look forward to it. Come along, Gruchy; much to be done."

About six blocks from Casimir's flat, Gav broke down.

Dan tugged him into an alleyway before he became a complete shivering wreck, but it was a close run thing. For several minutes, he could scarcely stand on his own, wracked by breathless tremors and weeping. Dan held him up by his elbows, speaking softly and keeping an eye on the end of the alleyway.

"All right, that's all right, B, let it out. The hard part's done with. I'm sure Casimir will convince his friends to seal our alibi, it'll be all right."

Gav shook his head. Between gasping breaths, he choked out, "We've ruined them."

"Not a bit! I don't even know how you got round to thinking that."

"He'll go looking. The police—they'll find—everything, they'll find out everything. They'll be—arrested, or—or outed, or—we've ruined them, we've ruined the whole damn..."

"Easy, B, take it easy. It won't be the first time they've had police come poking round, and it won't be the last. I'm sure they know how to take care of themselves, especially since they know what's coming. Casimir wouldn't have agreed to it if there was that much risk of collateral damage."

Even as the words left Dan's mouth, he was already kicking himself. He had no idea if that was true or not—and indeed, now that he'd said it aloud, it ran approximately perpendicular to everything he knew about Casimir.

"Or at least," he amended, "he's got a lot tied up in that place, and the people in it, and I doubt he'd risk losing all those assets just for us. Look, let's just get back, and have a cup of tea, and... regroup. Nothing's gone off plan yet. We're all right."

Gav pulled himself together, sucking down deep breaths through his nose and clutching Dan's wrists.

"We... we were meant to go looking for things, though," he said at last. "About—Jones' cult."

"And we can do that after we've got our heads together. You're in no state to be doing research."

"No, I—I want to, though. It'll help. To have something else to focus on."
"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure."

"All right. Where do we start?"

Gav took a deep breath and let it out again. His face smoothed, shoulders dropped, back straightened. He raised his head and, like a lens adjusted by the most experienced hand, came back into focus.

"We're going to need a lot of American newspapers," he said.
"You're not going to believe what we've turned up," Gav said, barging into Casimir's flat like he owned the place. Dan trailed behind, carrying a towering stack of newspapers in his arms. It obstructed his view so much that he bumped right into Gav and sent the whole thing cascading to the floor.

"Damn it all—! Sorry, I'll get that. Carry on."

"Er," said Gav. "Good afternoon."

The puzzlement in his voice carried a note of wariness. Dan's hand froze halfway to picking up one of the papers. He looked up and took in the state of the flat.

The older gentleman from the Ravin Rouge was sitting in Casimir's armchair. Casimir, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Good afternoon," the gentleman said pleasantly, in English. He had an Oxford accent. His hands were empty, his posture relaxed. There was an open bottle of white wine and three empty glasses on the table in front of him. His cloud-grey suit was pressed, his shoes shined, his hair and moustache immaculately groomed.

"I think we've met before," said Dan, straightening up slowly. "Lucien, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," he said, twinkling. "And you, of course, are Mr Gavin Free and Corporal Daniel Gruchy, whose reputations precede you. It's a pleasure, truly."

"The pleasure's all ours, I'm sure," said Gav.

Something queasy swirled in Dan's stomach, stirred up by the mention of his rank. Lucien was watching Gav much too intently, a fact to which Gav seemed oblivious. Dan eased himself between the two of them, drawing Lucien's attention.

"Er, might I ask," he said, "where's Dubois gone?"

"Haven't the foggiest," said Lucien. "I was waiting for him to come back. You're welcome to wait with me, if you're so inclined."

Dan glanced at Gav. "I'm sure we wouldn't want to intrude. We could come back later, when it's more convenient."

"Nonsense. I've heard so much about you, I'd be remiss if I didn't get to know you better. Come, sit. Have a drink with me."

"I don't really—"

Gav stepped round Dan and crossed to the couch, where he flopped down like a feckless youth. Lucien poured out a glass of wine and offered it to him. Gav took it.

"Cheers, thanks," he said. "GrUCHy, don't just stand there like a lummox, come and sit."

"Are—are you sure?" said Dan, glancing between him and Lucien. "I really don't think we ought to intrude, if he's got private business with Dubois."
"It isn't business and it's certainly not private," said Lucien. "Come come, I insist. To amend for the discourtesy of our last encounter, Corporal Gruchy."

"Oh dear, was he discourteous?" Gav said. "Tsk tsk, Gruchy, I can't take you anywhere."

"Rest assured, Mr Free, there was discourtesy from both sides. I certainly shouldn't have suffered it if it had been unwarranted."

Gav sipped his wine. It went down smooth as silk. "I should hope not! He really can be such a brute sometimes."

"I'm just going to pick all this up," Dan said slowly, unsure what Gav was getting at and wary of screwing it up. "You two carry on, I'll join you shortly."

"Very well," Lucien sighed, as Dan set about picking up the newspapers all over the floor. "So, Mr Free, I've heard a great deal about you, but I must say I'm dying to hear it from the horse's mouth, as it were. One can never tell what's factual and what's wild exaggeration, when it comes to dear Casimir."

Gav snorted. "Isn't that the truth. I do hope the fanciful portrait he's painted of us has at least been flattering."

"Oh, immensely," Lucien assured him. "He has a great fondness for detectives. He's quite taken with you."

"He seems to have a great fondness for many people."

Lucien waved a hand. "Dalliances, a dime a dozen. I don't recall his exact words—there are so often so many of them—but I'm sure genius has been used upon many occasions, and at least twice he's referred to you as the greatest mind of our time."

"Oh, well," said Gav, blushing. He had another sip of his drink. "There's an exaggeration if ever I've heard one."

"Not at all! There's a reason you're London's Golden Boy, after all. Why, if you keep it up, you'll be a national treasure!"

"Stop, really, you're too much."

"I'm only repeating what the papers have said—on their favourable days, of course. The Press is a fickle mistress."

"Don't I know it. I suppose you've seen the tripe they've been running recently."

"Oh yes. It's a large part of why I'm here. I was intending to ask Casimir if he knew what had become of you—and what luck, for here you are in the flesh!"

Dan finished stacking the papers up and set them against the back of the couch so they wouldn't topple over again. He seated himself next to Gav, although he couldn't get between him and Lucien.

"Ah, Corporal Gruchy, so good of you to join us," said Lucien. He took up the wine, poured a glass, and offered it. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thank you, and it's Mr Gruchy, if you don't mind."

Lucien's eyebrows raised. "Mr Gruchy, really? And how did that come about? Surely, you weren't
stripped of your rank when you were discharged."

"I stripped myself of it, for the sake of a cleaner separation."

"Ah, an army divorcee," said Lucien, twinkling. "They must have treated you rather poorly. I hope at least you managed to wring a healthy alimony from them."

"Healthy enough, and completely none of your business."

"There's no need to be rude," said Gav. "Settle down, Gruchy. We're all friends here."

"I don't know that I agree with that."

"You really are being unmanageable today." He turned to Lucien, apologetic. "Honestly, I don't know what's got into him."

"Really? This seems par for the course, so far as I've seen."

"Tsk! Then you really weren't joking about that discourtesy, were you?"

"Not a bit. I'd hoped we could get off on a better foot—or at least, a better lubricated one."

He offered the drink again. Gav touched it with the knuckles of his splinted hand and pushed it back towards Lucien.

"He doesn't drink," he said, with just the faintest hint of annoyance in his voice. "So that may be part of your problem. Improper lubrication can be worse than none, you know."

"Ah, but of course," said Lucien. He sipped the wine. Dan swallowed reflexively and clenched his fists. "More for the rest of us, hm?"

"You know, speaking of Dubois, I'm surprised he's been talking about us," Dan said, before they could go on talking about drinks any longer. "He's said next to nothing about you."

"As he should!" Lucien chortled.

"What he did mention wasn't at all flattering."

"Gruchy," Gav warned.

Lucien quirked an eyebrow. "No? I'm curious, what did he say?"

"Only that you were an opportunist," said Gav, before Dan could answer. "Which, while not exactly complimentary, isn't nearly as awful as Gruchy makes it out to be."

"It certainly isn't wrong, I'll give him that. I like to pick up little . . . projects, here and there. Casimir was one, and he's come along fabulously. I'm quite pleased with my work on him, but I do like to keep my eyes open for further opportunities. Ah, speaking of which—if it isn't too forward, Mr Free, I wanted to extend you an offer."

The slightest frown creased Gav's forehead. He lowered his glass halfway to taking a sip.

"What sort of offer?" he asked.

"Well, one can't help but notice that you've run upon certain misfortunes, of a sort that, by conventional methods, would be irreparable. I simply wished to acquaint you with the idea that other
methods are available, which may have a much higher success rate."

"Are there?" said Gav, sitting forward.

"What sort of methods are these?" Dan asked.

"Innovative medicine, Mr Gruchy. Techniques on the very forefront of science! You've seen, I presume, the miracles we've worked for poor Casimir's hand?"

"The one that's still missing two fingers?"

"Yes, the very same! The burns were quite horrific. I'm sure you've seen that, apart from some superficial scarring, the hand functions beautifully, now."

Dan folded his arms and sat back. "And yet, your miracle science hasn't managed to get his fingers back. Doesn't exactly instil confidence that you can replace an eye."

"Gruchy, can't you keep your mouth shut for one bloody minute?" Gav snapped.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, please," said Lucien, raising a hand, smiling a quiet little smile under his perfectly groomed moustache. "I don't mean to be the bringer of strife. Obviously, this is an immensely important and personal decision for Mr Free, and not one he should be expected to make instantaneously or on faith alone. I'll give you my card, and you can respond at your leisure—although a greater span of time between injury and reconstruction may complicate the matter."

"Yes, thank you," said Gav, glaring daggers at Dan. "I think I would appreciate that very much."

Lucien produced a card and handed it over while Dan seethed. Gav tucked it away in his pocket and had a deep drink of his wine.

"Do feel free to call at any time," Lucien said. "I am never too busy for a friend in need."

"I appreciate that. We're somewhat short of friends just now."

"Dear oh dear, your misfortunes abound! Well, if there's any way I can be of assistance, do please let me know."

Gav hesitated, then said, "Perhaps there is, actually."

"I am at your service, Mr Free."

"Do you know the Vagabond case?"

"Yes, of course. I followed it quite closely."

"Free, are you sure this is wise?" Dan hissed.

"It so happens we've tracked down some startling inconsistencies with the case," Gav said anyway. "I know you're a worldly man; you wouldn't happen to know anything about a Brotherhood of Ephemera, would you? Only it seems that at least three of the Vagabond killings weren't his doing at all."

"Really? I never saw anything about that in the papers."
"You wouldn't have. The Press are not only vultures, they're morons. All of the confirmed victims of the Vagabond, you see, were disembowelled and skinned—sensible, since the man came out to be a tanner by trade. These three, though, the three that don't fit, were embalmed and, according to the local papers, arranged. They were prime candidates for a Vagabond killing—young, in good health, on the wrong side of the law—but the methodology is all wrong. Jones picked up on it, but I don't know how no one else has."

"That is odd," said Lucien. "Still, what ties it back to this brotherhood you mentioned?"

"Only Jones. I couldn't find a single word about them in the papers. He seems to think it's something to do with an oil magnate, a banker, a mining entrepreneur and his wife, but the only real connection between them is that three of the four were murdered by the Vagabond."

"And the fourth?"

"Also murdered, probably by his ex-wife—who went on to become the miner's wife before they were both murdered."

"Nothing but dead ends, it seems," said Lucien, twinkling.

Gav rolled his eyes. "Hah-hah, very good. The crux of it is that, since Jones was obviously right about those three deaths not being the Vagabond's work, I'm inclined to think he's not wrong about the new-money twits and the cult, though hard-pressed to work out how he knows any of it."

"Still, I've yet to hear anything that warrants such an enthusiastic introduction as bursting through the door."

"Oh, that," said Gav, blushing. "Well—"

"Are you really sure this is wise, Free?" Dan cut in, unable to hold his tongue any longer. "This is sensitive information and we've known this man for all of five minutes."

"Ten, in your case," Lucien said cheerily.

Gav waved a hand and sipped his drink. "It's nothing that can't be worked out from looking at a few newspapers. What it comes down to is this: Jones must have figured, one way or another, that the three odd deaths were the cult's work; otherwise he wouldn't have mentioned them in the same breath. What's fascinating about it is, one of the victims just so happens to have the same last name as the mysterious widow from Nevada who is co-owner of the Théâtre des Variétés."

Before Lucien could give more than a low whistle, the door to the flat opened. Dan turned just in time to see the tail end of the expression on Casimir's face before, like the door swinging shut behind him, it was occluded by his customary courtesy.

It had been one of fear.

"Lucien, my prince, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waiting for you, of course!" said Lucien, getting to his feet. His French was exactly as smooth and precise as his English. "And here you are, at last. Don't worry, I took it upon myself to play host for your friends. One mustn't leave the poor things to their own devices, who knows what they might get into."

The corner of Casimir's mouth twitched. "I appreciate you extending your hospitality on my behalf, but I should hate to keep them if you have business with me."
"Why so? Mr Free has been telling me all about his latest progress in your investigations. I'm afraid I haven't been much help, but it's fascinating stuff. I'm sure he wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes while you and I have our little chat. It would be terribly inconvenient to ask him to leave."

"I would think that depends greatly on the size and caliber of the chat."

"Smaller and less painful than you expect. Think Derringer, not Colt."

Casimir's eyes darted. "Then perhaps the balcony?"

"I find the balcony amenable. Come."

He beckoned and slipped to the French window, which he held open for Casimir. When Lucien went out, he tugged the curtains nearly all the way closed behind him. The window drifted to, but did not close all the way.

Gav sipped his wine, thumbing through an invisible newspaper with his eye closed. Dan spared only a single breath on indecision before inching down to the other side of the couch, where he could peer through the gap in the curtains. He got there just in time to see Lucien grab Casimir by the hair and kiss him.

Casimir fought. Lucien gripped his arm, tightened the hand in his hair and forced him deeper into the kiss. Dan went hot from toe to tip, though he couldn't tell if it was with embarrassment or disgust. It was only when Casimir stopped fighting, when he went still and docile, that Lucien pulled away.

"Better," he said. "You continually forget yourself, and it's becoming tiresome."

"We're in public," Casimir said miserably. His voice shook.

"And it matters not an ounce. You know I'll take care of you, darling, you needn't worry."

"Don't call me that," Casimir snapped, bristling.

Lucien took him by the arms and, when he struggled, shoved him up against the railing so hard he yelped.

"Unless you want me to humiliate you in front of the entire Champs Élysées, you'll stop struggling," he said: gentle, matter-of-fact. "Even your voice will carry down to the street from here, and people do love a spectacle. Is that what you want? To be made a spectacle?"

Casimir shook his head, mute and trembling.

"Use your words."

"No, sir," Casimir croaked.

Lucien kissed him again. Casimir remained stiff as a board, his hands clenched to fists on empty air.

"That's what I like to hear," Lucien said. "Good boys get rewards, darling. You want to be good, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Dan glanced over his shoulder at Gav.

"Oy," he hissed. "Are you bloody hearing this?"
"I'm working, Dan, don't distract me," said Gav, waving a hand.

"But—"

"Later."

Grinding his teeth, Dan turned his attention back to the balcony. Casimir had managed to halfway extract himself from Lucien's grasp, cringing and pathetic.

"I asked you to stay away from them," he was saying, so choked up that he might have been crying. "You said you'd stay away from them!"

"My darling, for someone so bright, you can be so unfathomably stupid," Lucien said fondly. "I took your request to heart, of course I did—but at the end of the day, it was, after all, just a request. You've toed the line of your own no-contact order, so I thought I'd return the favour. One good turn, and all of that."

Casimir swallowed. Lucien smiled and kissed him on the lips.

"Just remember that I love you very much, my little rook. Please don't make it come to discipline, I really do detest having to do it."

"You won't have to," Casimir said, keeping his eyes down.

This was rewarded with another kiss. "Very good. Now, while you have been naughty, I won't ask you to make it up to me until after your friends have gone. But—and this is very important, pay attention—you must in return promise not to interfere in my friends' business. I don't mind if they get themselves into trouble, of course, but I really can't have you contributing. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. So long as you can keep that promise, my recompense will remain strictly between the two of us, even unto future mistakes."

Casimir mumbled something that sounded unpleasantly like a thank-you. Lucien took his chin and, however gently, forced him to meet his eyes.

"Tell me that you love me, darling," he murmured.

"I love you," Casimir said woodenly. Lucien's fingers dug into his jaw.

"As though you mean it."

Casimir took a deep breath. "I love you," he said.

To his credit, he really did sound like he meant it.

"Beautiful," said Lucien. "I'll see you soon, my little rook. Try not to do anything foolish while I'm away. Once I can forgive; twice I will punish; and three times—let's not get to a third time, hm?"

Casimir said nothing. Lucien kissed him one last time, patted his cheek, and came back inside. Dan scrambled to look as though he hadn't been eavesdropping.

"Well, it's getting on, and I've many places to be," Lucien said. "Mr Free, Mr Gruchy, it was lovely meeting you both. Perhaps I'll see you again soon."
"Are you leaving already?" Gav asked, sounding disappointed.

"Alas, I must. Our dear Casimir kept me waiting for nearly an hour."

"Typical."

"Entirely! Still, he has his charms. Good afternoon, gentlemen. Do take care."

"You as well, sir," said Dan, barely keeping a lid on his revulsion. "Good afternoon."

Lucien collected his hat and coat. On the threshold, he turned back. "Oh, and Free, do think about my offer, won't you?"

"I will. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," he said, twinkling at him. "'Til next time, everyone."

He walked out. The door closed behind him. Casimir slunk in from the balcony, shutting the French window and the curtains. Dan gave it to the count of ten before he spoke.

"Casimir," he said, "if you would like me to kill that man, I'll do it tonight."

"Dan!" Gav cried, scandalized.

"No, you won't, and don't say such things," Casimir said. He dropped himself into the armchair, swept up the bottle of wine, and took a hearty gulp. "Lucien is a very dear friend and a very generous benefactor. He's had an exceptional amount of patience with me, disastrous as I am."

"It didn't look friendly or generous. It looked—vile."

Casimir raised an eyebrow. "Eavesdropping, Daniel?"

"Well—well, I mean—it's only—" Dan sputtered, going red and hot and slimy. Casimir waved him off, taking another swig from the bottle.

"If you saw, you were meant to," he said. "Lucien doesn't do carelessness."

"Of course he bloody doesn't," Dan muttered under his breath, in English. Back in French, he said, "At the very least, you're not taking him up on that offer, B."

Gav scowled at him. "Come off it."

"There, I'm afraid, we stand in agreement," Casimir said. "I would not recommend it."

"And why not?"

"Did he mention a price?"

"No."

"That's because it's more than you can afford."

"What, does it require selling my soul?"

"Yes," said Casimir, and drank again.

"I don't see the trouble with that. I've more use for an eye than a soul."
"For God's sake, what's wrong with you?" Dan burst out.

"What's wrong with me? You're the one who's been rude for no reason. And eavesdropping, to boot!"

"Any other day, you'd have been right there dropping eaves with me!"

"It's not any other damn day, though, is it, Gruchy? You're jeopardizing——"

"What, your opportunity to get fucking conned?"

Gav stiffened, ground his teeth, and turned to Casimir.

"Cassie, my sweet, did you manage to find anything out from the underside of society?" he asked, ever so prim and delicate.

Casimir had yet another swig of wine. He turned sideways in the chair, draping his legs over one arm and resting his elbow on the other.

"Nothing," he said to the bottle. "I chased down every rabbit hole I could find. All empty."

"Really?"

"Sincerely and truthfully."

"That's disappointing, but no matter. We've found enough interesting tidbits for three. If, of course, you're not too busy getting drunk to hear them."

"I can do both at once."

Before Gav could detail their findings again, a knock came at the door. Casimir heaved a sigh and let his head fall back.

"God's blood, what now?" he groaned. Gav made a face. Dan got to his feet.

"I'll get it," he said. "But only on the condition that you, Casimir, put that damn bottle away."

Casimir grumbled something unintelligible, but he did stuff the cork back in the bottle and tuck it under the chair. Dan fixed his face, tamped down his temper, and answered the door.

There, wearing a marigold-yellow dress and an inscrutably sharp expression, was Gabriel.

"Hello, Gruchy," she said. "Fancy meeting you here."
The Grand Summing Up

Dan gawped.

"You look surprised," said Gabriel. "Didn't you get my telegram?"

"I—well, I must've—"

"Left it under the door of your hotel room, along with nearly two weeks' worth of papers and not a single indication of where you might've gone, yes. Do you think I could come in?"

Dan could do nothing but stand aside. Gabriel strode past him and planted herself in the middle of Casimir's sitting room like she was planning on redecorating. Her gaze snagged on Gav, on his eyepatch and the splint on his wrist and the hand clenched white-knuckled in his lap. Though she faltered, she pushed past it without comment. Casimir got to his feet, wide-eyed and pale.

"I'm tremendously excited to hear how you've been getting on with the James case," Gabriel continued. "You must've found some very juicy leads, to have not been back to your hotel in such a long time. You'll have to tell me all about it."

Casimir recovered first. He glided out and took up Gabriel's hand to kiss the air above her knuckles.

"Detective Gabriel," he said. "It is such a pleasure to see you again."

"The sentiment is mutual," she said, like she could slit his throat with words alone.

He smiled a taut little smile. "Could I offer you something to drink? Tea, perhaps?"

"Tea would be lovely, thank you."

"Of what kind? There is an assortment."

"Rooibos, if you have it."

"I'm happy to report that we do. Please, make yourself at home, and I will bring it to you posthaste."

As he slipped into the kitchen, she called after him, "I would prefer it not poisoned, if possible."

Casimir smiled that tight little smile again, regarding her over his shoulder with eyes like broken glass.

"Well," he said affably, "if you insist."

"Gabriel, really," said Dan, while Casimir busied himself with the kettle.

She folded her arms and raised her eyebrows at him. "So, while we wait, would you like to tell me what's been going on?"

"Er. . . ."

"Or," she said, clipped and flinty, "I could start. I could start with your insanely suspicious letter. I could start with what I've been reading in the papers about this nightmare of a case. But I think where I'd like to start is with Casimir Lazare Dubois, who, up until five months ago, simply did not exist."
Dan's heart skipped a beat. Gav frowned, eyes darting between Casimir and Gabriel. In the kitchen, the kettle began to rumble.

"Oh, please do start there," said Casimir, smiling away. "I'm on the edge of my figurative seat."

"I would encourage you to keep quiet, sir," Gabriel said icily. "I don't know by what manipulations you've strung these two along, but I know they're not going to hold much longer, and Mr Gruchy has a temper."

"Hang on, one moment, I—I think there must have been some mistake," Gav said.

"There have been several," she said, never taking her eyes off Casimir. "I have not been idle while you've been away, Mr Free. I knew there was something off about this man the moment I set eyes on him. It was simply a matter of gathering enough hard evidence to make anyone believe me."

Casimir leaned a hip on the kitchen counter and folded his arms, still smiling, still sharp and glittering.

"Let her speak, Mr Free," he said, as intent upon her as she was on him. "The detective has earned her grand summing-up."

Gabriel's lip curled. "How very courteous of you. The fact of the matter, gentlemen, is that Mr Dubois is not only a liar and a fraud, but a murderer of the most vile and vicious caste, who brought you back to France for the sole purpose of playing his sick little games with you. What better sport than to lead the detectives round on a string while committing his grisly murders right under their noses?"

"Gabriel, listen, you've got this all wrong," said Dan, pleading.

"No, Gruchy, with all due respect, it is your turn to listen. We will begin at the beginning, on the twenty-fourth of January, 1887, when Mr Dubois opened his bank account and officially popped into existence."

Casimir stayed where he was, lit from within by an inner flame that Dan had only glimpsed before. On the sofa, Gav clenched his hands and trembled, silently pleading with Dan to intervene. He was given no time to do so, however, as Gabriel was at full steam and showed no signs of slowing.

"Prior to that date," she went on, "there is absolutely no record of anyone by his name, anywhere. His first deposit was a round sum of five hundred thousand francs. Two days later, he signed the lease on this flat, to officially move in the following week. The address he lists as his previous residence, much like Mr Dubois himself, is entirely made-up; a swath of empty field in the French countryside. The man he lists as his character reference may exist—although the only Lucien Faye I could find anywhere in the vicinity of Cambridge is, in fact, a professor of mathematics at Oxford and not even remotely wealthy, so I suspect this is entirely coincidental."

"Gracious, you have been thorough," said Casimir.

"All of which I uncovered the first time I looked into him, when I was still working for the Paris police. Nobody else cared and I was forced to drop it when I quit, but even an inch of deeper digging turns up some fascinating curiosities. Like the twice-monthly deposits to his bank account, each in the amount of five thousand francs, all in cash. Or the hundreds of cheques he has written over the past five months to dozens of different young men. Or the summer home in Marseille that belongs, not to him, not to any Mr Faye, but to an old Polish widow, who died suddenly in mid-February, and whose will left absolutely everything to her granddaughter—whom nobody could find. Shall I keep
going, Mr Dubois, or would you like to start talking?"

"I am so desperately fond of the sound of my own voice, I fear I would never stop," he drawled. "Please, continue. Your story is fascinating, if irrelevant."

"It is anything but. I found the Polish widow's granddaughter, Mr Dubois; and so did Mr Brouillard. Indeed, he must have found her very much to his liking, because he visited her with some frequency while he was in Paris. Her name is Teodozia Brzezicki, although you would most likely know her as Theo. Somewhat less frequently than Mr Brouillard, but certainly more than once."

Casimir went chilly. "Theo isn't anyone's granddaughter, Detective Gabriel. He is a lonely young man with a good heart, and he deserves better than to be constantly assailed by notions of womanhood."

"Up to and including men like Mr Brouillard?"

"Especially," said Casimir, showing teeth, "men like Mr Brouillard."

"Your capacity for hypocrisy is truly astonishing. I won't accuse you of being in love with her—some things are beyond disbelief and stray into impossibility. What I do know is that you, Mr Dubois, are a parasite, and Miss Brzezicki was ripe for the sucking. You got hold of that will, decided you wanted what it promised, and set about getting it. You didn't speak enough Polish to pretend to be Miss Brzezicki, so you had to earn her favour instead. The only bit I haven't worked out is whether she asked you to kill Brouillard, or—"

In one smooth motion, Casimir drew a revolver and levelled it at her head.

"I think that will do," he said.

Dan leapt to his feet. "Good God!"

"Cassie!" Gav cried.

"Silence and stillness, please," said Casimir. His gaze was fixed on Gabriel. His hand was rock-steady. "I should hate for my finger to slip."

Gabriel stared him down, drawn up to her full height and taut with fury. If Dan had been an inch farther away, he would not have been able to see her hands shaking.

"So which was it?" she asked. "Did she ask you to, or did you make up your own mind?"

Casimir shrugged. "He was a vile man and a vicious bigot. I simply decided that he ought to die."

"Curiously, I think the courts' decision will be very similar when it comes to you," Gabriel retorted.

"Oh, undoubtedly. But I must know, detective: how did you know Brouillard was dead? The disposal, you see, left very few distinctive pieces."

"You're not nearly so clever as you think you are. They identified him by a tattoo on his shoulder—what was left of it."

"So, you still have some friends in the police," Casimir remarked. "Interesting to note."

Gabriel stiffened. She clenched her fists, breathed deeply, kept her voice level. "What about James?"

"Chad? A dreadfully tiresome and clingy fellow. I couldn't get rid of him civilly, so I had to resort to
drastic measures to gain some peace and quiet."

"His wife?"

"Intent on killing me. I couldn't possibly share Paris with her."

"And their children."

"Witnesses."

"How very practical you are. Are you going to shoot me, or not?"

"I haven't made up my mind," he said with a smile.

"You will not," Dan snapped, rage and terror boiling up his throat in equal measure.

Casimir made a face, waggled his head, and pointed the revolver at the ceiling.

"And now I have decided," he said. "I hope you will forgive me, however, if I further decide to refuse the executioner his satisfaction."

He tucked the muzzle under his jaw. Dan lunged for him, much too late. Gabriel sucked in a breath.

Gav leapt from his chair, blurtling, "I killed Brouillard!"

Echoes rang off the walls of the flat, trailing silence. Dan's knees gave out. He caught himself on the armchair, dizzy and sick. Gav stood trembling, sheer panic written in every line of his face.

"I did it," he said, pleading. "I did it, me, and—Cassie didn't kill any of the Jameses, he wasn't anywhere near them when any of it happened, now—stop this whole stupid charade, please. Please. No more."

The fire died in Casimir. His shoulders slumped. He uncocked the gun and slapped it down on the kitchen counter.

"Idiot," he spat.

With nothing more than that, he turned on his heel and fished out a bottle of wine from the cabinets, from which he proceeded to guzzle a truly unwise amount.

"Would someone," said Gabriel, strained to her last nerve, "care to tell me, please, exactly what the hell is going on here?"

Dan sank into the armchair. He put his head in his hands and let out a helpless laugh.

"You'd better sit down," he said. "It's a long damn story."

Gabriel sat quietly through the whole thing. She never spoke a word, never gave any indication of her thoughts or opinions. Her face remained stony. Although it was only Dan who spoke, she watched all three of them with equal attention—Dan while he talked; Gav, who was waxen with fear and shame; and Casimir, who had gotten extremely drunk.

"So that's . . . essentially all of it," Dan concluded. "And I know how insane it all sounds, I didn't
believe it either, but—"

Gabriel held up a hand. Dan bit his tongue. Casimir drained his glass, which at some point had transitioned from wine to gin.

"Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly," Gabriel said. "You're saying that Free, when he was kidnapped by Mr Peake and the theatre troupe, was summarily possessed by the same entity which, you claim, also possessed Christophe Demarais and murdered him at Mr Brouillard's instruction. This slaughter, you believe, was bought with the murder of Mr Luna—because you believe the theatre troupe is some splinter society from an American cult that, for whatever reason and by no concrete evidence, you think was tied up with the Vagabond murders. In a similar fashion, you believe a second entity possessed Mrs James, which slaughtered both her and her children when Brouillard—and here I use your wording—sacrificed James to it. Somewhere along the way, then, Free's quote-unquote passenger became so incensed with jealousy at this action that it took control of him and murdered Brouillard most gruesomely. But, of course, it's all taken care of now because you've had him exorcised, leaving no trace of the entity whatsoever—and of the people who might have seen this entity, helpfully, the only ones who are not in this room are all friends of Mr Dubois."

On the couch, Gav had his head in his hands, wide-eyed and vacant. Casimir tried to drain his glass again, apparently having forgotten it was already empty. Dan swallowed down his nausea and tried not to think about how much he wished he was drunk.

"You don't believe a word of it, do you," he said.

Gabriel took a slow breath through her nose and let it out again.

"Logically," she said, "no. My reason tells me it's the most fantastical crock of shit I've ever heard. It is absolutely irreconcilable with everything I have ever experienced up to this point. It is the raving of a lunatic. It is so patently, painfully false that I am equal parts astonished and furious that you think I would ever believe it."

Dan rubbed his face, eyes closed, biting his tongue. At this point, what did it matter if he got drunk? He might as well; and it might give him the courage to put Casimir's revolver to good use, spare himself and Gav the indignity, the scandal of a public execution. . . .

"But," said Gabriel.

His heart leapt. He raised his head. "But?"

She chewed on it, wrinkled her nose, and spat it out. "My heart tells me that every word is true. So really, I don't know what to believe."

Casimir scoffed, rolling his eyes. Gabriel turned her attention to him like a hawk being shouted at by a mockingbird.

"Anything to add, Mr Dubois?" she asked.

"Why bother?" he said. "It will be immediately undercut by simpering, altruistic idiots."

"So sorry for preventing your completely unnecessary suicide," Gav snapped.

"You should be, you damn fool. I gave you a perfect out, a perfect Part Three, wrapped up in a—with a beautiful bow, and you threw it away without a thought. Why bother doing anything at all for you? Ungrateful."
He tried again to drain his empty glass, glared at it, then heaved himself to his feet and returned to the kitchen. It took him three tries to get the stopper out of the gin.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Dan said, "Casimir, I think you've had enough."

"Go to hell."

"You're making an ass of yourself. Put the drink down and go to bed."

In answer, Casimir took a swig straight out of the bottle, smacked it down on the counter, and leered at him.

"Only if I can take you."

"Dan, don't," said Gav, but Dan was already in motion, storming into the kitchen with a vibrant red haze over his vision. Casimir laughed at him and raised the bottle to his lips again. Dan caught his wrist before he could drink.

"I have had it up to here with you," he said, fighting to keep his voice level. "Whatever has gotten into you, I suggest you go and sleep it off before it gets you into more trouble than you're worth."

"You can suggest whatever you like, because I won't give a damn regardless. Let go of me."

He tried to jerk his wrist loose. Dan tightened his grip. The other hand made a wild swing for his head, so he caught that, too. Casimir kneed him in the thigh with bruising force, three times in quick succession. Dan shoved him up against the kitchen counter.

"Stop that," he snapped. Casimir thrashed like a wounded snake.

"Let go!"

"Hit me one more fucking time, and I'll—"

The bottle slipped from Casimir's hand and smashed on the floor, spraying liquor and shards of glass all over. Casimir stilled, as though the explosion had snuffed out whatever fire was left in him. By a tremendous effort of will, Dan wrested control back from the rage simmering in his veins. The smell of gin engulfed him. He pried his hands off Casimir's wrists and took a step back. Glass crunched under his heel. Casimir trembled where he stood, his eyes down, his balance unsteady.

"I think we ought to go, now," Gav said quietly. "All three of us."

"But—"

"That's the best idea I've heard all night," said Gabriel, getting to her feet. "Come along, Gruchy. We'd better leave him to it."

Casimir had not moved, had not so much as lifted his eyes. With the utmost care, Dan leaned in, reached past him, and took the revolver from the kitchen counter.

"I am taking this with me," he said. "I don't know where you got it from, or what you were planning to do with it, but I know you can't be trusted with it. You can petition to get it back from me when you're sober."

There was no response. Dan backed away slowly, tucking the revolver into his jacket pocket. He did not turn his back on Casimir until he was all the way out the door with Gabriel and Gav.
"So..." Gav began.

"Outside," Gabriel preempted him. "I'd prefer not to hear the fit he's about to pitch in there."

Gav inclined his head. He kept his distance from Dan and Gabriel both as they made their way out of the building. Dan, for his part, focused on keeping a lid on his temper. The bruises on his leg weren't helping, nor was the lingering scent of gin. He kept his hand on the revolver to prevent it from shifting round in his pocket.

Out on the street, a brisk and dusty wind was sweeping the streets, driving tattered clouds across a crescent moon. There was an unseasonable chill in the air, an autumnal gloom. Even the endless bustle of the Champs Élysées was muted. Under the stoop of Casimir's building, Gabriel stuck her hands in her pockets and let out a slow, shaky breath. She bit her lip, blinked back tears, and exhaled.

"Gabriel, are... are you all right?" Gav asked.

"Fine, thank you, although not by a very large margin."

"But what—"

Dan put a hand on Gav's shoulder.

"Let it go, B," he said. "I reckon anybody'd be a bit shaken after having a weapon pulled on them."

"But she seemed—you seemed fine, up there."

Instead of responding, Gabriel adjusted the collar of her bright yellow dress, like a knight checking the fit of his armour.

"This is an incredible mess you've made, gentlemen," she said quietly, not looking at either of them. "Regardless of whether or not you've told me the truth."

"We know," said Dan. "My God, we know."

Gav winced and turned his face away. Dan restrained himself from taking his hand.

"If I turned my back," Gabriel said to the street, "would you run?"

"Would you chase us if we did?"

"Personally? No. But every policeman in Europe would be on the hunt for you within a day."

He nodded, pressed his fists, glanced at Gav.

"What if we didn't run?"

"Then I would be at a bit of a loss," she sighed. "Right now, I have a few leads to follow up on, but I will be at your hotel room at midnight. It is up to you whether you would like to be there when I arrive."

"Will you... help us?" Gav asked. "If we stay. Will you help us?"

"I don't know that I can help you. It may be that the most I can do for you is to walk away. But I'm still not convinced that Dubois isn't behind it all, I'm not convinced that you're not being strung along, and I am deeply, gravely concerned that if I do nothing, the two of you may be hanged while
"He really hasn't killed anyone, Gabriel," said Dan.

"That you know of," she sniffed.

"He's been a tremendous help," said Gav. "I don't know where we'd be without him."

"Presumably, in much less trouble."

"I'm not asking you to trust him. I know he isn't trustworthy—especially having heard what you said up there. But he didn't do this. He didn't cause it. It's . . . it's my mess, Gabriel. It's my trouble, and I dragged him into it, not the other way round. Suspicious or not, he hasn't hurt anyone, not for as long as I've known him."

"He pointed a gun at me."

"He didn't fire it."

Gabriel clenched her teeth and sighed like a gasket releasing steam.

"I agree with him on one singular point," she said, "and that is: you are idiots. Midnight, gentlemen. It's a longer head start than you've any right to."

With that, she strode off into the gusting wind, her yellow skirts billowing like a field of sunflowers. Dan put an arm round Gav's shoulders, as much to reassure himself as to comfort Gav.

"Are we running?" he asked.

"I don't know," Gav said, trembling and miserable. "I don't know. I'm so tired, B. It never gets any better. It just gets differently bad."

"Personally, I'm much happier being away from the Abstain Brothers, away from Casimir, and very far away from that Faye prick. And I'm certainly happier with you being well again."

"I don't feel well. I feel like—"

Dan's stomach sank. "Like what?"

"Just . . . I'm sorry, B. I'm sorry for how I behaved earlier, and—and I think you should lead. For now. At least until we're out of trouble."

Giving Gav a squeeze, he said, "Let's get back to the hotel."
Coming back to the hotel room felt a lot like returning to the scene of a crime. The door would scarcely open for the number of newspapers and letters stuffed under it. The dishes had gone mouldy in the kitchen. The air was stuffy and stagnant, like an attic or a cellar. Dan set his things down and opened the window, in the hopes that the gusting winds outside would air the place out a little. Mostly what they did was scatter papers everywhere.

"Oh, damn it," he said, yanking the window closed again. "Sorry, didn't think. I'll get all that. Would you mind putting the kettle on, B?"

"Will do," said Gav. He picked his way through the mess while Dan, once again, set about cleaning up the papers all over the floor.

"Second time today," he grumbled. "Break my bloody back, at this rate."

"I really, sincerely think that's just about the least of our worries right now, B."

"Says you. You're not the one who's bloody back is breaking. Oh, look, here's Gabriel's telegram. *On my way, stay put and hang tight.* At least she didn't say anything incriminating."

"Could be worse, I s'pose," Gav admitted.

Dan continued picking up papers and nattering on about nothing. The kettle whistled and, when tea had been appropriately poured out, Gav shuffled to the breakfast table and eased himself into a chair. His responses went from brief to brusque to monosyllabic as he wilted in his chair. Dan was so caught up in his fading demeanour that he almost didn't see the note.

It was the texture of the paper that did it—smooth, heavy, entirely distinct from the flimsy newsprint. Startled, he looked down at the hand that held it and saw a familiar business card.

His heart plunged into his stomach. His hands sweated. The front side of the card was an advertisement for the Théâtre des Variétés. Though it felt like sealing his own doom, he turned it over to see what was written on the back.

*I KNOW WHAT YOU DID*  
*CITÉ SAINT-MARTIN, MIDNIGHT*

"Oh, Christ alive," he said.

Gav winced. "What is it now?"

Wordless, Dan got up and handed him the card. Gav shut his eyes and gulped. His hand trembled. He set the card down and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Fuck," he said, softly but with great feeling.

"It doesn't even say what day, damn it all. What if we've missed it? What if—"
"Tonight," said Gav, looking over an image on the back of his eyelid. "It was on top of today's paper. It means tonight."

"Oh, grand, so in addition to being fucked if we don't go, we're fucked if we do, 'cos it'll look to Gabriel like we've hooked it. This is just bloody fucking perfect!"

Dan paced to the other side of the room, cogent enough to recognize that he was shouting and waving his arms, but not in enough control of himself to stop it. The smell of gin still clung to him, wafting up with every step he took. Gav stayed in his chair, his forehead propped on his knuckles, his eyes closed.

"Not if we split up," he said.

"You are not going out there alone, and that's the end of it."

"I wasn't thinking of me going out. I'll stay here and wait for Gabriel, 'cos of the two of us, I've got more to run from. You've still got Cassie's gun, haven't you?"

Dan stared at him. "You can't be serious."

"I'm not asking you to use it unless you've got it, but since you've got it, you might as well take it. I don't expect there'll be more than one of them there, but if there are, you'll have something to fall back on."

"Are you honestly sending me to a—a blackmail meeting, in the middle of the night, by myself?"

"I don't like it either, but we haven't got much of a choice. If we miss either meeting, we're done for. We've still got a couple hours to prepare, we shouldn't spend them arguing."

"Look, when I said you're not going out there alone, I didn't mean—that wasn't to imply that I should go out there alone!"

"Have you got any better ideas?"

"I could be kidnapped! I could die!"

"Have you got any better ideas?"

"Of course I don't, I'm an idiot! But you said yourself that you didn't feel up to leading, so why don't we just—go and find Gabriel now, and explain what's going on? She could help, even."

"We don't know where she's gone."

"You're a detective, work it out!"

Gav opened his mouth to retort, balked, and closed it again. With his lips pinched tight, he crossed to Dan, took his face in his hands, and kissed him on the mouth—once, twice, three times.

"I'm going to need some coffee," he said.

"That's a funny way of saying, you're right, Dan, well done."

Gav patted his cheek, just a bit harder than was necessary.

"Don't push it, B."
It was not the first time Dan had been alone down a back alley in the middle of the night, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

Even at this hour, Paris was bustling. Carts trundled past the end of the alleyway, drunks and revellers and prostitutes ambled by, beggars and vagrants poked their heads in and, when they saw Dan loitering there already, continued onward. The gusting winds flung a barrage of dust and refuse down the narrow chute between brick walls, rattling laundry lines and stirring up foul scents. Dan was not leaning on anything. He'd learned that lesson some time ago, and lost a very good pair of trousers because of it.

In the light spilling from the street lamps, he checked his pocket watch. It was five minutes past midnight. His fingers left gleaming smears of sweat on the brass backing. He snapped the watch shut, wiped it on his vest, and tucked it back into his pocket.

By the time he raised his head, a familiar silhouette was stood at the end of the alley.

Blake Belladonna approached like an alley cat that had been kicked one too few times. Her hair and skirts were buffeted by the wind. She stopped about five yards away, her jaw tight and her posture tense. Dan straightened up, fighting down his instinctive awkward chivalry.

"Good evening," he said—and then, because he couldn't help himself, "Fancy meeting you here."

Her eyes narrowed with disgust. She lifted her chin and spoke in a cold, imperious voice.

"Where is Free?"

"I left him at the hotel," said Dan. "It isn't safe to take him out in public these days—as I'm sure you know."

Although she nodded, her eyes flicked round the alley, flinty and suspicious. "And where is Dubois?"

"From the way he was drinking when I last saw him, probably in a coma by now. We'll have to make do without."

"Tsk! I hope he never wakes up. I am only concerned about being stabbed in the back. In that vein: if anything should happen to me, your dirty secret will headline tomorrow's papers. I have taken out considerable insurance."

"Sensibly enough," said Dan, clenching his fists behind his back. "Since you've been kind enough to warn me, I'll return the favour: I am armed, and though I'd prefer not to shoot anyone, I would also prefer it if you didn't make any sudden moves."

Her eyes flicked to his waistband. Dan tugged his jacket aside to show the butt of Casimir's revolver. Blake swallowed.

"Is that the one that killed Marquis?" she asked.

"It isn't the same weapon, but it's the same hand firing it."

"Then I will not be too concerned; I have only a one in six chance of being hit."

"It only takes one," said Dan.
Blake did not have an answer for that. Dan tried not to feel smug about it.

"Now that we've got the posturing out of the way," he said, "what is it that you want?"

"I want you to get Karine out of prison."

Dan inclined his head, buying himself a moment to absorb this. It wasn't the most ridiculous of demands, though certainly not what he'd been expecting. Money would have been easier, especially if they had Casimir on board—but there was no use wishing for a simpler world when the complicated one was waiting for him to respond.

"At least you don't waste any time," he said. "Just Karine, or should we pick up Mr Crawford and Mrs Willems as well?"

"Just Karine," Blake said through her teeth. Her eyes blazed with fury. "The others can rot, for all I care."

"Why her, then?"

"It is of no importance. All you must do is retrieve her."

"And once we do—if we do—what assurance do we have that you won't blab the moment she's free?"

Her lip curled. She tossed her head as the wind raked a stray strand of hair into her face. "You will simply have to trust me, Mr Gruchy."

"Brilliant. Just what I was hoping for. Have you got a timeline, or shall we work it out ourselves?"

"The more quickly you get it done, the less time I have to let slip what really happened to Bones. That's the only timeline. You would be wise not to make me impatient."

Dan rolled his eyes. "Of course. Once we've got her, where shall we put her? Your castle in Saint-Prix?"

"What—" Blake began, but cut herself off. She took a slow breath, smoothing down her skirts. "Yes. Once she is freed, you may bring her there; but not without contacting me first. That is all."

"Very well. I suppose it's too much to ask how you found out the truth about Bones."

"Much too much. I am not a fool, Mr Gruchy."

"I didn't suspect you were, but hope springs eternal. Miss Belladonna, before you go, I have one thing to say, if I may."

"Because you so courteously rid me of Marquis, I will allow it."

"You all know what happened to Free down there," he said, teasing the slightest tremor from his voice. "You all know what he's become, and you ought to know it's furious. I wouldn't stay put too long, if I were you. I'd pack up your whole troupe and get to running."

"Are you threatening me, Mr Gruchy?"

"I'm warning you. It's out for blood and it's not going to stop until every last one of your Brotherhood is dead."
"Not so," said Blake, grim and taut. "It will stop when Free is in pieces."

Dan clenched his teeth. The corners of Blake's mouth pinched in a cruel, cold little smile.

"Good night, Mr Gruchy," she said. "Good luck."

She turned on her heel and walked out of the alleyway. Dan stayed rooted to the spot, breathing deeply, counting the ticks of his pocket watch.

After two minutes, Gav and Gabriel emerged from the shadows behind the bins.

"It could be worse," said Gabriel.

"It could be a hell of a lot better," said Dan.

"No, this is good, this is good," Gav mumbled, watching the end of the alleyway where Blake had gone. "They're splintering like mad. The whole thing will go bust, if we can just work out where to hit it."

"How d'you mean?"

"Belladonna's working alone," said Gabriel. "She hasn't got the rest of the group behind her."

"Precisely," said Gav. "First they lost Elyse, Jenzen, and Crawford; then Marquis, in a rather more permanent capacity; a month later, James went off the rails; and then. . . ."

"Then Peake lost his enforcer," Dan filled in for him.

"Yes. That. So now the ones who want out have got a window of opportunity."

"But Belladonna seemed like one of the more loyal of the bunch. D'you think it's got that bad already?"

Gav nodded, but Gabriel shook her head.

"She was loyal," she said, "up until the rest of her brotherhood abandoned the man she loves in prison. It's a testament to her regard for them that she hasn't murdered them all in their beds."

"Woman," said Gav.

"What?"

"The woman she loves."

Gabriel raised her eyebrows. "The entire judicial system and all legal records would beg to differ on that count."

"They're all wrong. At any rate, I think we ought to do it. I've no fondness for Ms Jenzen, but even she deserves better than to be locked up in a men's prison for the rest of her life."

"You'd put him in a women's prison instead?" Gabriel demanded.

"Since she's a woman, yes, but I doubt that option will be given to us."

"Surely, you don't intend for her to walk free?" said Dan.

"I don't know. I hardly care. Once she's out, she's not our problem anymore. I'm only interested in
staying out of prison myself."

"Then why waste your time with Jenzen?" Gabriel asked. "We'd make better headway tracking down whatever precautions Belladonna's taken, if any, and working out how she found out in the first place. Oh, and finding some way to clear your name that doesn't sound like total, absolute lunacy."

"Well. . . ."

"That sounds like a capital idea, and we'd be incredibly grateful for your help with it," said Dan, before Gav could say anything about framing Peake. "I also think you're right about the other bit, too. Even if we break Jenzen out, there's every possibility Belladonna will ask for something else afterwards."

Gabriel nodded. "Precisely. So long as she's got the leverage, she's unlikely to stop using it."

"But it will buy us time," said Gav. "And time is something we're desperately in need of."

"What're you on about, B? It'll waste time, if anything. We've got enough to do without planning a bloody prison break!"

"I'm sure we could convince Casimir to chase down Belladonna's informants and insurance. He's always been happy to buy us things, I don't think he'd object to purchasing a little time on our behalf."

"We can't keep on relying on him for everything. One day we're going to get to the end of his generosity, and then what'll we do?"

"We'll work that out when we get there. Now's not the time."

"I am still failing to understand, Mr Free, why you're so dead-set on breaking Jenzen out," said Gabriel. "One might begin to think that you want to do it, regardless of blackmail!"

"What?" Gav squeaked. "No I don't! I'm just being practical, that's all!"

"B," Dan said softly.

The cold facade melted like butter in a frying pan. Gav shrank down, misery written on every inch of his face.

"It's . . . wrong," he said. "What's happened to Jenzen is wrong. It doesn't matter what she's done, no one should have to live with that sort of—of fear, and isolation, and misery. It's torture. And before you say anything, yes, I know this isn't right, but. . . ."

He hugged himself, glancing at Gabriel. Dan stepped in and clapped him on the shoulder, reassuring.

"I think what you're feeling is called empathy," he said. "It's a beautiful and horrific thing."

Gabriel folded her arms. "If you really want me to have you arrested, you can just say so. I've been as tolerant as I can be, but this is really going too far. I'm not having you breaking a guilty man out of prison."

"Then—all right, but there's still the issue of the blackmail, though, isn't there," said Dan. "All moral quandaries aside, there is that."

"Belladonna's wanted for conspiracy to murder. All we've got to do is track her down and set the
police on her.

"Shall we turn ourselves in while we're at it? 'Cos there's no way she'll keep quiet when she's been arrested."

"Who would believe her?"

"At this point? I'll bet that lieutenant would. He nearly arrested us on sight as it was. And she's probably got evidence, otherwise she wouldn't be doing this."

"I'm certain that's what she wants you to think."

A light went off over Dan's head. "What if it will help us catch the rest of them?" he said. "People get plea deals of that sort all the time, don't they? Their sentence converted to time served?"

"It's barely been two months."

"And Jenzen was so far from instrumental in the whole thing that they left her behind the moment the going got rough. Look, if it means that much to you, we can always go and catch her again, can't we?"

"Unless she flees the country."

"Ah, but you're a private detective now, Gabriel," said Dan, tapping his nose. "Your jurisdiction is everywhere."

"That would be slightly less meaningless if I still had the power to arrest anyone," she drawled. "Still, you make a fair point about catching the rest of them. If at all possible, I'd like to talk to Jenzen first, before you two do anything foolish. There's a chance this can be fixed without having to break any laws, if only someone can get Jenzen to convince Belladonna to knock it off."

"How likely d'you think that is?"

"I don't know, Gruchy. But you've managed to convince me not to have Free arrested for first-degree murder—yet—and to accompany you to this meeting, so perhaps anything's possible."

All the mirth drained out of him. "Fair point," he said. "Gav, what d'you think?"

"I think if one more bloody thing goes wrong, I'm going to off myself," he muttered, rubbing his face. He pulled himself together and said, "We might as well. Even if we can't convince her to lay off, we might be able to find something out about the Brotherhood from her. Silver linings."

"Right then," said Gabriel. "I'll see you both at your hotel first thing in the morning. If you're not there—"

"Yes, yes, every policeman in Europe," Dan sighed.

Gabriel set her jaw and stared him down.

"If you're not there," she repeated, clipped, "I will find you, gentlemen. I will follow you to the very ends of the earth. If you're going to string me along, I'm going to come back with a rope."

"Oh," said Dan. "Er. . . ."

The faintest twitch of a smile turned up the corner of her mouth.
"After all," she said, "my jurisdiction is everywhere."
In stark contrast to all Dan's prior experiences with her, Ms Jenzen did not seem frightened, angry, or distressed. Her hands were manacled, her feet bare. All her hair had been cut off, and faint stubble grew on her chin, accompanied by a multitude of nicks from what must have been a very dull razor. She had a black eye, and her knuckles were scabbed over. There was a greyness to her countenance, like clouds across the sun.

A pair of prison guards were stationed immediately outside the visitation room, leaving Dan, Gav, and Gabriel with very little room for privacy. It had taken them two days to set up the meeting, and they had only managed it by a great many called-in favours and very little sleep. Ms Jenzen watched them with a hollow composure. Gav gestured for Dan to take the chair, while he himself stood by the door with Gabriel. As Dan sat down, Ms Jenzen turned her attention on him, tight-lipped.

"Well," Dan said. "This is passing familiar, isn't it?"

She continued to stare at him. He coughed into his hand and shifted in his chair. The brand-new flask in his pocket nudged up against his leg, a sickening comfort. With a casual fidget, he adjusted his jacket to be sure the silhouette of it stayed hidden.

"Right. Er... we had some questions, Ms Jenzen, that we hoped you might be able to answer. It's about the Brotherhood, if that incentivises you at all."

"It doesn't," she said, although there had been a minute shift in her posture at the title Ms.

"Really? Even after they abandoned you here?"

"Transparent and clumsy, Mr Gruchy. Try harder or go away."

Dan chewed his lip, weighed his options, and went for broke.

"James' wife and children are dead," he said. "So is James. And as of about a week ago, so is Brouillard."

Her eyes snapped up. Some faint colour returned to her cheeks. Dan kept talking.

"Now, I'm not at liberty to discuss what killed him, but I think you most likely know, or can guess. You're a bright woman. I'll go on and let you know that you're not being threatened, as nobody in here has got any desire to hurt you. I should also tell you that, regardless of what your Brotherhood's up to, you've still got at least one very determined friend on the outside. That's why we're here, Ms Jenzen. On her behalf."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Oh, you shouldn't," said Dan. "Undoubtedly, you shouldn't. We're very much in this to save our own skins—not to mention our reputations—and we certainly wouldn't be here if it weren't for certain extenuating circumstances, but, Ms Jenzen, I will tell you this: we are so self-interested, and so near to the end of our ropes, that we've got to a point where we're not opposed to taking you up with us."

"And once you've gotten what you wanted, what will happen to me then?" she demanded.

"That depends in part on whether or not you're willing to help us. Detective Gabriel is relatively
certain she can pull the appropriate bureaucratic strings—with the assistance of a bit of, shall we say, corrected paperwork—to get you transferred to a facility that better suits your inclination, if you understand what I mean."

"A prison is a prison, Mr Gruchy. None of them suit me."

"I'd think you might be more comfortable in one where you weren't surrounded by men."

"There is no possible way you could manage that, and you do us both a disservice by pretending that you could."

Dan bit his tongue. He clasped his hands on the table. He could feel Gabriel behind him, looming like a storm cloud; and on the other side, Gav, silent and nervous and with such a terrible amount of faith in him.

"No," he said, "we most likely couldn't. But if you can give us information that leads us to the rest of your Brotherhood, we may be able to arrange your release."

"You are honestly embarrassing yourself. If you wanted to waste your time, you could have found much kinder ways of doing it."

Dropping his voice to the barest whisper, Dan said, "I didn't say legally, Ms Jenzen."

She gave him a long, hard look. Her eyes drifted to Gav. The corners of her mouth pinched in a familiar sort of smile.

"I wasn't lying about your friend," Dan went on. "You may at least believe that much."

Still, she didn't answer, looking to Gabriel instead.

"And you, policewoman?" she said. "Have they acquired your cooperation, as well?"

"I'm not a policewoman anymore," said Gabriel.

"You seemed very concerned for my well-being, when we first met," Ms Jenzen mused. "Are you still? Or have you changed your mind, now that you know I'm not the delicate flower you thought I was?"

"I never thought you were a delicate flower; I thought you were a conniving snake, and I was right."

"Strange," said Gav. "Your exact words were, and I quote: Ms Jenzen was the most intelligent and canny person in the room, and, a bit later, the woman is a genius."

Gabriel glared at him, her cheeks darkening. He shrugged, making his smug face.

"Fine, then," Gabriel said through her teeth, still glaring daggers at Gav. "I thought you were an intelligent and canny conniving snake, with an admirable skill for manipulating men."

"My survival has always depended on my ability to manipulate men, Miss Gabriel," said Jenzen. Gabriel turned to her, and she smiled. "Or at least to convince them that I am who and what I say I am. Perhaps, if you'd listen, I could convince you, too."

"It's Detective Gabriel, and now that you've been exposed, you've got about as much chance of swaying my opinion as any other man in here."

Dan saw Jenzen flinch—the tiniest twitch of the eye, the instinctive pinching of the elbows towards
the chest, the ducking of the chin to hide the Adam's apple. Before any further harm could be done, he stepped in.

"Fortunately, your fellow actors looked out for you, didn't they, Ms Jenzen?" he said. "Belladonna and James and the others. You all looked out for each other."

She gave him a long look before saying, "That was the general idea."

"Well, Ms Jenzen, Mr Free and I would really like to look out for you," he said. "And, unless I'm very much mistaken, a certain wealthy benefactor wouldn't be averse to it, either."

"I would be," said Gabriel.

Jenzen opened her mouth to retort. Dan leaned in and made his coup de grace before she could.

"So we need you to convince her, Karine," he said softly. "Convince her that catching what's still out there is worth more than the price of your freedom."

She looked him over, scrutinizing every inch of his expression and posture. She looked to Gabriel, to Gav, to the door behind them where the guards waited. She looked at her own manacled hands. With a deep breath, she set her composure in place and met Dan's eyes.

"I joined the Brotherhood because Elyse assured me that they could, by certain means, put right that which the Lord saw fit to leave mismatched," she said. "Aaron wanted to become rich without enduring the risks of embezzlement. Chad and Torrian wanted fame. I think Bones simply enjoyed having power. I never found out what Peake and Elyse were in it for. I assume the same as the others; power, money, fame."

"What about Belladonna?" Dan asked.

"She was betrothed to a vicious, possessive monster of a man. Had they been allowed to marry, I doubt she would have survived a year. The Brotherhood rescued her from him. She swore one day she'd return to kill him; the Lilith to his Adam, she said."

"And Christophe?"

"A means to an end. He was . . . an experiment. A trial run, as it were. He wasn't inducted into the Brotherhood. We convinced him to cooperate with promises of food and a warm bed."

"Hideous," Gabriel muttered.

"It was," said Jenzen, a tremor in her voice. "I cannot tell you how hideous it all became. Most of us didn't want to be murderers. It was a war of attrition, waged by Peake and Elyse and Bones. A litany of minor concessions, chipping away at our souls—and at our friends and families and all outside connections, until none of us had anywhere else to go but back to them. I had friends, once, and a family. Blake had friends here in Paris. Now all we have is each other—and maybe not even that."

A pang shot through Dan's heart. "That sounds horrific. I'm so sorry."

"I almost believe that you are. I don't know if Peake and Elyse ever meant to follow through on their promises to the rest of us. I doubt it. I don't doubt that they could, just whether or not they meant to. I think it was that way for all of us. We knew they were capable of getting us what we wanted, so long as we stuck it out just a little longer. And every day we stayed, we dug ourselves in deeper, each covering for the others' crimes and every day persuaded to commit more. By the time we got around to cold-blooded murder, it was just one more tick mark on the list. We even got away with
the first one."

"I don't know that I'd call what happened with Luna *getting away with it.*"

She fixed him with a look as sharp and cold as rime ice.

"Luna wasn't the first."

"No, he wouldn't have been, would he," Gav said, with an air of realization. "One never gets it right on the first try."

Jenzen sat back, letting out a slow breath. She kept her chin up and her face composed even as she blinked back tears. Once braced, she turned her attention to Gav.

"Christophe was the first try," she said. "He was when it went wrong. We didn't know it was possible for him to survive, that—while a sacrifice was needed, that wasn't in *addition* to the vessel itself. The creature spoke to us, when the deed was done. Told us that the price for its services was death. That we had to keep it . . . *amused.* And then it drove him mad anyway."

"Who was the sacrifice?" Gav asked.

Jenzen swallowed, sickened. "I don't know. I think she was a—a whore. They didn't tell us her name."

"How did she die?"

She shook her head, lip pinched between her teeth. The tears in her eyes spilled over. Her breath came quick and shallow.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't, it's too awful."

"Can you tell us who did it, then?" Dan asked, as gently as he could.

"It doesn't matter. Can't you see, it doesn't *matter?* We were all complicit. We all worked together to set the whole thing up, to weave that stupid, elaborate fiction to cover up why we killed Miles, why Christophe died, why we pulled in Monsieur Dubois—why *any* of it. Peake and Elyse might have been in charge, but we were all guilty."

"You're not making a very good case for your freedom, you know," Gabriel said.

Jenzen turned tearful eyes on her. "I would rather be in here with the men than out there with the monsters."

"Does Miss Belladonna know that?"

The corner of Jenzen's mouth twitched, somewhere between amusement and pain. "I don't know that she sees a distinction."

"Question," said Gav. "To your knowledge, was Dubois meant to be replaced with this . . . creature you spoke of?"

"To my knowledge, yes. His fortune, his influence, his image would become ours, wholly and without stipulations. Or that was the plan, at any rate. There was always fine print."

Gav nodded. "He was meant to be taken, then, as a vessel, and sacrificed, such that the only force in his body was the one that you placed there?"
"Yes, I—I think that was the general idea. Why is it important?"

"And you said it drove Christophe mad, when custody of the quote-unquote vessel was shared. Could you elaborate?"

Jenzen's eyes widened, slowly, an expression of horror dawning on her face. She shrank back in her chair, pulling her manacled hands close to her chest, white as a sheet.

"God have mercy," she whispered.

Gav's eye twitched. "The theatrics are unnecessary."

"Oh, God have mercy," she said again, her voice cracking. "You—you—!"

"Ms Jenzen, please try to stay calm," said Dan, while the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

She bolted, throwing herself on the far door and screaming for the guards. Gav took a single step forward, as swift and instinctual as a cat swiping at a passing bird. Dan's stomach lurched. His hands broke out in a cold sweat.

"Right, I think that's all we're going to get out of this meeting," he said, getting to his feet, carefully and subtly interposing himself between Gav and Ms Jenzen. As the guards shouldered their way in, he raised his voice to be heard over her hysteria. "There's no trouble! No trouble on either side, no need to get rough with anyone, hahah, we'll just be on our way. I expect sh—er, he'll calm down once we've gone, just put the baton away, there's a lad."

Blabbering thus, he extracted himself and Gav and Gabriel from the room. His head was spinning and his hands were shaking, his breath coming short and shallow. With a hand in his pocket, he clung to the thought that he only had to endure for a few hours more, if that. In just a few short hours, he could put the fear up on a shelf for the night.

"Well! That's certainly not how I expected it to go," he said, as they made their way back out of the prison. "Actors, yeah? The drama of it all."

Neither Gabriel nor Gav took him up on his levity. He smoothed down his moustache and kept his mouth shut until they were all the way out to their waiting cab. The cabbie sprang to attention as they approached.

"All finished, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Business concluded, at least," said Dan. "Thank you for waiting."

"No trouble at all, sir. Hop in."

They all three climbed in, and the carriage trundled off towards the 9th District. Gav stared out the window, a crease between his brows and a fidget in his fingers.

"So, Gabriel," said Dan, because she was watching Gav just a little too closely. "Thoughts?"

She mulled it over before answering, looking between Dan and Gav, chewing her lip.

"If you are mad," she said at last, "it is a peculiarly consistent madness. Belladonna didn't bat an eye when you suggested that something supernatural was afoot, nor when you mentioned the Brotherhood. Jenzen stated it outright, without any prompting or coaching, so far as I could see. I don't know if he honestly thought he was in danger at the end there or if he just wanted out of the
interrogation—he is a skilled actor, after all."

"Personally, I think it was absolutely genuine," said Dan.

"I'm sure you do. Regardless, I don't think this Brotherhood bit is something you and Free cooked up yourselves. There are too many disparate players telling the same story. So I believe you on that count, at least; there is a cult, it probably came over from America, and the theatre troupe is definitively involved."

"At least there's that," Dan sighed. "Still undecided about the possession bit?"

She glanced at Gav. He probably couldn't even see her do it, since his sighted side was turned towards the window. He was fiddling with some invisible paper, about the size of a business card, turning it round as he examined it through his mind's eye.

"Call it less undecided than I was before," said Gabriel. "If one believes the cult business, and what Jenzen said about sacrifices, then. . . ."

"Then what?"

She shook herself, folded her arms and sat back in her seat. "Well, then your shooting Mr Marquis in the head comes into a different light."

All the blood drained from Dan's face. His palms itched and burned. His throat swelled shut like he'd swallowed a stinging hornet. A roar filled his ears. His hands started to tremble again.

"Oh," he said faintly. A hollow laugh escaped him. "Fantastic."

"It wasn't your fault, Dan," said Gav, with all the wooden insincerity of rote memorization.

Gabriel began to speak, looked between the two of them, and thought better of it. The cab trundled along in silence for the better part of three minutes before she said anything.

"Free, could I have your full attention for a moment?"

He didn't respond. Dan cleared his throat.

"Gav."

"Hm?"

"Gabriel wants you for something."

Like a geriatric dog dredged up from an afternoon nap, he finally turned from the window. He looked first to Dan and then, when prompted, to Gabriel.

"I've got an experiment," she said. "Watch closely: God."

The flinch was subtle, but definitive. Dan's intestines knotted up. He dug his fingers into the flask in his pocket, drawing hollow comfort from the warm metal. Gav glanced about the cab as though expecting something to come knocking. When nothing did, he raised an eyebrow at Gabriel.

"Was that it?"

"That was it," said Gabriel, still scrutinizing his expression. "Thank you."
Gav shrugged. "All right."

As he turned back to the window, Dan and Gabriel shared a look. Dan made a face, questioning but not hopeful.

*That isn't good, is it.*

Lips pinched tight together, Gabriel shook her head.
"Well!" Gav sighed, dropping into the armchair in their hotel room. "I'm not sure I'd call that a successful outing, but it's certainly given us some food for thought."

"Certainly," said Dan, hanging up his hat and jacket. He glanced back to make sure Gav wasn't looking, then slipped the flask from his trouser pocket to the jacket pocket, shielding the action with his body just in case Gav glanced over.

"You're not still up your own arse about that Marquis business, are you?" Gav asked. "'Cos genuinely, B, even if it did contribute to—well, the elephant in the room, as it were—you couldn't possibly have known."

Dan wiped his sweating hands on his trousers, fixed his face, and turned round. "Gabriel was right, though. I didn't have to shoot him in the head. Anywhere else would have done."

"Out of curiosity, were you trying to kill him?"

"No, that's why I shot him in the head."

Gav rolled his eyes. "Hah-hah, very good. Anyway, it doesn't matter much, at this point. Bigger and more multitudinous fish to fry. D'you reckon Belladonna would believe us if we told her Jenzen didn't want out of prison?"

"I don't reckon so. Tea?"

"Ooh, yes, please. And why not?"

Dan put the kettle on, keeping his movements slow and careful to account for the shaking of his hands. "'Cos I didn't believe Jenzen when she said it."

"But she convinced you, didn't she?"

"Not a bit. I still don't believe she meant it."

"Then why did she say it?"

"Damned if I know."

"Give it a go."

"Oof, all right," said Dan, folding his arms and considering the ceiling. "Let's see. Could've just been for the drama of the thing; she has made something of a habit of having hysterics to shuffle people about."

"I reckon that was what we got at the end of the interview."

"Possible. Could've been to drum up pity, she likes that game, as well."

"That's sounding more likely, but you still don't seem too enthusiastic about it."

"No, it doesn't fit quite right. I s'pose—here, that's a thought, what about reverse psychology? Gabriel's hellbent on keeping her in prison, so she says, well I'd rather be in prison, ha-hah, take that. Sort of in the hopes that Gabriel might pull her out just to be contrarian."
"If so, she hasn't got a very good handle on our Gabriel."

"Maybe better than you think. Remember when I wrote to her saying to take a holiday, and along she came straight to Paris? Or how she decided to get involved in a murder case despite being on probation?"

"Yes, Dan, I remember all of that," Gav said, with all the resigned patience of a primary school teacher. "I still don't think it'd be enough to get her on board with all this."

"Probably not, but Jenzen isn't to know that. Yeah, the more I think about it, the more right that sounds. I told her to convince Gabriel that the bastards who were still loose were bad enough to warrant letting Jenzen out, and I think she gave it a rum go."

"Hm. And the rest of it—d'you reckon any of it was genuine?"

"I don't know about genuine, but I think she was telling the truth. Oh—damn and blast, we should've asked her about the castle!"

Gav quirked an eyebrow. "The castle?"

"Yes, the Chateau du Moulin whatever in Saint-Prix, from that card we found in Bones's coat."

"Oh, that. Wouldn't have been any use, it's a red herring."

"A red herring?"

"Of course. Two dozen people don't cram in to a castle. Brouillard might've been a drunk, but he wasn't a total moron. The coat and the card were both left for us to find—or at least for Cassie. It was put there after the police searched the place, or else they would've collected the coat as evidence. I'll bet at least a few of the troupe had a good enough handle on Cassie to know he'd whisk it right up without a thought as to why it was there."

"But Belladonna—"

"Is an actress, B. A very talented actress, who knows about the trap the rest of her Brotherhood's set, hence why she demanded advance notice. What better way to get you to walk right into it than to pretend you weren't meant to know about it? They're not there, they've never been there, and if it'd been any use to ask Jenzen about it, I would've done."

"Then why did you get so bloody pleased about that card?"

"Simplest thing in the world!" said Gav, leaning back in his chair and propping his ankle on his knee. "I'm sure you could work it out if you thought about it for five seconds."

The kettle whistled on the stove. Dan tended to it, mulling the problem over and trying desperately not to be annoyed. He brought Gav a cup of tea and settled into one of the chairs at the breakfast table with his own.

"Chad lied about the house being in the countryside," he concluded. "He got awfully nervous when you mentioned how silly it was for him to go back to Paris, and his excuses for it were awfully thin. Then there's Theo, who said Bones was in Paris when Casimir started asking about, but we never managed to get her—him, sorry—to tell us how long Bones had been about. Belladonna's about, as well, and she knew where we were staying and what'd happened to Bones. So..."

"Yes? Yes?"
With a deep breath, Dan said, "They're all still in Paris. They never left."

Gav squawked like a parrot, cooed like a baby, scrambled up out of the armchair and darted across the way to drop himself in Dan's lap.

"What the bloody hell—I've got tea, you bell-end!"

Setting his own cup on the table, Gav looped an arm round Dan's neck and peppered his face with kisses.

"Lovely Dan, brilliant Dan, look at you! Detectiving like a champion, I knew you had it in you!"

"I'll have something in you if you keep that up."

Gav gurgled and kissed him on the mouth. "Do."

With a sigh, Dan set his tea aside and put his arms round Gav's waist, lacing his fingers together over his hip.

"What's this mood about, then?" he asked. "Half an hour ago it was all bloody ennui. Not that I'm complaining, mind."

"Gabriel was about."

"She's never dampened your enthusiasm that much before."

"Well, things've changed."

"I s'pose it is a bit difficult to keep upbeat when she's talking about arresting us at every turn."

"That's not it at all. I wouldn't mind if it was that. Frankly, I think she's taken the murder bit much better than she'd take the dress-wearing."

Dan winced. "I wish I could say that wasn't the case, but it very well might be. If you'd like me to try and talk to her about it, I might be able to—I dunno, convince her to at least ease up a bit. Put her through a few of the paces I've been through to get less horrible. I wouldn't tell her about you, of course, just—"

"No, don't bother. There's more important things to be done, and if we keep talking about this, I'll be right back to the ennui again."

"Fair. But—all right, if the theatre troupe's all still in Paris, why hasn't anybody found them yet?"

"Simple, Dan: 'cos those leaky police have been spilling their every move to the papers."

"You reckon so? It's not some supernatural bollockery?"

"I don't resort to supernatural bollockery unless it's absolutely necessary. Though it's possible—and don't quote me on this, this is strictly speculative and I'm only telling you 'cos you're my B—it's possible that someone in that police station is a member of the Brotherhood, and they've been telling their secrets tactically."

"Lieutenant Durant?"

Gav made a face. "Of course not, use your head. He would've arrested us at the first bloody opportunity if he was working for them."
"Oh. Fair point."

"No, it's someone else. Possibly someone we've never met. There were two dozen people in that sewer, they've all got to have come from somewhere, and gone somewhere after."

"And if one of them was a policeman, it'd be the easiest thing in the world to just—join the search, when it happened, wouldn't it."

Gav froze. His eye lit up with stars. He took Dan's face in both hands and kissed him on the mouth.

"Daniel Charles Gruchy, you're a bloody genius," he breathed.

"Eh?" Dan said articulately. Gav kissed him again, long and slow and deep.

"Cracked the bloody thing wide open, haven't you!"

"Have I?"

"You perfect, brilliant idiot. I'm going to suck your cock 'til I suffocate."

Dan went red from his toes to the tips of his ears. "Gav, really!" he sputtered.

"Really," he said, and kissed him a third time. "Unless you're opposed."

"I'm not opposed, but—but at least let me have my tea first, honestly, it's a waste otherwise."

Gav pouted at him. Dan pecked him on the lips and squeezed his waist.

"But I'm glad you're feeling better, and I'll take you up on it later," he said.

"You never let me have any fun."

"I'm trying to keep you on-task, B."

"Oh, are you? What was the task, then, hm?"

"Come off it."

"You don't know," Gav taunted, kicking his feet like a schoolboy. "You don't remember!"

"Well—maybe not, but you bloody well do!"

"Mm, and I'll get right back onto it once I'm not distracted by how much I want to suck you off."

"Oh, for the love of—fine, have it your way, then."

Gav kissed him, then slid out of his lap and nestled in between his legs. His expression was unbearably smug.

"Didn't take much convincing, did you."

Pinching his cheek, Dan said, "Hurry up; your tea's getting cold."

Gabriel looked the two of them over with such poorly disguised amusement that it made Dan's ears
burn. She let them sizzle for a good two seconds before speaking.

"Good afternoon," she said. "I assume something's come up."

"Very much so," Gav chirped. Dan could've strangled him. "May we come in, or are you in the midst of something?"

"I am in the middle of something, but you can come in anyway," said Gabriel, standing aside. The two of them filed into her hotel room—just down the corridor from their own—and she shut the door behind them.

"Working on the James case, I presume?" Gav asked, eyeing the papers spread across the room's tiny table.

"Yes. Dare I ask what the two of you have been working on?"

"The same, the same, don't fret. Dan's made some stunning insights; we'd hoped you might be able to—hm, what's the word I'm looking for. . . ."

"Help," said Dan.

Gav glared at him. "Not precisely, but it'll do. We hoped you might be able to weigh in on a plan of action."

"I'm pleasantly surprised you decided to ask," said Gabriel. "Sit anywhere, and let's have those insights you mentioned."

Gav plonked himself right down into the nearest chair, at the breakfast table. Dan began to follow suit, then stopped. He turned to Gabriel and offered her the chair instead.

"Er . . . since it's your room, and all," he said.

With a nod and a warm smile, she accepted the seat. Dan cast about and pulled up the chair from the desk.

"So?" said Gabriel, looking between the two of them.

Gav leaned his elbows on the table and clasped his hands. "So. Given all the evidence, plus Belladonna and Jenzen's behaviour, we can safely assume that the whole lot of them are still in Paris."

Frowning, Gabriel performed some mental calculation. After a moment, she nodded, chewing her lip.

"Yes, that would make sense. It simplifies things."

"Considerably. The little notecard Dan found must've been, therefore, a trap—or at least a red herring."

"Or to get you out of the city. Whether it's because they don't want to be caught or because they're afraid of their own pet demon, it's in their best interests for you to be as far away as possible."

Gav raised his eyebrows. "Fair point. But my point is: they wouldn't have stayed here if they didn't need to. The risks vastly outweigh the rewards, unless they've got a much bigger reward coming."

"You think they've got something planned?"
"I know they've got something planned. Even as rich as Dubois is, he's small potatoes compared to what they could be getting. He's not even holding his own purse strings, as you demonstrated with his bank account, and I'll bet Peake and Elyse knew it. He was a stop-gap, at best."

"Right," said Gabriel. "I assume you've either worked out what the plan is, or you've got an idea for how to work it out."

"The second one, yeah. Dan and I think somebody in their Brotherhood is a policeman. We think he was there that night in the sewers, we think he's been leaking police movements to the Press, and I think I know how to find him."

A light came on behind Gabriel's eyes. She sat up straighter.

"Somebody was unaccounted for during the hour leading up to the search," she said. "And was more than likely acting suspiciously during and after."

"Precisely," said Gav. "We find that officer, we find the Brotherhood."

"What will you do with them once you've found them?"

Gav's confidence faltered. "Er... to be determined. But for right now, the important bit is, we know how to find them."

"And have you a plan for how to extract the information from this officer, once you've found them?"

"Well—well sort of, hadn't really given it much consideration. I'm sure something could be worked out."

"What about Belladonna and Jenzen?"

"What about Belladonna and Jenzen?"

"How do you plan to keep from being accused and arrested while you search for this officer? Especially because, presumably, said officer knows what happened to you, and what happened to Mr Brouillard."

Gav turned the colour of old milk. Dan coughed into his hand.

"I, er, was under the impression that we thought Belladonna was not working with the rest of the Brotherhood, as regards Jenzen?" he said.

"As regards Jenzen, no. It seems like Belladonna saw an opportunity and decided to leverage it in her favour. But the method of Brouillard's death was too distinctive to be mistaken for anything but what it was. The level of detail in the papers has been excruciating—possibly due to a deliberate leak in the force, as you said. Any members of the Brotherhood who've been getting the paper would know."

"Then why haven't they said or done anything about it?" Dan asked, because Gav looked like he was about to be sick. "It could get us out of their hair rather permanently, so why are we, you know, still loose?"

"I... don't know," Gabriel admitted. "Granted, any of the ones we know about would be arrested on sight, but that wouldn't stop anyone who wasn't a part of the theatre group—and it seems as though Belladonna may have found a way round it, anyway. If they've got someone on the force, it's even less explicable. I don't know. I can't imagine how it—"
She stopped. She looked at Gav. Her jaw tightened and a line appeared between her brows. Gav shut his eye and rubbed his face.

"It benefits them if they can recover their assets," he mumbled. "Much easier to reuse a vessel than to go and get a new one—with the added advantage that they can throw me to the wolves for Brouillard's murder whenever they like."

"Brouillard's murder and anyone else they kill," said Gabriel. "If played correctly, they might even be able to wipe Luna and Demarais off their slates and go scot-free. When the detective who solved it is outed as a murderer and . . . all the officers present were friends of . . ."

She trailed off. Dan bit his tongue to keep from completing the sentence for her. In her own time, she did it herself.

"Friends of an officer who was fired and subsequently hired by that same detective," she said. "I think we've found our line of reasoning. They're not just leaving you loose. They're building a case for their own mistrials."

"And potentially, those of everyone Gav and I have ever put away," said Dan, sick to his stomach.


"At least it's confirmation that Belladonna's not working with the rest of them, isn't it? Otherwise, she wouldn't even be doing this whole blackmail bit, knowing Jenzen's name would be cleared with the rest of them. It seems like she's not even been told the plan, or else she's got no faith in it."

"That is a tremendously thin silver lining on a very large raincloud, Mr Gruchy."

Gav put his head down on the table. "Just arrest us now. Save yourself. It'll put a wrench in their plans, at least."

"Not a big enough one to be worth it. Free, I—can't say that I believe you, about all the paranormal bits, but I also don't believe you're a cold-blooded killer. I don't know what's really going on here, or who's at fault, or what's to be done about it. What I do know is that these people need to be stopped, and it'll go much quicker if you're not in prison. So I'm not going to turn you in—not yet, at least."

A tremendous weight slid off Dan's shoulders, like a cape woven from lead. He took his first real breath in days. Some of the trembling settled out of his hands.

"Thank you," he said. "Gabriel, honestly, thank you. I know that can't have been an easy decision."

"It wasn't. But—and here's the caveat—you're not breaking Jenzen out. You can stay out of prison so long as he stays in."

All the air sighed out of Gav like he was never going to breathe again. Dan's ribs constricted round him. He held his tongue, no matter how much he wanted to argue, to bargain, to do anything to alleviate the misery pressing down so heavy on Gav's back.

"All right," Gav said, pronouncing it like a death sentence. "I s'pose we can't ask for any more than that."

Some of the tension left Gabriel's shoulders. She nodded.

"O.K.," she said. "Now that's out of the way: how are we going to find this officer of yours?"
When Gav didn't answer—or even pick his head up off the table—Dan stepped in.

"We hoped you could ask about," he said. "Or that you might already know of someone."

"I can think of a few possibilities, but I doubt I can get very far with asking," she said, making a sour face.

"Ah. Something of a persona non grata ever since the. . . ?"

"They never liked me much."

"Well, they certainly aren't going to want to talk to Gav and me, especially not about this."

Gabriel's face got even sourer. "I really sincerely hate to say this, but: I don't suppose you could convince Dubois to poke his nose in?"

"Bloody hell, is it that desperate already?" said Dan, pained.

"An asset is an asset, Gruchy, no matter how distasteful it may be."

"Well—yes, I just didn't think you'd ever be the one to suggest him."

"Believe me, neither did I. But if there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that he's not inclined to turn anyone in for this particular crime."

"And according to Durant, he's already got a penchant for—er, making friends with officers."

"For a very loose definition of making friends, yes. Durant eventually set me on him because he guessed—correctly, I might add—that I was un-bribable and un-seduceable. At least by the likes of Dubois."

"Er, right. Can't hurt to ask him, anyway. If—I mean, assuming he's not too upset with us. Which he might be. He seems the sort to hold a grudge. Actually, it—it might be wise to check in on him anyway, just in case, er. . . ."

Gav finally picked himself up. He rubbed his face, adjusted the bandages over his eye, and took a deep breath.

"In the morning," he said. "I can't have that conversation today."

"Morning, then," said Dan. "I'm sure he'll keep 'til morning."

Although he was exhausted in every possible sense, Dan found himself lying awake long past midnight that night. He bobbed on the threshold between dream and consciousness, adrift on a churning ocean of anxieties. Too tired to think properly, but too nervous to sleep, he fidgeted and chewed his cheeks and thought—longingly and at great length—about the flask hidden in his jacket pocket. If only he could be sure he wouldn't wake Gav, if only he could sneak out of bed for a few short moments, then at least he might be able to rest. . .

Gav rolled over and slipped an arm round Dan's chest, cuddled up close behind him and tangled their legs together. Dan sighed and leaned into him, tipping his head back. Obligingly, Gav kissed the back of his neck, behind his ear, the corner of his jaw. The hand slid up his chest, lingering.
It clamped on his throat like a bulldog. Dan thrashed, choking. A voice like boiling tar dribbled into his ear.

"Danny boy~"

Dan jerked bolt-upright in bed, drenched in sweat and gasping. His heart thundered in his chest. Tremors wracked his body. Next to him, Gav rolled halfway over, rubbing his face blearily.

"S'wrong, B?" he mumbled.

It took Dan three tries to get his voice to catch. "Nothing. Just—nightmares. Just a nightmare, that's all. Go back to sleep, B."

"Aw, poor thing." He rolled the rest of the way over, fumbling his arms round Dan's waist. Dan shoved him off and scrambled out of bed.

"Don't!" he snapped; then, regaining control of himself, "Don't. Please. Just—go back to sleep."

Gav pouted at him. Dan's knees twitched, but he held his ground. With a sigh and a grumble, Gav rolled back over and nestled in.

Dan stood perfectly still until he was sure Gav was asleep. As quietly as he could, he dressed himself. His hands shook. His racing heart would not slow. The skin on his neck and back crawled with a thousand slimy touches. He could still feel the lips against his ear, vile in their hunger.

Keeping one eye on Gav, with the utmost care, he fished the flask out of his jacket pocket. The cap, well-oiled, eased off without a sound.

The motion of taking a swig out of it was just as finely tuned.

Warmth drizzled into his chest while nettles stung his sinuses. He stifled a cough, took another swig, and hid the flask again before he could take a third. Two would have to do. Two would have to be enough, no matter how much he wanted to drain the thing.

With just as much care, he picked his way to the armchair and settled in for another sleepless night.

At least his hands had stopped shaking.
Morpheus

There was no answer when Dan knocked on Casimir's door. His stomach dropped. He hardly dared to breathe, lest the smell of blood and death seep into his lungs.

"Perhaps he's out," he said, more to himself than to Gav. "Could've . . . spent the night somewhere else. I'm sure he does it all the time."

"I'm sure," said Gav. "Be a dear and pick the lock, would you?"

"Will do. Keep an eye out."

Dan made quick work of the lock. As he opened the door, a wave of stale scent washed over him, cloying and flowery. His heart skipped a beat. He braced himself.

And just as he'd feared, there was Casimir, lying face-down and motionless on the floor of his flat.

"Cassie!" Gav cried, darting in. Dan lunged after him and caught him by the arm.

"Don't touch him!"

"But—"

"This could be crime scene. Stay there."

Dan pushed past him, knelt at Casimir's side. His eyes were closed, a miasma of opium and gin fumes surrounding him. He was deathly pale. Dan fished out his pocket watch with shaking hands, held the shiny brass in front of Casimir's parted lips.

One second passed, then two, then three, before the faintest of breaths fogged the smooth, cold metal.

Dan whipped round. "Gav, can you get hold of Dufresne?"

"I—I think so, if there's—"

" Courtesy 'phone downstairs, go and tell him Casimir's overdosed on opium."

"But—"

"Now, Gav!"

Gav turned on his heel and fled the flat. Dan stuffed his watch back into his pocket. As carefully as he could, he gathered Casimir up into his arms.

"All right, come on, let's get you off the floor," he said. "Ups-a-daisy, there's a lad. Christ alive, you're light as a bloody feather, you. We've got to get you eating properly."

Casimir's head lolled over his elbow. He was as limp and cold as a corpse. Dan carried him to his bed and set him down. As he tucked him in, Casimir's eyelids flickered and his fingers twitched.

"Hello, there, steady on," said Dan, taken aback. "You'll be all right, though you're a damned fool."

Hazy eyes struggled to focus on him. A hand fumbled at his arm, weak as a starving child's. The
parted lips and breathless lungs stammered out a single word, scarcely a whisper.

*Michael?*

"No," Dan said, as gently as he could. He took Casimir's hand to give him something to hang on to. "No, I'm sorry. It's just me. It's just Dan."

Insensate, Casimir mumbled the name four, five more times before slipping back into unconsciousness. Dan kept two fingers against the pulse point in his wrist, afraid that if he lost the moth-wing fluttering for even a moment, it would be gone before he could find it again.

Gav returned shortly, frazzled and frightened. He darted to the bedside, his eye full of tears, his lip quivering.

"He's—he's not coming," he said. "He said there's nothing he can do, he said—he said—"

"It's all right," Dan told him, though it wasn't. "He woke up for a bit, d'you know, so maybe it's not so dire as it seems. Go and see if you can find any medicines he's got. Tobacco will do, or coca. Anything but alcohol or opium, honestly. He's had enough of those."

Gav nodded and darted off again. Dan sat and listened while he ransacked the flat, measuring Casimir's pulse by the ticking of his pocket watch. Casimir did not stir again.

"Much more agreeable when you're unconscious, aren't you," Dan muttered. "But still making trouble somehow. Bloody typical."

Not long after, Gav came creeping back round the corner with tears rolling down his cheek. His hair was mussed, his skin flushed and sweaty.

"I couldn't find anything," he said, strained. "Nothing but more opium and laudanum and alcohol, there isn't anything else. Unless—unless he's hidden something in his closet, but—"

"That's all right. I don't know that it would've helped anyway."

Gav paled even further. "Is he—?"

"Still ticking," Dan said hurriedly. "Though—barely. If I'm being honest."

Gav's face pinched with misery. He turned away, pressing his knuckles to his lips. Dan set down Casimir's hand, got up, and put an arm round Gav instead.

"We should've come yesterday," Gav said, choked up. "We should've checked on him, we—we shouldn't have left him alone for so long, we knew he was—was—"

Dan rubbed his shoulder. "Don't, Gav. It's not your fault he decided to do this. Trust me, there's nothing to be gained from blaming yourself."

"Hypocrite," Gav accused damply. "You're blaming yourself right now and we both bloody well know it."

"It's reflexive. I don't want you developing the same reflex. One of us is bad enough."

"Dan, it isn't your fault either."

"I'd beg to differ, but that's beside the point. Here, you remember how to find the pulse in the wrist, yeah? Come and sit and keep a finger or two on him, I don't want him pulling his disappearing act.
Pull his hand back a bit—there, right next to the big tendon, d'you feel it?"

Whey-faced, Gav shook his head. Dan snatched Casimir's wrist from him and held his breath until he found the pulse again. He couldn't tell if it was actually weaker, or if it just felt that way.

"No no, there it is, it's still there," he said, unable to prevent his voice from shaking. "Just there, B, you'll have to press a bit to get hold of it, there's a lad. I'm—going to make tea. When all else fails, at least we've got tea."

Once he had the kettle on, round the corner from the bedroom and muffled by the rumbling of boiling water, Dan went fishing in the cabinets. The gin was right where he remembered, a half-empty bottle and a full one behind it. With shaking hands, he took the flask out of his pocket. He went to fill it and had to abort the attempt, lest he spill gin all over himself.

He took a swig out of the bottle instead.

The burn was familiar, galvanizing. He glanced back over his shoulder—no sign of Gav, not a word or movement. Dan took another gulp of gin. While the warmth filled up his chest, he filled up his flask; then a third swig, for good measure. Everything was back in its proper place by the time the kettle whistled, from bottle to flask to Dan's expression. Still, Gav did not emerge from the bedroom. By the time Dan came in with the tea, his heart had stopped racing, his churning thoughts had settled, and—most importantly—the fumes on his breath had had sufficient time to disperse.

Besides, everything already reeked of gin and opium. Even the Nose of London would be hard-pressed to detect an extra whiff here or there.

"Still ticking?" Dan asked, setting Gav's tea on the nightstand for him.

" Barely," said Gav. "It's—it's so weak, Dan. I can hardly feel it at all."

"I know."

Gav's fingers were pressed so tight to Casimir's wrist that his knuckles were white. There was no accompanying discoloration on Casimir's skin. Gav looked him over, drawn and sick and trying desperately not to cry.

"He's dying, isn't he," Gav murmured.

"Yes," said Dan. There was no point in lying about it.

"Will—is there any chance? Or—or is it—?"

"I don't know. I hope it's not certain, but I don't know."

Gav sniffled and ducked his head. His arm trembled with the force of his grip. Dan put a hand on his shoulder, for all the comfort it could provide.

"You've seen this before," Gav said, when the silence had stretched too long. "Seen people go like this."

Even with the numb warmth of the gin in his stomach, it still hurt. The pain was more gut-punch than javelin, though, so Dan breathed through it and rubbed Gav's shoulder and did something he never would have done sober.

"I have," he admitted. "More times than I'd like. The war wasn't kind to any of us, but—let's just say
I got lucky in my choice of numbing agents. It was horrible, but at least I survived to regret it."

"Is he—did they—I don't know how to ask this, I don't even know what I'm trying to ask."

"If it's any comfort—and I know it won't be much—but at the very least I can tell you it's . . . peaceful. Painless."

Something between a laugh and a sob spilled through Gav's lips. "Small mercies."

All right. So there was some point in lying to him.

"You haven't got to stay, if you don't want to," he said gently. "I've sat this watch before."

Gav shook his head. "I want to stay. Whether—whatever happens. I want to stay."

Another twinge shot through Dan's chest. He took in Gav's posture, the desperation of that hand clenched so tight on the pulse, the pain in his expression.

"Then I'll stay with you," he said. "Whichever way it goes."

A week ago, Dan might have hesitated to call anything a miracle; but after everything he'd seen, and in the face of all prior experience, there was no other word for it but miraculous. Scarcely two hours after they found him face-down on the floor, Casimir woke up.

It was not a violent affair, nor a pleasant one. He simply opened his eyes, rolled over, and threw up everything in his stomach—at which point, Gav fled to the washroom, gagging, and left Dan with the mopping-up.

"Cheers for that," Dan said to Casimir. "I mean. I know we've done basically nothing to pull this off, but you could at least show a bit of gratitude."

Dangling half off the bed, Casimir whined like a sick dog. Dan patted his shoulder and took a judicious step back.

"There there, better out than in." He leaned round the corner and called, "Gav! D'you think you could put the kettle on? He'll be wanting something to settle his stomach. Ginger, if you can find it."

"Will do," Gav warbled.

Although it took several minutes for Casimir to stop being sick, Dan managed to get it all cleaned up before Gav came in with the tea. As Gav set Casimir upright in bed, fussing over him like a mother hen, Casimir managed his first words.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "My sweet, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. . . ."

"You should be," said Gav. "Scared me half to death. Honestly, what were you thinking?"

Casimir shook his head. A languid hand gestured towards the closet.

"I'm sorry," he said again, and again, "I'm sorry."

While Gav was frowning in trepidation, Dan poked his head into the closet. His throat tightened. His stomach sank. The taste of gin on his tongue turned sour and dry, begging to be refreshed. Sweat
broke out over his hands and back, born of a deep dread and a strange, vicarious grief.

The floor of the closet was covered in ribbons of satin. Shreds of petticoat lay like driven snow. Splinters of whalebone littered the scene, and a spatter of bright blue beading left no possible doubt of the victim.

"Oh, no," Dan murmured. He put a hand over his mouth. "Oh, no, Gav."

"What?" said Gav. "What, what is it?"

"It—it's your—"

Before he could finish, Gav pushed past him to look for himself. He locked up like the brakes on a runaway train, his eye going wide and glassy. He swayed where he stood. His lips struggled to form a word as his throat worked at empty air.

"Why?" he whispered, barely a sound, a frayed bow dragged across limp strings.

Dan put an arm round him. He was trembling. "I'm so sorry, Gav."

"But—but why? Cassie, why?"

Casimir did not answer, hollow and dead-eyed. He picked at the bedclothes, automatic movements unattended by his higher functions. His fingertips were blistered bloody. As the colour returned to his skin, Dan could see the red edges of bruises seeping out from beneath his clothes.

"Sometimes people do horrible things when they're in pain, Gav," said Dan, rubbing his arm. "There's no accounting for pain."

"I never have," Gav retorted, rounding on him. "I've never done anything so horrible, even though—it's been nothing but pain for months! I've been cut up and beaten and battered and—and all sorts of things, and I never—"

"Look, I know you haven't, but—"

"Don't interrupt me!"

Dan raised his hands, biting his tongue. Gav stood seething, his fists clenched at his sides—even the one in the splint, which must have been aggravating his broken wrist. His eye was full of tears, threatening to spill over at a single incautious blink.

"I have been in so much pain, for so long," he said, his voice shaking. "And it has gotten worse, and worse, and worse, and still. I've never hurt anyone. I've never—ripped up something that was loved. I am not like you, Daniel. I don't break things to feel better."

"Gav, I don't—"

"Yes you do! You do, and you always have, and you always will!"

Dan took a deep breath, eyes closed, hands deliberately loose at his sides. There was a pain growing in his chest, pressure building to heat, accelerated by the warmth of the gin still tinging his blood. He let the breath out through his nose, steam from a relief valve.

"I was going to say," he said slowly, "I don't think he did it to feel better."

Some of the fire bled out of Gav. He glanced over his shoulder at Casimir—still vacant, still hollow
and cold. Gav dropped his gaze and wrapped his arms round himself.

"So . . . why?" he said again.

A wry smile tugged up the corner of Casimir's mouth. Averted eyes narrowed with amusement, or pain. Blistered fingers picked at the bedsheets. He shrugged.

"You know what they say about idle hands."

"That's not an answer."

"Then because I hate you. Go away. Go to hell. Don't come back."

"You what?"

"Casimir, could you give us just a moment, please?" said Dan, taking Gav's arm. "Won't be long, stay there and try to drink your tea, if you can. It's on the nightstand for you. Gav, a moment?"

"What for?"

"Could I please just have a moment, Gavin?"

Gav ground his teeth, but went with Dan without complaint. Dan took him to the sitting room and turned their backs to Casimir.

"I think I know what's going on here," he said quietly, "and it's worse than we thought."

"Oh, is it? I hadn't noticed, what with the sudden violent hatred and all."

Dan shook his head. "I doubt he means it. He's still extremely drunk, after all, and more than likely he was drunk when he did for the dress, too."

"Either way, he's being a bastard, and I'm not going to put up with it."

"I wouldn't ask you to. You're well within your rights to be furious with him, and you haven't got to have a bit of compassion for him, either."

"Grand! Then let's go. We've got a cult to catch and my name to clear."

Dan winced. "I really don't think we can."

"Why not?"

"Someone's got to stay with him."

"Got to? Why? He's awake, he's breathing. Surely, the worst is over."

"Gav, I love you dearly and I know you're furious, but we can't leave him alone. He's not well enough. He could get right back into the gin and laudanum, or—or go outside and do unwise things, or God forbid, hurt himself."

"Dieu s'en fous de moi," Casimir mumbled out.

"Oh, do be quiet," Dan shot over his shoulder, also in French. "We're trying to keep you from killing yourself, you daft fool."

"And it's a damnable waste of all my hard work."
Gav stared at him. Dan hissed in a breath through his teeth.

"Never thought I'd be so unhappy to be right," he said. He took Gav by the shoulders. "Look, you're the detective, all right? Take Gabriel, go out and do your detectiving. I'll stay and look after Casimir 'til he's well enough to be on his own."

Gav raised an eyebrow. "You're really, honestly suggesting that we split up? You're suggesting that? Now, at this point, with all the nonsense going on?"

"I trust Gabriel to look after you," he said, though he felt queasy just saying it. "I'll see if I can't get someone else to take over for me once he's a bit more lucid, but—right now, I don't think we can risk it. He knows much too much about the nonsense to leave him with anyone else when he's this—this—"

"Fucked," Casimir supplied helpfully.

"Yes, that, thank you."

"But—Cassie, you weren't really trying to—"

"With every fibre of my fucking being. I wish you hadn't come. I wish you'd go away."

Dan raised his eyebrows and gestured. Rubbing his temples, Gav let out a breath.

"I think perhaps I've found the missing motivation," he said. "All right. I'm following your lead, Dan. I'll go and find Gabriel and we'll... we'll work out what's to be done about that officer."

"I ruined your dress," Casimir said, somewhere between despondent and venomous. "I cut it up into ribbons."

"Then you'll just have to make me a new one, won't you," Gav retorted, although his voice shook.

"No. I hate you and I hate your stupid dresses. Go away and don't come back."

"Casimir," Dan cut in, at the end of his patience, "as Ms Jenzen would say: obvious and heavy-handed. Be quiet and drink your tea. Gav, you should head on. He'll be like this for a while."

"Will you be all right? He's been known to provoke you to violence."

"I'll manage somehow. Maybe I can teach him to apologize properly, while I'm at it. Er, speaking of which. . . ."

"No, don't," Gav sighed. "You've nothing to apologize for."

"I'd beg to differ."

"I'm sure you would. But—I think you're right. I think I'd better go. I'm glad to have not been moved to violence yet in my life, and I'd like to keep it that way. With the way Cassie's being it's... trying."

"I've more to fear from a kitten," Casimir called. "From a pigeon. A dove. You couldn't hurt me if you tried."

"Thank you for so effortlessly proving my point," Gav said dryly. "Dan, take care. Of yourself and—I suppose of him, as well."

"I will. You know where to find me if you need anything."
"I do."

Gav leaned in and kissed him quickly. Dan's heart skipped a beat, a shock of pure terror lighting up his every nerve. He could still taste the gin on his own breath, faint and sour but unmistakeable. When Gav stepped back, though, there was no hint of mistrust on his face.

"If you haven't heard from me by morning, assume something's gone horribly wrong," he went on. "Gabriel's all right, of course, but I'd rather be safe than dead."

"Speak for yourself," Casimir grumbled.

"I was, actually, thank you."

"I'll come and find you," Dan said. In English, he added, "If it's a choice between him and you . . . well, you know who I'll pick."

"Obviously. But do at least try to take good care of him, Dan. For the sake of tomorrow's Gav, who isn't quite so upset with him."

"For the sake of today's Gav, shall I make him drink a prairie oyster?"

Gav's only answer was an immense, despicable grin.
After three hours, Dan's self-inflicted vigil over Casimir was going surprisingly well.

It had gotten off to an inauspicious start, with Casimir tossing out increasingly inflammatory remarks while Dan tidied the flat. If he'd been any less sober, it certainly would have come to blows; but in the end, it was Casimir who gave first, subsiding into despondent silence after only half an hour. From there on, he was much more agreeable. He drank and ate what he was given, albeit mechanically, kept his head down and his mouth shut, and even allowed himself to be coaxed into taking a hot bath (though Dan practically had to carry him to the tub).

While he was in there, Dan finally cleaned up the closet. He found that, horribly, large pieces of the dress had been stitched back together. The needlework was clumsy, drunken, desperate. Long swathes of satin were spotted with blood and pus from fingers worked to the bone, blotched with still-damp tears. Dan stuffed the whole ensemble into a sack and shoved it into the back of the closet, too sick to keep on looking. He washed the bad taste out of his mouth with a gulp of gin from his flask, as he had been doing periodically ever since Gav left.

When Casimir emerged from the steam-wet washroom, he had put himself back together in much the same fashion as the dress—poorly, painfully, and incompletely. Dressed in silk pyjamas and towelling off his hair, he gave Dan a sheepish smile.

"I believe some measure of gratitude is in order," he said. "Along with a healthy portion of an apology, if you are amenable to such things."

"I think that would be a reasonable first step," said Dan. He'd settled on the couch to skim through old newspapers, although mostly what he'd been doing was listening for suspicious silences and resisting the temptation to have another drink.

"Then you shall have both. I won't try to explain myself; it seems that you understand more than enough. I will simply say that I deeply regret dragging you into this, and I deeply regret the things that I said to you and Gavin, and I will do my best to ensure there is no repeat performance. Thank you for coming to my aid. It isn't what I wanted, but it's what I needed."

Dan nodded. "I'll accept it. How are you feeling now?"

"As well as can be expected. Ravenous, of course. Do you mind if I...?"

"No, please do."

With another fond smile and a gracious sweep of the hand, Casimir drifted into the kitchen and started rifling through the cabinets. Dan watched him, intimately familiar with the misleading busywork. When he started drifting towards the pantry, with its secret stash of laudanum, Dan swallowed his embarrassment, mustered his courage, and spoke.

"Who's Michael?" he asked.

Casimir went absolutely rigid.

"You called out for him," Dan explained. "When you were... before you were lucid."

"It is," said Casimir, trembling head to toe and choking on the words, "absolutely, unequivocally, none of your fucking business."
Dan raised his hands. "Understood. I'm sorry I asked."

Casimir took a deep breath, tapping his fingers on the kitchen counter. He made a fist, clenched it, and let the breath out as he flexed his fingers.

"Perhaps you should go," he said. "I'm certain you have more important things to do than make a nuisance of yourself here."

"I don't, actually."

"Was there not a murder case in progress?"

"There is, and that's why Gav isn't here. His job is to catch the murderers, and my job is making sure our friend doesn't die."

"Then you had better go and look after him."

"I was talking about you."

"I am not your friend, and you are not mine."

"Delighted to hear it, but Gav doesn't think so, and his is the mind you'll have to change. I'm afraid you're stuck with me, at least until you can convince me you'll still be alive in the morning."

"It's pointless idiocy, but fine; I'll lie to you if it will make you leave sooner."

"Look, after everything you've done for us, we're not just going to stand by and let you kill yourself."

"My God," Casimir spat. "Can I not simply be kind to people without having to endure their affection?"

"No! That's not how it works!"

"You've gotten what you wanted from me; now go away. You may return when you need something else, provided you refrain from caring about me."

"What the hell is wrong with you? What, honestly, goes through your head to make you spit out that much shit in one mouthful?"

Casimir slammed his hand down so hard that Dan nearly threw out his back jumping.

"I am a cruel and broken thing!" Casimir snarled. "There is nothing of me worth caring for, there is no part of me that will not hurt you! Would you hold a handful of broken glass if—"

"Yes!"

Casimir's voice died in his throat. He stared at Dan with eyes full of tears and a mouth empty of words. Dan roared onwards like a locomotive at full steam.

"A thousand, ten thousand times, yes! Smash every window in Paris and bring me the bits, and I'll cut my hands to ribbons on them if I can squeeze out an ounce of comfort!"

"Don't make promises you can't keep, you deluded imbecile," Casimir said. A pair of tears slipped down his face.
"Don't fucking call me names, you selfish prick," Dan retorted.

"If you knew the first thing about me—"

"So tell me! Tell me, and let's find out, and if you're right, then you won't have to deal with me caring anymore!"

Casimir drew himself up like a cobra preparing to strike. Dan braced for venomous words, for the cold and deadly truth of where he'd come from, who he'd robbed, what had gone on between him and Gav when Dan wasn't looking.

Instead, Casimir deflated. He shrank down, dimmed and rusted, all the fire in him burnt out. He tugged open a cabinet, fished out a bottle of whiskey, and tottered to the armchair. He sank into it as though simply standing was a Herculean task. When he spoke, his voice was flat, dull, exhausted.

"Michael is the reason I am trying to die," he said.

Dan stared at him. Casimir took a gulp of whiskey. He looked, suddenly, so much less alive—like an empty skin, a taxidermy man, all the glamor stripped away to reveal a sick, sad, hollow thing.

"All this," Dan wondered, "all the recklessness, all the drinking and drugs and sex—did you know the theatre troupe was plotting to kill you? Were you trying to get killed?"

"They wanted me dead and I wanted to die," he said dully. "It seemed an equitable arrangement."

"Good God. All of this, over a man?"

Casimir cracked a wry smile. "If you knew him, you wouldn't say it that way."

"I know you, and I said it like that on purpose. Look, Casimir, you're—you've got so much else going for you! You've got money, influence, good friends, and you're . . . I suppose good-looking, and intelligent, and you can be charming enough—"

"And all of it is worthless without him."

"No, that's not true at all."

Casimir met his eyes. An arrow of vicarious pain shot through Dan's heart.

"If you could have everything I have," Casimir said, "be everything that I am, and the only price you had to pay was to never see Gavin again; is that a deal you would take?"

Dan dropped his gaze. He rubbed the back of his neck and swallowed.

"No. Of course not."

Casimir turned out his hand and took a swig of whiskey. Dan sniffed and cleared his throat.

Against his better judgement, he asked, "Did you love him?"

"Did I love him," said Casimir, derisive. "I couldn't stop if I tried—and believe me, I have tried. It isn't a matter of did. I still do."

"Did he—stop me if I'm prying, but—did he love you?"

A breath of a laugh passed Casimir's lips. He drowned it with another gulp of whiskey.
"No," he said.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, Casimir. That's a rotten lot."

"Don't be. Don't ever be sorry for my misfortunes. I deserve every last one of them."

"What on earth did he do to you, that it's put you in such a terrible state?"

"It isn't what he did to me. It's what I did to him."

"And what was that?"

Casimir winced. He drank. He tapped the arm of his chair, idle agitation.

"I . . . hurt him," he admitted. "Badly, and often, and—undeservedly. I thought that it was for the best, that in the end he would understand why I had done what I did. Instead, I came to understand that why didn't matter. Nothing mattered except that I had hurt him."

"Been there," Dan sighed. "It's the most rotten lot there is."

"Daniel, I don't think you fully understand the caliber of cruelty I enacted on that man. It's unforgivable. It's unconscionable. He attempted to kill me, and I don't blame him for it. I wish he had succeeded. The only place I can fully absolve my debt is in Hell."

"You're really, tremendously dramatic, did you know that?"

Casimir glared at him. "As if you could possibly understand what I've done, you and your perfect love story."

Sitting back in his chair, Dan chewed his cheek and rolled his eyes and sighed.

"My wife," he said, "divorced me, and took our daughter away with her, because when I got back from Afghanistan, I made a weekly, sometimes daily habit of getting blind drunk and—and shouting, and throwing things, and scaring her half to death, and . . . in the end, at the worst of it . . . beating her. Sometimes in front of our daughter. Even then, she didn't leave. Not until Maggie—not until our daughter tried to stop me, and . . . well. You can guess."

Casimir's eyes went wide in total disbelief. Dan shrugged.

"I haven't seen either of them since," he went on. "Didn't even hire a lawyer for myself. Just signed whatever Sarah sent me and let them go. Wound up destitute, of course. For about a year after that, I tried my damnedest to drink myself to death, and ruining everything because of it, until he kicked my arse into shape. Then I got to start on my love story, and it has absolutely not been perfect, but we're working on it."

Still, Casimir took his time responding.

"Does Gavin know?" he asked.

"Of course he does. I thought you did, as well, after what that—thing said, at the séance."

"I decided to do you the courtesy of assuming it was all false."

"Well—it wasn't. Not all of it, anyway." He hesitated, then asked, "Should I do you the same courtesy?"
"Whatever will make you pity me less."

"Right. But—yes, Gav knows, and it scares him more than he'd like to admit. It's one of the many imperfections in our story."

"But you never hurt him. You learned your lesson before it mattered."

"If you think I don't spend every day of my life regretting what I put those women through, you're a damn fool. I live in fucking terror of going back to it. I lost everything, and I damn well deserved to. I lost any right I had to see my child grow up. Do you think that ever stops mattering?"

"And yet, here you are, clean and sober and well-loved," Casimir sneered. "Deservedly or not."

"Not! What I've done is utterly unforgivable, and I'll be the first to say so! But being miserable every day of my life wasn't doing Sarah and Maggie any good, and it was hurting the people who decided—rightly or not—to care about me, and so I pulled my shit together and learned how to be happy. I don't get to wallow in misery anymore. I haven't got the luxury."

"Which is precisely why I don't want anyone caring about me."

"Too late."

Casimir frowned at his bottle of whiskey, swirling it round and round, a bottle of amber sunset. With a heavy sigh, he set it on the table.

"I don't know how to let go," he said softly. "I don't know how I can possibly move forward. I think of him constantly, of all the things I wish I had said, and the apologies I should have made, and the farewells I never got to say. I drown myself in spirits and opium and the hollow pleasures of the flesh, and yet I always resurface to the same pain. I am consumed. I am ruined. He hated me enough to kill me, and yet . . . I am still in love with him."

"Then write him."

"No, God no, are you mad?" Casimir cried.

"Why not?"

"He wouldn't want to hear from me. It would hurt him."

"It's one letter, how much harm could it do? Worst case scenario, he burns it, stewes on it for a few weeks, and then gets on with his life."

"If you think that's the worst that can happen, you severely underestimate the gravity of the situation."

"Fine, maybe he turns up and succeeds in killing you this time. Grand! Then you haven't got to worry about doing it yourself."

Casimir raised his head, slowly, slowly, a look of something dangerously close to hope in his eyes. Dan's heart shrivelled up.

"That was an exaggeration," he clarified. "I didn't mean that seriously. Look, just—write to him, say all the things you wish you'd said, and either he'll respond and you'll have struck up a conversation, or he won't, and you'll know for certain he never wants to hear from you again. That's what I did with Sarah, and—it hurt like hell, and I'm sure it hurt her, too, and I hate that. But it was necessary. I
had to do it before I could move forward."

"And how long do I wait, before I know he wants nothing more to do with me? Six months? A year?"

"As long as it takes for you to find something else worth living for."

"Then all of this is simply a ploy to keep me alive a little longer."

"Well—yes. It is."

"God, you're a fool," Casimir muttered. He had another swig of whiskey.

"Cas, please."

"Don't call me that, Daniel. Your friendship is difficult enough to endure, I don't think I could bear your affection."

"Cards on the table, Casimir? I don't like you. I think you're an overblown, self-absorbed, cold-hearted bastard, with little to no regard for anybody but yourself."

He barked out a laugh, took a gulp of whiskey, and smacked the bottle down on the arm of his chair.

"If I asked you to put me out of my misery," he said, "would you do it?"

"Absolutely not."

"Despite my being an overblown, self-absorbed, cold-hearted bastard?"

"Gav's all those things, as well, but we've gone through an awful lot of mess to prevent his execution anyway."

"But you love him."

"And he's very fond of you, so I'm invested in your well-being whether I like you personally or not."

"I can't fathom what you stand to gain from this," said Casimir, shaking his head. "If I am so unpleasant, then why don't you leave? There is nothing I can offer you or Gavin that a thousand others couldn't, and none of them with the attendant miseries that I bring. Why are you holding so tight to someone who is sinking so quickly?"

"Because seeing people in pain distresses me."

"You could stop looking at any time."

"And you would still be in pain. I am trying to pull you out of the water, Casimir. The least you could do is stop swimming down."

"No one asked—"

"Ah-ah! Stop. Stop it. Go and get a pen and paper. We're writing a letter."

Casimir bristled. "We are doing no such thing,. Whether I write it or not, you'll have nothing to do with it."

"All right, all right," said Dan, surrendering. "I know when to quit. But look, at least let me take that
bottle off your hands. If there's one thing that's not going to help you, it's being less sober."

Casimir looked from the bottle to Dan and back again. With a tremendous sigh, he put it back on the table and stuck the stopper back in it.

"Take it," he said. "It's been no help so far; I don't expect it will be any help going forward."

"I'm glad you're finally seeing sense. Now, if I go and help Gav with that murder case, are you going to be here when we get back?"

He chewed on it for a good long while, pain and exhaustion chasing each other across his face while his blistered fingers picked at the upholstery.

At last, he said, "Yes."

"All right," said Dan. "Then—unless you'd like me to stay—I think I ought to be going."

"Are you joking? I thought I was going to be stuck with you all night."

"You were only going to be stuck with me until I was convinced it was safe to leave you."


"I didn't mean it like that. Listen, if you want me to stay—"

"I do," said Casimir, with a sudden and sincere vulnerability that stopped Dan in his tracks. "Of course I do. But you don't, and so you should go. Gavin needs you more."

"He does have Gabriel with him. Er, presumably."

"Presumably. Go, Daniel. I will still be here when you get back."

"Well, all right," said Dan, rising. "I'm trusting you on this one."

"Thank you," said Casimir. He, too, got to his feet. As he showed Dan to the door, Dan swept up the bottle from the table on his way past.

"But not quite this much," Dan said, gesturing with it. "And stay out of the laudanum, as well, I know you've got it."

"In general, I avoid it whenever possible," said Casimir. "I can't stand the stuff. Just the smell of it makes me ill."

"Good. Then I'll see you soon, I suppose. If not for help with the case, then just to be sure you've kept your promises."

The faintest of smiles turned up the corner of Casimir's mouth.

"You will notice, through careful observation, that I promised you nothing," he said. "But I will try to be conscious next time you come calling."

"I appreciate that. And you might want to think of some way to smooth things over with Gav, because I'll be damned if I know how you're going to make up for that dress bit. Though—I know you tried. I'm sure that'll mean something to him."

"I'll work something out. Good evening, Daniel."
"Good evening."

Casimir ushered him out, started to close the door behind him, and stopped.

"One more thing," he said, with a thoughtful expression.

"Hm?"

"I seem to recall you mentioned something about an officer, yes? One who might have been connected with the Brotherhood?"

"Might've said a word or two about it. Why?"

Still, Casimir chewed on it for a little longer before answering.

"If he is a member, he will have a tattoo," he said. "Likely, it will resemble the sigil that Mr Jones sent. It will be small, somewhere not easily noticed by passers-by; an ankle, or a shoulder, or a thigh—even the small of the back. But it will be there."

"How do you know?"

His eyes twinkled. The small smile grew a little larger.

"I know everything, Daniel," he said. "Surely, you must have realized that by now."
Bacchanalia

Dan made it about six blocks before the bottle burned a hole in his resolve. The first concession was not throwing it away, which he knew was a mistake; but it was very good whiskey, expensive, and he was certain he could find someone to give it away to, rather than letting it go to waste. The second concession was wrapping it up; he couldn’t, after all, be seen walking about with the thing, lest he be picked up by the police or—worse—have to explain himself if he ran into Gav.

The third concession was the most natural of all, the easiest and simplest thing; he’d been doing so well so far, and none of his little sips here or there had gotten him into trouble; why, it had been two whole weeks since he’d gotten blackout drunk at Casimir’s, and he’d handled himself admirably, so what would it hurt to have one or two more sips on the way back to the hotel? After everything he’d been through, he’d earned a bit of relaxation.

And then, of course, because one or two sips went so well, it became three or four sips, which became eight, and twelve, and then he’d lost count but it didn’t matter because for the first time in ages he wasn’t scared and nothing hurt.

Making his way down some street or other (they all looked the same), he took up singing, whatever came to mind and at whatever volume best suited him. He couldn’t remember most of the words—to anything—but certainly that was only because he hadn’t sung in so long.

"'S a damned tragedy, 's what it is," he said, mostly to everyone but partially to the young woman loitering on the street corner. "I ask you. I mean I ask you, right, where's all the joy in life gone off to, eh? 'S all misery and drudgery and—and other sorts of -eries, innit. Horrible. Horrible! 'S like even the best people you know, right, have these little—little bastard bits hidden away, even the best of 'em. Wonder I've not killed myself yet, frankly."

"Yes, yes," she said, nodding along. "It is a very sad world. If you would like something nice, sir, something more pleasant, perhaps I can help you."

Dan squinted at her, looked her up and down, and burst out laughing.

"Oh, sweet'eart, you're barkin' up the wrong bloody tree, love," he said. "Wrong wrong wrong bloody tree. 'S barely even a tree, really. Here though, here, have a sip, I'm not a monster. Keep you warm. 'S chilly out, innit, too bloody chilly to be dressed like that. Brr! Freeze your poor—poor—freeze your ears off, won't you."

She caught the bottle as he gestured with it and took a hearty gulp.

"Santé," she said. "Maybe you have a friend, who is more of the right tree?"

"Me? No. Not a one. Got no friends at all, really, me. 'S 'cos of the drink. I'm a right bastard when I'm drunk, en't I."

"Not so. You are very sweet."

He tapped his nose, leaning up against the lamppost next to her to keep from falling over.

"Yeah, but I'm not drunk," he said conspiratorially.

"Oh, no, I am mistaken. Of course you are not, you are just a jolly old Englishman."
"Damn right."

From the blurry soup of the Paris evening, another figure emerged, sidling up like a crab in a suit. From the tips of his mirror-shined shoes to the silky heights of his top hat, he was the poshest, oiliest, most insufferable twat Dan had ever laid eyes on—and that included Casimir.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, in simply the most cultured and perfect French. "Is this gentleman bothering you?"

"No, sir," she replied, coquettish on the instant. "I believe he was just leaving."

"Like hell I was," said Dan. The French slid off his tongue like raw oysters, bitter and slimy. "Who the fuck are you, then?"

The man looked him over like he was a particularly talkative bit of rubbish, then turned back to the woman.

"I believe I saw the police patrolling just down the block," he said. "It would certainly be no trouble to have him removed, if he's disturbing you."

Dan shoved him in the shoulder, hard enough to make him stumble. "Oy, you fat cunt, I was talking to you."

"Stop it," the woman hissed. "Get out of here, go away."

"Piss off," Dan retorted. "Go whore someplace else, if you're that worried about the fucking coppers. Plenty of slimy rich fucks out there."

"And plenty of useless drunks to go with them!"

Dan upended the bottle of whiskey over her cleavage. She shrieked and shoved him back. Laughing, he stumbled, the world spinning round him. The man dealt him a ringing blow across the jaw. The bottle slipped from his hand and smashed on the cobbles.

A red mist swamped Dan's vision. He grabbed the man's cravat and slammed the other fist into his face, once, twice, three times until he lost his grip on the silk. The man staggered back and fell on his arse. Dan kicked him as hard as he could. A great oomph of breath rushed out of him. Dan kicked him again, again and again, revelling in the way he cowered and cried out, the sheer pathetic helplessness of him.

"Not so fucking big now, are you?" Dan spat. "How d'you fucking like that, you stuck-up twat!"

The woman grabbed Dan by the jacket and dragged him back. He rounded on her with gusto, landed a heavy right hook to the temple. She crumpled. Delighted by his own strength, Dan turned back round and took up pummelling the rich bloke in the face.

"Hé, toi là!"

Dan snapped to attention. A pair of blurry figures dashed towards him. The French was garbled, but the tone was unmistakeably policeman-like. Cursing under his breath, he lurched to his feet and took off running.

Cobbles pounded under his shoes, a dozen back-alleys and staggering sidesteps. He ducked through a crowd, across a street, dodged one carriage and nearly went under the wheels of another. Shouting and police whistles filled his ears. He put his head down, hunched his shoulders, wriggled through
the crowd on the opposite side of the street and slid into an alley so narrow he couldn't turn frontways through it. When he popped out the other side, the clamour was more distant, muffled. After a minute and a half plastered to the wall, he lost the sound of pursuit entirely.

With a great, laughing sigh, Dan folded over.

"Bloody hell!" he said to no one, and laughed again. "D'you know what, I could use a bloody drink, me."

Across the street, there was an invitingly bright and noisy building, golden light spilling through wide amber windows. Dan spat on his kerchief and wiped the blood off his knuckles, straightened up, focused hard, and walked in a straight line right into the pub. He shouldered his way up to the bar, caught the bartender's attention, and ordered a whiskey double, neat.

"Long night, eh?" the man next to him remarked, when Dan gulped down the whole thing in one go.

Dan grinned. "Just getting started, mate."

Face down in a gutter, dizzy and miserably ill, Dan had to wonder how he'd gotten back here.

It was obviously his own fault—because everything was his fault—but there had to be something that had done it. Maybe it was hanging about with Casimir too much, watching him drink himself into oblivion and envious of the descent. Maybe it was the stress of everything to do with Gav, pushing him farther and farther along his rope until he was down at the drunken end. Or maybe—maybe he was just a horrible, cowardly, soft-headed, weak-willed bastard who ruined everything he touched, and he always had been and he always would be, and he ought to just drown in this stupid gutter because that's all he was good for.

Yeah, that was probably it.

A pair of strong hands clamped onto his arms and heaved him up. Through the tears and the alcoholic blur, he couldn't make out a face. He was dragged somewhere, chucked up onto a wooden floor. A door slammed. There was a lurch of movement—or maybe that was just his head.

A bucket of freezing cold water hit him in the face.

Dan sat bolt upright, sputtering and blinking. He wiped the water off his face and took in his surroundings, too startled to keep being miserable. The space was small, filled with a sway and bounce, the rattle of wheels on cobble, the clopping of hooves. There were two other people in with him, seated on hard wooden benches along the walls. Before him was a small grating, showing the back of someone's head. Dan hauled himself up and mashed his face against it, trying to work out who it was.

He was White, short-haired, with thick sideburns and a policeman's cap. There was some kind of birthmark on the back of his neck, a dark splotch poking out above the collar of his uniform. From this angle, Dan couldn't see the man's face—although policeman was description enough, from where he was sitting.

"'S goin' on?" Dan asked.

"Good evening, Mr Gruchy," said the driver. The voice was familiar.
"Lieutenant Durant?" said Dan, startled. "Oof, Christ alive, who've you pissed off? I mean to say, a lieutenant driving the bloody paddy wagon? Now I've seen everything."

"It's a dirty job, Mr Gruchy, but someone has to do it."

"Yeah, but I thought that's what you had constables and the like for. D'you have constables in France?"

"We do not."

"Ah, s'pose that explains it, then. Must be a quiet night out, 's awfully empty back here, innit."

"Quiet enough," said Durant.

"D'you know, you've got something on the back of your neck, just there. 'S that a birthmark or something?"

"Yes."

"Funny. D'you know—d'you know I've never seen you from the back before? Always at your bloody desk, aren't you. Never seen you not behind that bloody desk. What d'you even do all day, d'you just sit behind that desk?"

"Whenever possible."

"Ah, and then at night they send you out to drive the paddy wagon and get upchucked upon, do they? Must've pissed somebody off up there. Who've you pissed off, what'd you fuck up? Love to hear about it."

"You won't."

"Love to hear about you fucking up, 'cos you're a right prick, d'you know that? Bloody useless, too. S'pose they found out about the—the—the culty fellow you've got in your ranks, bet that's why they've set you to driving the paddy wagon. 'Cos you've got a fat traitor right under your stupid stubby nose. That'll show you, won't it. Hah. 'S what you get for being rude to Gav. 'Cusing him of murder. The nerve."

"I could have arrested you both, very easily."

"And you'd be out of a bloody job if you had, wouldn't you. 'Stead of driving the drunk round-up. Least it's a nice one. Least it's a nice night. Or otherwise you're not doing your bloody job again, wouldn't surprise me. Ought to be chock-bloody-full of drunks back here."

"Do you have much experience with these sorts of rides, Mr Gruchy?"

At the sound of that equally familiar voice, Dan turned round. After much squinting and struggling and making of faces, the two figures in the back with him resolved into Fennec and Corsac Albain. Dan dropped onto the bench under the grating and rubbed his head. His ears were starting to ring, like his body desperately wanted to pass out but couldn't quite manage it.

"More than's good for me, I'll tell you that much," he said. "'S nice, though, this one. Doesn't smell like piss and sick, for one, puts it well above all the other—other—hic other times I've been picked up, d'you know."

"I imagine that must be exceedingly unpleasant," said Fennec.
"Christ alive, you've no bloody idea."

"Language, Mr Gruchy," Corsac scolded.

"Oh, shit, sorry. Er—fucking Hell, you've no bloody idea."

Up at the front, Durant snorted. The Albains exchanged a quietly amused look.

"Wait, hang on, actually," said Dan, peering at the two of them. "What're the two of you doing in back of the bloody paddy wagon? Surely you two haven't been about carousing. Caroozing? Car—mucking about. Have you?"

"Us?" said Fennec.

"Certainly not," said Corsac.

"We are simply here to provide guidance and comfort to the poor lost souls the lieutenant sweeps up."

Dan's lip curled. "Right, yeah, of course you are." And then, as the words percolated through, "Am I—you're taking me to jail, aren't you. We're going—we're going to lock me up for the night. That's what—oh, Christ alive."

"Ahem," said Corsac.

"Sorry; oh, bollocks." A laugh bubbled through his lips. He clapped a hand over his mouth until it subsided. "Oh, Gav's going to kill me. Er, Free. Mr Free. Mr Detective Free. He's going to kill me. Hahah. Bollocks."

"Oh?" said Fennec, politely interested.

"Oh," said Dan. "I'm not meant to be drunk. Or—or—or out and about. Bloody hell, I've—look at my hands, I've bloody done for someone, haven't I. Oh, shit, all that—shitting happened, didn't it, fuck me sideways."

He put his head in his hands. The carriage was tilting about like mad, unsettling his stomach. He couldn't find a proper rhythm for his breathing. The ringing in his ears intensified, setting his teeth on edge. This had been a mistake. This had all been a gigantic mistake. How had it all gone so wrong so quickly?

"There there," said Corsac, patting his shoulder. "The vices of men are many, and Mr Free is not without his own. I'm certain he can find it in his heart to forgive you for your trespasses."

"I'm bloody not," Dan mumbled. "Soon's he notices I've gone missing, he'll—he'll—prob'ly just leave me there to rot, honestly."

"He isn't expecting you anywhere?"

"Not anytime soon, 'cos I was stuck bloody nannying bloody Casimir. Who's prob'ly going to bloody off himself now I've gone, and that'll be my bloody fault, too. God, just—just—just lock me up and throw away the key, honestly, I don't want him to find me,’s better if he just doesn't know."

"That, I believe, could be arranged," said Fennec.

"Secrecy, dear brother?" Corsac said. "That's hardly a Christian value."
"Ah, perhaps not, but forgiveness and reformation surely are. It sounds to me as though to expose Mr Gruchy's vices is to damn him to a miserable reckoning."

"But to keep them secret is to allow them to persist, is it not?"

"Not at all, dear brother. The demons of wrath and strong drink are just as easily purged as those of more uncommon name."

"Of course. How silly of me."

"Hang on," said Dan, looking between the two of them.

"Don't worry, it is not a lengthy process," said Fennec, smiling at him.

"Lieutenant Durant, could you take us to the secondary location, perhaps?" Corsac called.

Dan's heart climbed up into his throat. The faint ringing in his ears resolved into the sound of warning bells. He bit his tongue. He looked up at Durant, intent upon his driving, and willed his eyes to focus. Slowly but surely, the little splotch on the nape of Durant's neck resolved, blurry and doubled and swimming, but perfectly recognizable.

Infinity, cut with a diagonal slash.

Dan threw himself at the back door. Each Albain grabbed an arm. Dan thrashed like his life depended on it. They wrestled him back into his seat, taking kicks to the shins and thighs and carrying on regardless.

"Let me go!" Dan screamed. "You fucking frauds, let me go!"

Corsac dealt him a resounding strike across the temple. His vision whited out. His limbs went numb. He toppled out of his seat and onto the floor. He couldn't get his legs underneath him. Fennec and Corsac and Durant were talking, laughing. Dan made a clumsy lurch for the back door. The carriage hit a bump and cracked his chin on the floorboards. Sparks swarmed his vision.

"Gabriel," he gasped. "You don't—you don't understand, she—he'll kill her, he'll kill her. . . ."

"Yes, Mr Gruchy," Durant said. "That's the idea."

"No. No, no, no, you can't—you can't. . . ."

Fennec knelt on his back and pressed a damp cloth over his mouth and nose. A cloying stench filled his sinuses. He struggled. Corsac grabbed his wrists and held him down. Fennec pressed his other hand to the back of Dan's head, clamping him in like a vice. The harder he fought, the more of the vapours he sucked into his lungs, until he could taste the chemical on the back of his tongue. His strength failed him. He couldn't focus his eyes. Even when Fennec and Corsac let go of him, he could do nothing but lie on the floor and whimper, bruised by every bounce in the road, helpless and dizzy and too drugged up to even be properly afraid.

Amongst the fog in his head, amongst the numbness and confusion, only one thought persevered. 

Gabriel.
By the time Dan regained his wits, one thing had become abundantly clear: he was *fucked.*

He was bound hand and foot to a chair. His head was still muzzy from the drugs and the drink. Bright lights shone down upon him, blinding, sweltering. There were shuffling footsteps, muffled voices. The smells of mildew and sawdust and candle wax filled the air. The black floor at his feet had been painted with thick white lines, curves and angles, sigils and symbols. He couldn't tell what it was, but he was in the centre of it. He was not gagged. As he mustered himself to speak, someone leaned in close and spoke into his ear.

"Keep your mouth shut, and you may survive," Blake hissed. "Where is Karine?"

"Wh—what? I don't—where am I, where's—"

"Shut up. The others haven't realized you're awake. Where is Karine?"

A distant voice reached Dan, familiar in its vulpine disinterest—Corsac or Fennec, he couldn't tell which one. His heart skipped a beat. He jerked on the ropes holding him.

"Gabriel," he gasped. "Gabriel, I—I've got to—they haven't really exorcised him, it isn't safe, she isn't—"

Blake slapped him across the face so hard his ears rang.

"Drunken imbecile! Just answer the damned question!"

"Whoah, hey, careful there, honey, you're gonna break his poor li'l neck!"

Blinking stars from his eyes, Dan raised his head. A blurry figure approached over Blake's shoulder—blonde, shortish, as weathered and sun-bleached as its accent.

"I was growing tired of watching an unconscious man," Blake said, smoothing down her skirts. "He mumbles in his sleep. It is aggravating."

"Well, shoot, then I'll just take him off your hands for ya!" Elyse chirped. "I'd say we oughtta gag him, but he'd prob'ly choke to death on it, and that'd be a real shame, huh?"

"Desperately unfortunate," said Blake, every syllable clipped to a razor-sharp edge.

"Guess it's a moot point anyhow, 'cuz looks like you done woke him up. Howdy there, Mr Dan! You remember li'l ole me?"

"How. . . ?" he croaked, still reeling. Elyse grinned at him and tipped an imaginary hat.

"Boy, you sure do! Always nice to make an impression. Guess you're wonderin' how I got outta lockup so soon. Well shoot, I'll tell ya, since the whole entire cat's already outta the bag. Our good pal Jock—that'd be ol' lieutenant Doo-rant—he pulled him a couple strings and got me sprung out lickety-split! Real handy fella, we're gonna keep him."

"The—the newspapers? The leak?"
"Yessiree bob! Like I said, real handy fella. Though boy, we just about shit ourselves laughin' when he told us y'all was plannin' on framin' Peake for what happened to ole Bonesy. Hoo buddy did y'all screw the pooch on that one!"

With a groan, Dan shook his head, trying to clear it. He couldn't focus his eyes. He was going to be sick. He had to get out of here, or he was going to die and Gabriel was going to die and God only knew what was going to happen to Gav.

"Why weren't . . . why didn't he arrest us? And—Saint-Prix, what was the bit about the . . . castle or whatever in Saint-Prix?"

Elyse patted his head. "Bless your soul, but you ain't the sharpest tool in the shed, are ya. If y'all had wound up in prison, we woulda just had to getcha right back out again! Y'ain't no good to us in prison."

"The Saint-Prix diversion was Bones' idea," Blake said, distasteful. "He feared for his safety and wanted you out of Paris. He was told not to do it, and did it anyway."

Twinkling, Elyse said, "For all the good it did him. Cain't say it wasn't satisfyin'."

"No," Blake allowed. "I cannot say that."

A phrase swam up in the soup of Dan's thoughts, mumbled in foetid darkness.

_They're splintering like mad. If we can just work out where to hit them. . . ._

"He was . . . working alone?" said Dan. "Without the rest of you?"

"Yep, that's what the word _alone_ tends to mean, sweetie-pie," Elyse said.

"Like Ms Belladonna?"

Blake went ice cold at his side. The handprint on his jaw stung and ached. Elyse frowned, tipping her head to the side.

"Honey, you really must be drunk as hell, 'cuz I ain't think you were dumb enough to try some shit like that. Blake darlin', you can hit him again, if you w—"

She did. His head rang like a church bell. Sparks swarmed his vision. If he hadn't been tied to the chair, he would've fallen out of it. He tasted blood.

He spat it on Blake's dress and said, "Jenzen's in prison and he'll die in prison."

Blake went for him like a mad dog. The chair toppled over. Something _cracked_. Pain exploded through his right side. Blows rained down on his face and chest. He thrashed against his restraints. Blake grabbed his neck and wrung it, battering his head against the floor, drawing blood with her fingernails. Dan choked and gasped and struggled, helpless, as his tongue swelled in his mouth and his head filled with red-hot pain and the darkness encroached on his vision.

"Blake."

The voice was almost inaudible, and yet she stopped. After three wheezing gasps—perhaps with some prompting—the hold on Dan's neck released. He coughed, sucking down air even though it burned his throat like hot smoke. Elyse set him back upright. He would've preferred to stay on the floor. Things spun too much up here. Blood oozed down his face and neck, trickling into the collar
of his shirt. Even with no weight on them, his knees were jelly. He couldn't feel either of his hands, and his shoulders were so sore he could barely turn his head. One of his ribs felt broken. The chair, unfortunately, did not.

In hindsight, maybe it hadn't been the best plan.

The soft voice came again, saying, "Go get ready." Blake shot a murderous glare at Dan before stalking off.

As she did, Peake himself approached, as mousy and unassuming and bored as ever.

"You," said Dan. The blood on his breath made his voice hoarse. The lingering drugs and alcohol and the blows to his head made his mouth clumsy.

"Hey," said Peake.

"He's a real trouble-maker, this'un," Elyse said fondly, clapping Dan on the shoulder. "You hear what he said to Blake? Hoo-ee, I thought she was fixin' to kill him."

Peake shrugged. "Yeah, well."

All round them, the motion of the crowd changed. Figures emerged from the darkness, shrouded in black cloaks. The bright stage lights cast deep shadows over their faces, revealing only hints of features, glints of eyes. Some of them began setting out candles while others waved incense around, while still others set up some sort of bowl on a pedestal and filled it with little sachets from their pockets.

"He's not—he isn't going to come after me, you know," Dan said, struggling to keep his head together. "You've made a—a . . . your little trap won't work. Free isn't coming."

"He doesn't have to," said Peake.

The floor dropped out from under Dan. He forgot how to breathe. A scream was building in his chest, blood and bile turned flammable by the vapours of potent spirits. The assembled crowd swirled round him like the tarry waters of a swamp. The scent of incense and burnt matches washed over him.

"What—but—then why—?"

"See, that's the beauty of the thing, honey," Elyse said, grinning. "Those Albain boys sure do a mean exorcism, and hell, for all I know, it might even work! But it don't matter one li'l bit, nor even if y'all took off runnin' to some-damn-where in the middle of no-place. We just picked you for the key 'cuz you was convenient."

"Key? What key? What are you talking about?"

"You know all that shit we carved in poor li'l Free's chest? That's a door."

Behind her, with no fanfare or flourish, Peake drew a revolver. He checked it over, cocked it, and pointed it at Dan's chest.

"Just have to unlock it," he said.

The panic boiled over and tumbled out of Dan's mouth. "Wait, wait, wait, you—you don't understand, you don't know what you're doing. It'll kill you, it'll kill all of you if you let it loose
again. Brouillard was just the beginning, just a—a bloody appetizer! You won't be able to bargain with it, it's not going to listen to you. Look, I know—I've heard it talk, it's said as much!"

The motion of the crowd slowed, drawn by Dan's frantic shouting. Even the candle flames stilled from their flickering. Elyse straightened up, looking about as the members all turned inward, towards centre stage. Peake took no notice, kept his aim on Dan's heart like he was waiting for something.

"Look, what is it you want?" Dan cried, in utter desperation. "There's got to be better ways than this! I'm serious, you're signing your own death warrants with that thing!"

"Hoc per sacrificio," Peake said, sighting down the pistol, his wrist steadied on his other hand, "nos te exsuscitamus, O scolopendra inferne, ut—"

Dan squeezed his eyes shut and prayed, as hard as he could, as loud as he could, to anyone or anything who might be listening.

*Please save Gav and Gabriel. Please help them. Please.*

"Actually, I find that to be a pertinent question."

"A somewhat important question, indeed, for how often it's been dismissed."

Dan cracked an eye open. The Albain brothers had stepped forward from the mass of shrouded figures, shoulder to shoulder, watching Peake with their beady, calculating eyes. Peake sighed. The corners of his mouth pinched. From Dan's other side, there was a rustle of cloth.

"Yeah, I'm pretty curious, too," said another man—scarred, American, vaguely familiar—one of Casimir's dalliances from the Ravin Rouge. "What's so important that it's worth risking all our lives for?"

"Ain't nobody's life at risk, darlin', settle down," said Elyse.

"Curious," Durant remarked, though he remained hidden in the crowd. "All evidence suggests otherwise. What are the current casualties of this enterprise, again? I believe it was hovering near the half-dozen mark."

"Only because you refuse to get anyone else out of prison," Blake snapped, also keeping out of sight.

"I was instructed not to," said Durant. "On the promise that soon, everything would work itself out—if only I had faith."

"That sounds familiar," said Corsac.

"Very familiar," Fennec agreed.

From the wings near the stage door, there came another, immediately recognizable voice.

"Hahah, all right, well this has all been lots of fun but I think I really need to get going now," said Dr Dufresne. Dan could just hear him sweating.

"Honey-bunches, you put a finger on that door and I'm gonna blow your dumb li'l head off," Elyse said sweetly.

Dufresne let out a strangled squeak and, wisely, did not say anything else.

"So many of Dubois' friends in this room," Dan managed, still fighting the clumsiness of his tongue,
still keeping both eyes on the revolver in Peake's hand. "Surprised he's not come along."

"Well, we had to rope him in somehow or 'nother, so we ain't leave nothin' up to chance," said Elyse. "Now how 'bout you shut your mouth and die real quick, O.K. honey?"

A clamour broke out, filled with no and wait and hang on just one moment. Peake and Elyse shared a quick, sharp glance. Elyse nodded. Peake pointed the revolver at the ceiling.

"What?" he said.

"Where is our assurance, Mr Peake, that we will not be slaughtered in our beds?" someone demanded.

"You won't be."

"How will you control the creature?" asked another.

"Same as always."

A third piped up: "Which clearly hasn't worked!"

The clamour rose again, Brouillard and monster and self-serving bastards. Dan risked a glance round, the sea of faces twisted with suspicion and the immense cowardice of the greedy. He flexed his fingers and twisted his wrists and shifted his centre of balance, ever so slightly.

"Everybody shut up!" Elyse snarled, ripping another revolver from her belt—Casimir's revolver, doubtless stolen from Dan's pocket while he was incapacitated. There was an outcry, followed by silence. She smiled round at the assembled, her composure at last worn thin enough to show the rusty steel underneath.

But still, Blake squared her shoulders and spoke out.

"I think we would all like an answer to Mr Gruchy's question, Elyse," she said. "What is it that you want?"

"Me?" Elyse said, turning to her. The crowd rolled like a wave as the muzzle of the revolver swept across it. "I'll tell you what I want. I want my goddamn husband back. But since I ain't never gonna get that, I gotta settle for tearin' the fuckin' throat outta the sonnuva bitch that killed him."

Blake's jaw tightened. Her lip curled. Her fists clenched at her sides.

"All of this," she said, "over a worthless, idiot man?"

Elyse popped off one of those cheery, sunshiney smiles. "Well fuck you too, you dumb bitch."

The weapon trained on her head. Blake locked up, white with terror.

"You're pointing it the wrong way!" Dan shouted, before he even knew what he was saying.

"Would you shut the actual, honest-to-fuck up?" Elyse snapped, rounding on him.

"You know it wasn't the Vagabond," said Dan. The words poured through his lips like blood, black and gritty—but Elyse stopped, fury turning to confusion, suspicion.

"Huh?" she said.
"Free worked it out," Dan went on. "Jones—Jones, in America, the one who caught him and hanged him—he worked it out, as well, just like—but what you don't know, what they haven't told you—it was one of the cult, Elyse. It was one of your cult."

"All right, enough," Peake sighed, rolling his eyes. "Look, everybody: no one's gonna die. We have infrastructure for this stuff. Just have to finish, y'know, doing it. This guy's full of crap. Let's get on with this."

Very, very slowly, Elyse turned round.

"Matthew," she said. "Who told you what happened to my James?"

He frowned. "Hey, don't you start."

"You answer me right the hell now!"

All round them, the crowd was backing away, exchanging glances and looking for exits. Blake had already slipped through the line and was inching towards the stage door.

Peake shrugged. "Papers said."

"Just the goddamn papers? When I know you was up near Lovelock when it happened, when I know you was talkin' to some damn-ass banker sonnuva bitch about bailin' James and them out?"

"Yeah," said Peake, unflapped. "They got out, and then the Vagabond got them."

"Did he, Matthew?" she hissed, her finger twitching against the trigger guard of her revolver. "Did he?"

Making a face, Peake shrugged again. Elyse aimed at his head.

"Y'know, I changed my mind, partner," she spat. "I think I wanna know about Gruchy's question, too. What the hell are you in this for?"


"Try again."

"Elyse, c'mon."

"No," she said, trembling with fury, her finger curling ever tighter on the trigger, pulling the hammer back millimetre by millimetre. "You answer me, Matthew. After all the shit I done, after all the shit you promised me: what the fuck do you got to say for yourself?"

He thought about it. His mouth pinched over to one side. His big doe eyes wandered over the assembled crowd. He shrugged one more time.

"Nihil vere permanens," he said.

The gunshot was deafening.

Dan flinched. Someone screamed. Peake toppled forward and landed with a heavy thud. The muzzle of Elyse's revolver sketched silver figure-eights in the air. When she spoke, her voice came muffled through the cotton in Dan's ears.

"Anybody else got some dumb shit to say?" she asked. "'Cuz I got five more shots."
The crowd held perfectly still. Dark red blood oozed out in a puddle under Peake's head, creeping over the paint on the floor. His eyes were open and glassy, his face frozen in an expression of mild surprise. The heat of the stage lights beat down, a deluge, a waterfall, suffocating and muggy. The smell of blood was sharp as needles. An insect whine filled Dan's ears. He couldn't unclench his fists.

"O.K. then," said Elyse, turning back to him. She took aim, steadied it with her other hand. "So now we got that shit outta the way, let's get back to goddamn business."

"What for?" Dan croaked. "What's—what's the point, now?"

"The point, you damn-ass fool, is that I feel like shootin' your ass dead. The point is that I still got business with the no-good cock-suckin' sonnuva bitch who thought I was too fuckin' dumb to tell he was the—"

The stage door blew clean off its hinges. It smashed against the far wall, splinters and dust. The crowd scrambled back. Elyse whirled round. Dan's body couldn't decide if it wanted to pass out or throw up and therefore managed to do neither.

Two lights like candle flames ignited in the dark outside, one twice as bright as the other. A jack-o-lantern glow oozed down from them, tracing out sigils and symbols, arcane artwork cast in flame. A murmur broke out, terrified. The crowd flowed back like oil from a drop of soap.

Orphinaeus, wearing Gav's body but unmistakable nonetheless, stepped through the open doorway, cracked its knuckles, and grinned.

"Hello, lovelies," it purred, vicious and delighted. "Miss me?"

Elyse stared at it. She looked down at Peake's body, at the blood soaking into the fresh-painted sigils, and back at Orphinaeus.

"Wellp," she said. "Shit."

With a deafening BANG and a blinding muzzle-flash, the Théâtre plunged into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Invocation translation: "By this sacrifice, we awaken you, oh infernal centipede, in order to—"
Broken glass rained down from the stage lights. Purple splotches filled Dan's vision, obscuring the jack-o-lantern light of Orphinaeus. Globs of orange glow spattered the floor, tracing an arrow-straight line from the muzzle of Elyse's revolver to Gav's feet. Thin grey tendrils leaked from the wicks of the ritual candles. A low hiss filled the Théâtre, hollow and metallic. The air was thick with the stench of blood and gunpowder. Dan's heartbeat thundered in his ears, throbbed in his hands and feet and neck. The entire crowd of cultists was somehow behind him, now, all but Elyse and the cooling corpse of Matthew Peake.

Orphinaeus raised its spotlight eyes and grinned like a crescent moon. The empty socket blazed brighter than the other, like an open furnace beside a closed one.

"Not quite, love," it said. "Have another go."

BANG! went the gun, and Dan started so hard he nearly dislocated his shoulder. Another glob of molten metal spattered onto the stage, curling smoke and the smell of burning varnish.

"What the shit," Elyse hissed. Her voice shook. "What in the fuck—"

"One more, just for good measure, eh? Before I get started."

She backed away, silhouetted against the lamplight spilling through the open doorway. A figure darted out, nothing more than a swirl of skirts and shadows. Orphinaeus' head whipped round. It hesitated, but then Elyse backed up another step, and its attention slammed back onto her.

It stepped forward. There was a great shuffling as everyone but Dan stepped back. Again, Orphinaeus grinned, flexing its fingers at its side. In the left hand, something silver gleamed in the hellish glow.

"Come on, old girl," it taunted, laughing. "Who's afraid of poor little Free?"

Elyse bumped into Dan's knee, stumbled, ducked round behind him. She clutched the chair so hard the wood creaked. The revolver stayed fixed on Orphinaeus.

"We called you," said Elyse, choked with terror. "Now—now you gotta answer to us. That's how this works. You cain't do nothin' we don't tell you to."

Orphinaeus paused and tipped its head to the side. Its gaze wandered onto Dan, pressing down with the suffocating intensity of the Arabian sun. The low, metallic hiss grew louder, accompanied by a smell of sulphur. Dan pressed back against the chair. In the darkness, Orphinaeus seemed ten feet tall, spindly and glowing and monstrous.

"Allo there, Danny boy," it said. "It's a good look for you, that. Look good bloody and beaten. Not to worry, though. I'll save you for last."

"That's not reassuring," said Dan, too delirious with terror to think better of it.

Orphinaeus grinned. "Nah, but look at it this way: you get to watch."

"That's definitely not reassuring!"

"I believe this has gone far enough," said Corsac Albain, stepping forward. Fennec trailed at his
elbow, significantly less composed. Even Corsac wavered when Orphinaeus turned its full, undivided attention on him.

"Do you?" it spat. "We all know what your bloody belief is worth. The Big Man hates a liar. Does that little collar burn when you put it on?"

"Fennec, have you the items?"

"Ah," said Fennec, "about that."

Corsac paled. The stench of sulphur was overwhelming, dizzying, choking. Orphinaeus cackled.

"Ooh, I know whose guts I'm rippin' out first!" it crowed. "And then, let's see, not spoiled for choice on cunts, but—"

Elyse fired a third time.

And the whole world exploded.

Dan coughed himself back into focus. His ears rang. The Théâtre was in flames, curtains and set-pieces and seats, boxes and balconies, ropes and rafters. Jets of fire spewed from the stage lights, from the gas lines bolted to the walls. Screams rang out through the smoke. The stench of burned hair and cloth surrounded him. His entire right side was red with pain, needling and sticky.

Someone was untying his hands.

"What—?" he choked, trying to get upright.

"Hold still," said Gabriel. Her voice shook, though her hands were quick about their work. Dan craned his neck far enough to see her glance over her shoulder. Somewhere in the smoke and fire, Orphinaeus laughed.

"How are you here?" Dan asked. "I thought—I thought—"

"I'll explain later. If we can get back up, I think we can get out by the stage door."

"Up?"

Gabriel got his hands free. Dan fumbled at the rope round his left ankle, while Gabriel went for the right. Through smeary eyes, he glanced about, taking stock. It was hard to see anything at all, hard to get his bearings, but from the moth-eaten carpet and the mildewy seats and the short wall of wood, they had to be between the front row and the stage.

"How did I get here?" Dan asked, mostly to himself. His fingers were numb. His eyes wouldn't focus. The air was so hot it burned his lungs. The smoke scored his throat and sinuses with steel wool.

"I dragged you," said Gabriel. "Didn't fancy our odds up there with—with that thing. I—damn it, I can't—it's burned, the knot's fused or something—"

"It's fine, I'll get it. You've got to get out of here."

"Not without you!"
"If that thing finds you, then—"

Another scream. A spatter of fluid. The roar of the flames swallowed everything else. It was impossible to tell where it had come from, but it must have been near. Gabriel got to her feet, pressing a kerchief over her mouth and nose, and clambered up onto the stage. Dan's heart sank, but it was for the best, at least she would get away—

She leapt off and crashed feet-first onto the chair.

There was a tremendous crunch. Gabriel fell on Dan, bruising what wasn't burned and knocking all the breath out of him. The chair collapsed at his back. While he struggled to get his wits about him, Gabriel yanked the broken chair legs out of the restraints.

"Come on," she said, heaving him to his feet. "The longer we stay—"

"Well, well, well. What have we got here?"

Dan's knees gave out. It was only Gabriel's arm round him that kept him on his feet. He barely managed to raise his head.

Orphinaeus stood on the edge of the stage, bloody up to the elbows, caked with white ash and smeared with desperate, grimy handprints. Its shirt had been ripped wide open by some clawing, futile resistance. The same fire that was devouring the Théâtre blazed from its eyes and the markings carved into its chest. It was fixated on Gabriel.

"Leave her alone," Dan said, though it came out more of a cough.

"You're a juicy morsel, aren't you," Orphinaeus went on, heedless. "Good, 'cos I've already done for all the other cunts. Got a bit excited. Maybe I'll ruin Gruchy first, we're not long on time."

Gabriel drew herself up. The firelight blazed in her eyes, glowed off her skin like she was forged from bronze. She clenched her fists, lifted her chin, took a deep breath. Behind the smoke and flame, something crashed down from the rafters. A blistering wind swept over them, ash and cinder. Gabriel flinched, but did not falter.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, get out of him right now," she commanded.

Orphinaeus blinked. The orange glow snuffed out. A surge of smoke billowed back across the stage. Gav crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut.

Dan lurched out of Gabriel's arms and caught him. They toppled to the floor together. With another thunderous crash, something else fell, nearer this time. Gabriel dropped to her knees to shelter in the lee of the stage with them, cursing under her breath.

In Dan's arms, Gav blinked and fumbled his way back to consciousness. The bloodied knife fell from his grip. Dan picked it back up.

"Dan?" Gav mumbled. "What's—where—?"

From overhead, there came a creaking and snapping. The heat was only growing more intense, the fire encroaching from all sides. The roar was deafening.

"We have to get out of here, Gruchy," Gabriel said, urgent. Dan never took his eyes off Gav, seized by a clarity of purpose so bright and gleaming that it was as though the flames had parted and the
smoke had lifted like a veil.

"Gav, the thing on your chest is a door," he said. "I need to jam the lock."

Gav slid into focus. His hand, sticky with blood, wrapped round Dan's wrist. Holding his gaze, he said, "Do it."

Dan kissed him, pressed their foreheads together, and ripped the knife across Gav's chest.

Gav screamed out. A gas line burst with a deafening shriek. The Théâtre trembled on its foundations. From above, there was a CRACK like gunfire, a squeal of tortured metal. Something huge whipped down through the smoke and smashed into the stage. Splinters and broken glass blasted over them. Dan clutched Gav to his chest. Shrapnel peppered his back. A great wind rushed into the building, sweeping the smoke and embers into a whirling dervish. The fires leapt and surged.

"Gruchy, we're out of time!" Gabriel shouted. Dan could scarcely hear her over the howl of the inferno. He couldn't see more than two feet in front of him. She grabbed his arm and pulled. He followed, keeping Gav tight against him.

Hunched and coughing, kerchiefs pressed over their noses and mouths, the three of them fumbled their way up the aisle. Ravenous flames swiped at them with greedy claws. Tears streamed down their faces from the heat and the acrid air. The smoke made towers and walls, ever-shifting labyrinths, directionless mazes. The ground shook beneath their feet as more catwalks and rafters came crashing down. Amongst the blinding light and the smothering heat and the dizzying smoke, Dan couldn't even see the floor beneath his feet. His bearings were hopelessly lost, his heart pounding and his head spinning. Still, he forged onward, one arm clamped round Gav's waist and the other clinging to Gabriel's sleeve. Sweat dripped onto his hands, thick and waxy and hot enough to burn. His lips were cracked from the heat, his mouth so dry that his tongue was like leather against his teeth, his throat full of sawdust, his—

Waxy?

Above them, even through the roar and whistle and howl, there came a great groaning, a snap, a clatter, a rush of air and a billow of smoke. Dan ducked, clutching Gav to him. Gabriel shoved him so hard it sent him and Gav both tumbling down the aisle.

The chandelier crashed down behind them with an explosion of ember and flame.

Dan screamed out. Vortices whipped through the smoke, ash and wax, decades of dust igniting like black powder. He staggered to his feet, calling for Gabriel, shattered with panic and despair, deaf and blind and numb to the blistering heat. Gav caught him by the jacket, hauling him back.

Dan, no! he cried. His words were all but swallowed by the tremendous noise.

Get out of here! Dan shouted back. I'm going back for her, you get out!

Before Gav could object, Dan slipped out of his jacket and ran towards the wreckage of the chandelier.

In an instant, he was lost. The smoke closed round him, choking. The flames fluttered and snapped like flags in a storm. His eyes and nose and throat burned like he'd stuck his face in a bucket of nettles. He couldn't keep his footing. The whole Théâtre tilted and spun. He started coughing and couldn't stop. No breath he drew seemed to pull any air into his lungs.

Gabriel! he called. He could barely even hear himself. Gabriel!
Nothing but the roar of flames, the crashing thunder of the roof caving in. He tried to call for her again and choked. His knees were jelly, his fingers going numb. Everywhere he turned, there was only more smoke, flame, ash, cinder, heat and noise and light and death.

Until, ever so faintly, he heard an answering cry.

Gruchy!

A gust of wind swept up the aisle. Like the Red Sea, the smoke parted. Dan sucked down a breath. Strength flowed back to his limbs, clarity to his thoughts. Gabriel lay not five yards up the aisle in a puddle of molten wax, one leg trapped beneath the massive frame of the chandelier—but she was alive.

Dan put his head down and staggered towards her. Molten wax splashed on his ankles, biting. Splinters and shrapnel and glass crunched beneath his shoes. Smoke billowed up on both sides, waves waiting to crash. Gabriel was reaching out towards him, smeared with soot, spattered with wax. He was almost there, just a few feet more—

Something huge lunged from the smoke.

Gabriel screamed. Dan leapt back, tripped over himself, fell. The thing whipped between them, ash and ember, smoke and flame. Hundreds of charcoal legs skittered on charred carpet, a red-orange carapace streaked past like a train. The creature twisted round, raised itself up like a cobra—and up and up and up, ten fifteen twenty feet above them. Razor-sharp mandibles chattered and clicked, spitting sparks. Eyes like stage lights blazed down upon them, one hotter than all the fires of Hell and the other twice as bright. A vicious stinger pulsed at the air, striking out from a throbbing abdomen.

Orphinaeus, steed of Hades, centipede of the Pit, screeched like a breaking gas line and struck for Dan.

Dan threw himself to the floor. The mandibles snapped like a bear trap over his head. He rolled aside and the stinger plunged into the floor beside him. He kicked it. His foot went straight through, like kicking smoke. Chattering and shrieking, Orphinaeus struck for him again, again and again, rabid with fury. Dan scrambled to evade it. Barbed legs raked his back and shoulders. Something crashed down feet away. Hot coals rained down all over him. The molten wax on the floor ignited like lamp oil. A wave of flame rolled towards Gabriel. She cried out, struggling.

Orphinaeus turned. The whole length of its pulsating body shifted. The stinger probed the air. Sparks spat from the mandibles. She didn't see it, too focused on freeing herself. The great centipede drew itself up and lunged for her. With all the strength he had left, Dan leapt into the space between Orphinaeus and Gabriel, into the jaws of onrushing death—

And felt them evaporate against his shoulders, like so much smoke.

He stumbled, desperate to keep his feet. Orphinaeus reeled back, chittering and slavering. Flames flickered through its body. The embers of its carapace drifted and floated, held aloft by scarcely more than a breath. Even the blistering light of its eyes dimmed when confronted head-on.

Dan turned his back. There was another shriek, another phantasmal assault. He got on his knees, hooked his arms beneath the limb of the chandelier, and heaved with all his might.

Gabriel yanked her leg free. Dan dropped the massive frame and grabbed her instead.

Can you walk?
She shook her head. Her eyes were glassy, her face drawn with pain. Above them, Orphinaeus screamed in fury. She flinched. Dan shielded her as the stinger jabbed down. It struck his shoulder and crumpled like paper. Dan raised his head. With every ounce of breath in his lungs, he shouted out.

"I said leave her alone!"

Orphinaeus shrieked. Its hellish light flickered, candles in the gale. The gusting wind swept up the aisle. With a deafening CRASH, a gigantic oaken beam dropped from the pall of smoke—straight through Orphinaeus.

The massive form burst like a bubble full of fog. Dan shielded his face as sparks and ash cascaded over them. The great beam shifted, creaked, and cracked, burning from both ends. A single red centipede, no longer than Dan's pinky, wriggled out from underneath it and scurried in a drunken swerve across the carpet.

With no more gravitas than it deserved, Gabriel squashed it under her fist.

Come on, she said. We've got to get out.

To underscore this, another massive beam came crashing down, another explosion of sparks and smoke. Gabriel started off on hands and knees, between the rows of seats where the flames had not yet spread. Dan stayed close behind her. Her leg was burned, the foot twisted to one side, and yet she soldiered on. For what felt like hours, they crawled beneath the smoke, winding round fallen timbers and blazing boxes, heaps of rope and curtains and sandbags, crumbling mortar and toppled bricks, while the Théâtre collapsed all round them, devouring itself from the inside out.

And then, like a miracle, there was a patch of clear and velvet darkness before them.

Dan took Gabriel's arm and slung it across his shoulders, heaved them both to their feet and staggered from the smoke into a clear, moonless night. The fresh air dragged at the smoke in his lungs, setting him to coughing again. He took Gabriel as far away as he could, until she stumbled and hissed in pain. He set her down, blinking afterimages from his eyes, still struggling to catch his breath.

A crowd had gathered, firelit and gawping. Some broke off and hurried towards Dan and Gabriel. Dan coughed out another lungful of smoke and stood as far upright as he could.

"Free?" he called. Even here, the roar of the fire muffled him, the heat of it beat against his back. The pain was catching up, burns and bruises, cuts and scrapes and all the drugs and poisons he'd been subjected to. His eyes wouldn't focus.

"Est ce qu'elle est blessée?"

"Évidement, regarde-la!"

"J'ai besoin d'un médecin." That was Gabriel. What was Gabriel saying, who were these people? "On a les deux besoin d'un médecin."

"Free!" Dan called again, scanning the crowd. He staggered away from the newcomers, coughing, dizzy. Where was he? "Gav!"

Blurred faces, muffled words, someone was trying to stop him but it wasn't Gav. Where was he? He wouldn't have left the scene, he should be here, he had to be here, unless—
Dan turned. Before him, the Théâtre blazed, a pyre, a crematorium. Dan started back towards it. He couldn’t walk a straight line, could barely keep on his feet, couldn’t stop coughing for the life of him, but it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter, he had to go back.

Somebody caught him by the arm, speaking gibberish, frightened. Dan struggled. Tears streamed down his face.

"I've got to go get him!" he shouted. "Let go of me, he's still in there! He's still—let go, let go!"

"Monsieur, you will die! You cannot go back—please, stop this, it is too late!"

"Shut up! Shut up, let go of me! Gav! Gavin!"

More people were coming. More hands grasped at his thrashing limbs. He mustered all his strength and broke free, stumbled, ran as fast as his tripping legs would carry him.

He made it about ten steps before the whole building collapsed.

It went like a house of cards, all at once and with no resistance. Smoke billowed out in all directions. Sparks shot up, flames leapt, a wave of heat rolled over them. The sound struck Dan in the chest, crushed his ribs, collapsed his lungs and popped his heart. His steps faltered. He lost his balance. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see.

The last thing that fell was the stage door, slumping back into the smoke, a crackle of wood and a grating of bricks and then nothing at all.

Dan's knees gave out. He slid to the ground. His vision was so blurred by tears that all he could see was light, red-orange, smeared and flickering. All the strength left in him drained like blood from a slit wrist—and in its place came not pain, but a terrible and consuming numbness.

Gone.

A silence wrapped round him, dulling the shouts and screams, the crackle and roar, until they all faded out. A darkness found him, a merciful snuffing-out of the stars and the street lamps, the great pillar of flame. The numbness sank into his muscles, through his bones, all the way up into his head. It was a familiar sensation—the instant of clarity, of certainty, before the mind gathered its defences and refused to believe, before the heart could muster its convictions strong enough to keep on beating. It was the calm before the storm, the last reprieve before the pain.

He was gone.

The first sensation that returned was the stinging of his knuckles, burns and abrasions lying against the warm cobbles. Empty hands, useless hands, careless hands. He shouldn't have let go. He shouldn't have left without Gav. He should have listened, should have stayed by him, should have held him more often and said that he'd loved him and taken the time—he couldn't even remember what Gav's hands had felt like, twined with his own, he'd already forgotten them and now—but there had to be something else, something other than the terrible truth, there had to be some way that this wasn't happening—and now—

"Dan?"

The warbling voice wriggled its way down through the layers of pain and despair, at last unearthing his consciousness. The most he could do was turn his head and blink the tears from his eyes, but it was enough.
Peering through a sewer grating, grimy and sooty and wearing Dan's jacket, was Gav.

"This thing's a bit heavy," he said, pushing at the grating and shifting it not an inch. "Could I have a bit of help, please?"

At which point, Dan's body finally gave up the fight and passed out.
Somehow, eventually, Dan found his way back to consciousness.

The sound of rain cocooned him, softening the transition. The room was dim, white walls with peeling paint, gas lamps turned down low. There was a smell of vinegar, of ointment, of burned hair. As he blinked himself awake, there was a voice.

"Allo, B."

Dan turned his head. It was a struggle to focus his eyes. Somebody was at his bedside, somebody with an eyepatch and a sweep of perfect hair and a great beaky nose.

"Gav?" Dan croaked.

Gav smiled at him. "Good morning."

"Am I. . . ?"

"In hospital. It was a bit touch-and-go there for a while, but I knew you'd make it. You've been out nearly a full day."

As the memories of the night filtered in—hazy, blurred, choppy and scattered—an arrow of panic shot through Dan's heart.

"Gabriel—!" he gasped, catapulting upright. Dozens of burns and cuts and bruises screeched in protest. A broken rib shot him in the side. A wave of dizziness overtook him. Before he keeled over, Gav took him by the shoulders and eased him back down into bed.

"Shh, easy there, B, she's all right," he said. "Couple doors down, actually. Once she's a bit better I imagine she'll come to see you. She's got some burns and a broken leg, but she'll be all right."

"And—but you—"

"Ah, barely a scratch, bit of a cough. I'm all right."

"But. . . ." Dan said again, aching so deeply he couldn't breathe. Gav swallowed, glanced at the door, and faked a smile.

"Don't remember a thing," he said. "We'd worked out they'd been hiding in or near the Théâtre, Gabriel and me, and when you weren't at Casimir's, of course, we feared the worst, so—but, d'you know, not thirty feet outside the door, it just. . . goes white. And then it's all light until I wake up on the floor and everything's on fire. I dunno. Maybe an angel had his hands over my eyes—eye."

Dan said nothing, just watching him. The pain in his heart must have showed on his face, because Gav turned away, wrinkled his nose and shrugged.

"Sounds nice though, doesn't it," he mumbled.

"Will you be all right?"

"I. . . think so. I don't know, but I think so."

"We can work with that."

---

The Show Must Go On
Gav patted his shoulder. "Someday. Right now, you'd better be working on getting yourself better. You got properly taken to the cleaners, B."

"Sorry."

"Sorry? What're you apologizing for?"

"Got—well, I got . . . drunk, didn't I. That's why all of this happened; 'cos I couldn't stay sober. Went out and—"

He broke off coughing. Ash and lye burned his throat, old smoke left to ferment in the bottoms of his lungs. Gav kept a hand on his arm until the attack subsided. As Dan sank back in his pillows, Gav wiped the sweat-slick hair off his forehead.

"Daniel, you're being thick. They were vultures, the lot of them. They'd most likely been waiting days or even weeks for an opportunity to pick you off. Not your fault they found one."

"It is, though."

"Look at it this way: if it hadn't been you, it would've been me, and I haven't got the knack for convincing people not to kill me. Even at my best and most sober."

Dan opened his mouth to respond. He closed it again. Clumsy and trembling, he reached up and took Gav's hand. It was smaller than his own, the fingers thin, the skin smooth and cool to the touch. With cracked and blistered lips, he kissed the knuckles.

"All right," he said.

"But don't bloody well get drunk again," said Gav, levelling a finger at him. "I'll be watching you like a hawk, Gruchy, and don't you forget it."

From somewhere deep down inside him, Dan managed a smile. He kept hold of Gav's hand, twining their fingers together, memorizing.

"That's more like it," he said.

In the morning, after countless nurses and orderlies and (once) a doctor, Dan had a different sort of visitor. At the sound of a quiet knock, he pulled himself out of his half-conscious stupor and blinked his eyes back into focus.

Gabriel was stood in his door, supported on crutches with her leg firmly bandaged.

"Hello, Gruchy," she said. "Got a minute?"

"You're not meant to be in here, are you," he said.

"Forbidden from leaving my room."

"Come in, then."

She did, nudging the door shut behind her. With some finagling, she settled into the chair next to Dan's bed and propped her crutches up against the wall.
"How's the leg?" Dan asked.

"Excruciatingly painful, but it'll heal. How's all of you?"

"About the same. Have they been giving you anything for it?"

"Reluctantly, and with a great deal of badgering from Free. I wasn't sure he had it in him, but it seems that when all the chips are down, he steps up."

"Then and only then," said Dan, smiling to himself. "Er... d'you know what's happened, with the...?"

Her face hardened. She adjusted the hospital gown, folded her hands in her lap and looked at the far wall like it was a vast vista.

"They've pulled twelve bodies from the rubble, as of this morning, which is the soonest it's cooled down enough for anyone to go in," she said. "Scarcely more than skeletons, so I've been told."

"Christ alive," Dan muttered.

"In a way, one might almost call it a blessing. With the bodies destroyed by the fire, anyone would be hard-pressed to tell if anything had happened to them beforehand."

Dan swallowed. "Silver linings, I s'pose."

"I suppose. They don't think anyone made it out, other than us."

Something was off about her tone. Dan pushed himself a little further upright.

"You don't agree?"

She glanced at the door. "It's not impossible that they're wrong."

"What makes you say so?"

"Well, because I was standing right outside the stage door when Miss Belladonna came out of it. I was lucky enough to be behind Free when the... incident occurred. Either he didn't see me or he was more interested in getting inside, I don't know which. But Belladonna slipped past him, too, and probably by the same token."

"Just when we thought it was over," Dan sighed. A deep ache welled up in his bones, a leaden fog filling his head. "I s'pose it was too much to ask for, to get away scot-free."

"It was, but it may have happened anyway. If I were her, the last thing I'd want is to draw attention from you two. If I were her, I'd retrieve Jenzen, then run like the dickens and never look back. There's nothing for it but to wait and see."

"You're not going to go after her?"

Gabriel sighed, her shoulders slumping. She rubbed her forehead, sank into her chair, adjusted the angle of her bandaged leg.

"I'm exhausted, Gruchy," she said. "Chasing people to the ends of the earth sounds very well and good when one says it, but that's an awfully long way to go. If she was a victim of circumstance, she'll most likely go away to live a quiet, traumatized life somewhere else—and if she wasn't, someone else will get her. It isn't going to be me."
"Have you even told the police she got away?"

"They haven't asked me, and I've been too busy with recovering to go and find them."

"Gabriel, are you all right?"

"I don't know. I suppose I've had a lot to think about. It was all just. . . ."

She trailed off. Dan waited.

"Just an awful lot," she said at last.

"Yeah," said Dan. "Um. Thank you. You saved our lives, back there. Both of us. All—really all of us. I don't know how you did it, but I'm grateful."

Gabriel's lip quivered, but she kept herself composed. "To be perfectly honest, I don't really know how I did it, either. I suppose it's fortunate I'd been turning to the Bible for help these past few weeks, because otherwise, I don't know that I would've thought to do what I did."

"Did the Bible teach you how to save us from a great bloody chandelier dropping on our heads, too?"

"No," she admitted, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth. "That was all me."

"I, er . . . I don't suppose you'll be wanting to keep working with us, after all this. We ought to be able to muster some severance pay, or something, depending on . . . something or other, sorry, my head's not all the way back together. We'll make sure you don't leave empty-handed, anyway."

"That won't be necessary."

"No, I insist, really. I'm sure Gav will, too."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "I meant because I'm not quitting, Gruchy."

"Oh. Well—jolly good. Good news! Hah. Sorry."

"Although there was something I wanted to ask you for."

"From the sound of it, I'm not going to like it, am I."

"No, that's not—" She broke off, chewed her lip, fidgeted some more. "Gruchy, I . . . owe Free an apology. I've put some things together, these past couple of days, and that's the conclusion I've come to. I think I owe Jenzen an apology, as well, but I don't think . . . she would want to hear from me, unless it came with an acquittal. Which . . . I'm also starting to think might be appropriate. Or at least decent. It would be the decent thing to do."

It took a moment for this to sink in, for Dan's train of thought to switch tracks. By the time he made it over, Gabriel was already talking again.

"I just don't know what to say," she admitted. "And I'm afraid of making it worse."

"I think just sorry is enough," said Dan. "Maybe sorry for being ignorant if you're feeling fancy. I won't claim to know how Gav feels, but I know he doesn't like it when anybody brings it up, even to apologize. I think it just reminds him of how much it hurt in the first place."

"Understandable. It—it is still him, then, is it?"
"He's not told me anything different, so for now, it's still him. Though he's called himself a lady at least once, even though he's also said he's not a w—you know, I'm really not the person to be asking about this. You'd have to talk to him if you want specifics."

She nodded. "I'll do that. Thank you."

"Anytime. D'you mind if I ask what changed your mind?"

"In all honesty, it's the way he's been looking out for me," she said. "In combination with how he behaved about Jenzen. Men . . . there's no fear like being the only woman in the room, and I've never met a man who understood it. Free understands it; I just couldn't tell because I was so determined that Jenzen wasn't a woman. Now that he's shown it to me, I . . . owe him an apology."

"Well, I'm glad you've come round," said Dan. "And I'm glad you're staying on. I'm sure Gav will be glad, too."

"If you don't mind, can I ask what convinced you?"

"He told me."

Gabriel paused, blinked, frowned. "That's all? Just because he told you so?"

"As though I'd know better than he would? I believe him when he says his favourite colour's green, or that he hates mushrooms, or that he's got a soft spot for the violin. If I don't need evidence for all that, why should it be any different when he says he's not a man?"

"I don't know if those are in quite the same category."

"Neither do I, frankly, but—look, to be completely honest with you, I don't understand it. I don't know why he feels the way he feels or what it's all about or if it's a madness or an illness or anything else. All I know is that it makes him happy, and that being forced to live as a man makes him miserable, so I treat him the way he asks to be treated and I try not to hurt him. That's all I've got, Gabriel."

She winced. "When you say it like that, it sounds an awful lot like common decency, doesn't it."

"You know, I think that's exactly what it is."

"Right," Gabriel sighed. "Well. All the more reason to make a proper apology."

"If you like, I can put in a good word for you, with Gav. Sort of warm him up a bit before the actual apology comes in."

"I . . . would appreciate that," she said, taken aback. "Thank you, Gruchy."

"Any time. Er, and if you'd like, you can call me Daniel. I feel like we're sort of there, you know."

Gabriel made a face. "Can you pronounce Oluwaseyi?"

"Not on the first try," said Dan.

To his surprise, she laughed, although it turned into a cough halfway through. "All right," she said. "Work on it, then, and when you can call me by my given name, I'll call you by yours."

"That's very fair. Could I—could I get it one more time, just to sort of. . . ?"
"Oluwaseyi," she said slowly.

"I . . . will work on that," said Dan. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, I really ought to be getting back to my room, before they give it to somebody else."

"If they do, I'll knock them over the head."

She patted his shoulder. "Of course you would. Rest up, Gruchy. You've earned it."

The day passed in a haze of discomfort and boredom, as the medicines tugged him between sleep and consciousness, numbness and pain. He managed to get some porridge down at lunchtime, and afterwards fell asleep while his bandages were being changed. He woke again several hours later when a little clerkish fellow poked his head into the room and asked if he was feeling up to visitors.

"Depends on who it is," said Dan, groggy and trying not to look it.

"One Mr Dubois."

"Hahah, no."

"And Mr Gavin Free is with him."

"Of course he is," Dan muttered. "Fine, send them in."

"Thank you, sir."

Dan had just enough time to resituate himself in a less pathetic-looking (but markedly less comfortable) position before Gav and Casimir filed in. Gav went right to the seat at Dan's side, while Casimir hovered near the door. He was peaky, jittery, waxen and sleepless and unkempt—and yet he looked more real, more human, more sober than he ever had before.

"How're you feeling, Dan?" Gav asked, in French.

"Been better," said Dan, though his tongue was rusty and his brain struggled to stay on the Gallic side of the tracks. "They keep trying to give me laudanum and I keep telling them not to."

Gav frowned. "You've at least been getting morphine, though. Or something?"

"Must've been, because I'd be dead on the ground from pain if I hadn't, but I think they're doing it while I sleep."

"Well, not to worry. You'll be right as rain soon enough."

"We can only hope. Casimir, did you come in here for something, or were you just going to stand there ogling all afternoon?"

Casimir faked a smile. "I was given to understand you liked me better when I wasn't talking," he said.

"Generally," Dan allowed. "But it makes me nervous to have you come in here and stand about without even saying hello."
"Good afternoon," said Casimir. "May I stay, now?"

"Not sure why you'd want to."

He shrugged. "I was worried about you. I wanted to wish you well."

"Oh. Thanks, then, I suppose."

"And?" Gav prompted.

Squirming, Casimir said, "And . . . to apologize. For—for placing so much additional pressure on you, when things were already so dire. It was unfair of me. It was . . . selfish. Thoughtless. It—I. . . ."

"Come on, out with it," said Gav.

Casimir took a deep breath. "I promise it won't happen again."

"It had better not," said Dan. At the insistence of his twinging conscience, he added, "I hope one day that's an easy promise to keep."

"Thank you. Admittedly I'm not hopeful, but only time will tell."

"And you're still as exhausting as ever," Dan sighed. "Did you end up writing that letter?"

Casimir bit his lip, turned his eyes to the ceiling, and tipped his head.

"No," he said. "I did not. Though your advice was sound, it . . . would have been for the wrong reasons, if I had written it. After all, I have a promise to keep."

"Well, good," said Dan. "Because thinking about it, I think it was terrible advice and I shouldn't have given you it. I haven't . . . exactly been of sound mind these past few weeks."

"So much the better that I didn't, then. But—perhaps I should be going. You need your rest, I am exhausting, and there is a dress to be made."

Gav perked up. "Is there?"

"Of course. I couldn't let you leave empty-handed, and any apology I might have made would have been hollow without it."

"You know, I'm much more concerned for your well-being than I am about any dress. I know it might not have seemed like it, but that's the truth."

A flicker of pain chased across Casimir's face. "I'm sure," he said. "Rest assured, then, that keeping busy does me worlds of good. If I'm not done before you return to England, then I'll ship the final product to you—as an assurance that I'm still functional."

"You could just write."

"Are you certain? Forests would die in the service of my letters."

"They grow back," said Gav. "Besides, I'd hate to have you send me a novel when something goes wrong and you've got to explain it all from the very beginning. You write like you're being paid by the word."
A little of the old glimmer shone from Casimir's eye. "Who's to say I'm not?"

"I'd think people would be more likely to pay you to be quiet," said Dan.

"Dan," Gav warned.

"Sorry. Yes, I'm sure we'd both appreciate if you'd keep in touch."

"Then I shall do so," said Casimir. "And, if there ever comes a time when you need me, I will be more than happy to lend whatever assistance I can. I've made myself enough of a nuisance to you, it's the very least I can do."

"Thank you," Gav said. "Will you be going, then?"

"To spare Daniel the agony of my volubility, yes, I thought I would."

"We're not going to be here much longer, I think. Once Dan and Gabriel are well enough, I think—if it's all right with you, Dan—I think we'll be going home."

"More than all right," said Dan. "How soon can we leave?"

"Soon," Gav promised. "But Cassie, my point is, this may be the last time we see each other for quite some time."

"So it may. You sound like you're leading up to something."

"That's because I am. I had one last question—I know how much you hate them—before we part ways."

"Is it important?"

"Very."

"All right; one final question."

Gav looked him dead in the eye and said, "Did you really sell your soul?"

Casimir winced. "Ah, that. No, I'm afraid that was just an unfortunate turn of phrase, chosen mainly for the sake of catching your attention. Had I known how our friendship—our, at least, acquaintanceship—would play out, I would not have said it."

"Good," said Gav, nodding. "That's tremendously good to hear. And, Cassie?"

"I thought it was only one more thing."

"Friendship is the right word."

With another pained smile, Casimir said, "One can dream."

"Well, when this Lucien business inevitably blows up in your face and you need a friend, don't be afraid to dream in our direction. Or at least in mine."

"No, ours is fine," said Dan. "Particularly when it comes to Lucien."

"With any luck, it won't," said Casimir. "But I will keep you updated, since you insist. Farewell, gentlemen."
"Until next time," Gav said pointedly.

Casimir swept an extravagant bow that almost covered his distaste at those words. He let himself out of the room, leaving Dan and Gav alone. Dan gave it to the count of ten before he spoke.

"Do you believe him?" he asked.

"About what?" said Gav.

"Anything, honestly."

"I . . . believe his actions. I don't think I believe any reasons he gives for them."

"And d'you think he sold his soul?"

Gav chewed on this for some time.

"No," he said at last. "No, not really. But I'm throwing out that Lucien bloke's card. Whatever it is he's got, I don't want any. I've seen the sort of trouble Cassie's vanity has got him into, and I don't think it's worth it. I'll . . . get a glass eye, or something. I think I've had enough of big promises. I've certainly had enough of bad deals."

"Gav," said Dan, "you've no idea what a relief it is to hear you say so."
"I look a bit silly, don't I," said Gav, turning this way and that, making faces at himself in the mirror.

"Nonsense," said Dan. "I think it's stunning, and so're you."

"You know, technically it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride beforehand."

"Technically you're not a bride, so it doesn't count, and anyway, it's a bit late for all that."

"I don't know that you get to decide what counts and what doesn't."

"If I don't, then neither do you, so I reckon we'll just take our knocks as they come."

"D'you really think we're going to get away with this?"

"Again: bit late for all that."

"I haven't got the voice right. I'm not going to be fooling anyone."

"There's precious few anyones you've got to fool, so I wouldn't worry too much about it. You're the one who wanted the ceremony in the first place, we could've just got the certificate signed and been done with it."

"I mean, Tom's definitely going to know," Gav went on. "Why'd I invite him? Dan, what was I thinking, why've you let me do this?"

"B, Thomas has known for years and years."

"Sure, about us having a bit of a thing, but not about the dresses!"

"Frankly, I think you could walk out there nude and proclaim yourself the bloody Pope, and Thomas would just shrug and leave you to it."

"Dan, honestly. What if he tells our mum?"

"Then you might stop getting Christmas cards. I don't know what you're so worried about. If anything, your family would want to keep it hushed up to avoid the scandal."

"Might hush me up by having me carted off to an asylum," Gav muttered.

"Loads of people would notice if London's Golden Boy got carted off to an asylum."

"I don't think they'd be too surprised."

"Well, I'd come and break you out, how's that?"

"Oh, Dan," Gav sighed, rolling his eye. "You say that every single time. Nearly word-for-word."

"And I'll go on saying it until you stop worrying so much."

"You know, even if nobody works it out—and that's a tremendous if—the papers are going to lose
their bloody minds. You're kicking a hornet's nest with this, B."
"Nah, they won't care about me. Never have done, never will do."
"They will when somebody puts it out you're keeping me in an attic or something."
"We'll just take you out in public now and again. The only thing anybody might get suspicious of is why the Great Gavin Free had a secret twin sister nobody ever knew about. They'll be milking that for years."
"See, and that's exactly what I'm on about! They'll be all over Mum and Dad and Tom and Charlie, won't they, and there's no possible way one of them won't spill it."
"Plenty of ways. Charlie's still in Punjab or wherever, for one—"
"Persia, Dan, I keep telling you Persia."
"Still plenty far enough away that no one's going to come hounding him about it. Anyway, I reckon every single one of them will tell the press to piss off, like they've been doing for your entire career."
"This is different, B. What if I end up like you, with a whole family that won't even talk to me?"
"Oh, cheers for that, thanks."
"I—no, sorry, that came out a bit wrong, er. . . ."
"Look, from personal experience: it'll be horribly painful, but you'll recover. But I don't think they're going to stop speaking to you. If our bit of a thing wasn't the last straw, this could hardly be it."
"It really could, though, couldn't it."
"B, if you don't want to go through with this—"
"I never said that! No, I never said that, I'm just nervous, that's all. It's all happened so quickly, and I haven't had time to think about it properly."
"Two months wasn't enough time?"
"Half of that, I was properly fucked in the head and there was a case on, so really it's only been one month, and—God, Dan, what if this is all some syndrome, or something, and in a year I can't stand the bloody thought of dresses, and—and—"
"Would you want to be married to me anyway?"
"Yes, of course, that's not in question!"
"All right, then. I don't see what the problem is."
"Don't say that like it's all settled. What if I change my mind?"
"Then Guinevere Annabel Free can fall off a cliff or something, and Gav will go back to having only two siblings. It's not difficult."

Gav stared at him, left a bit cross-eyed by his glass eye.
"Blimey, but that's morbid, Dan," he said.
Wincing, Dan said, "Too much?"

"No, it's perfect, I can't believe I didn't think of it first."

"Well, even a stopped clock's right twice a day, innit."

Gav chucked him on the shoulder. "Sod off."

A knock came at the door, followed by Gabriel calling, "Free? Is Gruchy in there?"

"He is! Come in!"

Gabriel slipped inside, already glowering. She folded her arms and gave Dan a scathing once-over.

"You're not meant to be in here, you know," she said. "We've been running mad trying to find you. You're going to be late to your own wedding."

"They can wait," said Dan. "My fiancée's come over nervous, and I'm being supportive."

"You're letting her whinge at you, you mean."

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

She rolled her eyes and turned to Gav. "Free, if you don't mind, I've got to send the groom away so everyone else will stop panicking."

"That's fine," said Gav, swishing his skirts like a schoolgirl. "The—that bridesmaid's dress looks well on you, by the by."

"Thank you. While we're by the by, you look positively radiant. Now may I send your groom-to-be off to his place so that we can get on with this thing?"

"Yeah, all right."

"Gruchy," said Gabriel, and cocked her head at the door.

"One last thing."

He took Gav's face and kissed him; once, twice, three times, until a nervous giggle bubbled out through his lips like spring water.

"Ready, Gav?"

"Years past ready," said Gav. "And it's Gwen when I'm in the dress, B."

Dan winced. "Right, sorry; Gwen. I'll get better at it. Oy, d'you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm going to marry you today."

This time it was Gav—Gwen—who kissed Dan, and pinched his cheek, and smiled at him. "You'd damn well better."
Somehow, hours later, the blur came back into focus and the noise became music and the world, at
last, slowed down enough for Dan to catch back up. There was a party on, remnants of cake clinging
to his lips and a ring round his finger and the bruises of a slow dance just starting to rise on his toes.
Gwen was off by the cake and food with a gaggle of women, some of them having come all the way
from France. Gabriel was with them, too. Dan caught her eye. She nodded to him. He raised his
glass to her.

From the milling crowd, a scruffy, beaky figure sidled up, as mild and unobjectionable as the white
grape juice in Dan's glass.

"Thomas," said Dan, by way of greeting. "Glad you could make it."

"Daniel," said Thomas. "Still going along with this, are you?"

"Yes. I think I will be for quite some time."

Thomas nodded, watching Gwen and the other ladies giggle over the canapés.

"Good," he said. "Reckon someone's got to. Don't remember the last time I saw our Gwen this
happy."

Something cold and fearful in Dan's heart melted away. He let out a breath, all the way from the
bottoms of his lungs, like expelling the last dram of lake water after a drowning, the last cough of
smoke.

"It's been a hard road," he said. "I'm sure it'll be easier with her family behind her."

"Can't say about the whole family. Our mum thinks she's a still bit dotty after that fever, and Dad
won't have her mentioned in the house. Charlie and I think it's all right, though. Even if she is a bit
dotty, it's not hurting anyone."

"At least there's that," Dan sighed. "Er... you might want to tell her so, you know. She's been
worrying herself to bits over what you'd think of her."

Thomas frowned. Dan made a helpless gesture.

"I told her it was baseless, but you know how she gets about these things."

"Loads of catching-up to be done anyway. I reckon I ought to get to know my... sister. Yeah."

"She'll be absolutely delighted."

Nodding, Thomas finally turned his full attention to Dan. "Meantime, take care of her, will you? She
needs a bit of looking-after now and again."

"Quite a bit more often than that," said Dan. "But yes. I'll look after her. I have just said so in front of
an awful lot of people. There were rings, even."

To his immense gratification, Thomas blushed.

"Jolly good," he mumbled, and slunk off into the crowd.

Dan leaned a shoulder on the wall, tucked a hand in his pocket, and sipped his grape juice.

Some days it really did all come up roses.
That summer, Dan and Gav (or Gwen) and Gabriel passed the most unremarkable eight weeks of their lives. Dan and Gav/Gwen took a brief honeymoon in Egypt while Gabriel paid her visit to Nigeria, on which nobody died. Upon returning to London, the three of them made a jolly show of moving Gav out of the flat and then moving Gwen into it, revelling in the landlady's utter cluelessness (and the fact that, by the end of it, nobody had died).

They peddled to the Press the fiction that Gav was staying at their office, having been kicked out of Dan's flat now that he was A Married Man, which the Press devoured. The new Mrs Gruchy was, of course, a recluse, and so if they happened to only see her about once or twice a month, that was to be expected; and if Gav was at Dan's flat during unusual hours or more frequently than was decorous, it was only because he was a well-known work addict and Dan was still his business partner.

Gabriel, meanwhile, was actually living at the office, rent-free, half to help keep up the fiction and half because it was the most convenient place. She cleared out the workroom upstairs and converted it into a bedroom, designating the downstairs as for business only. The reorganization ruffled Gav's feathers, but once it was done, even he had to agree that it was for the better. It probably helped that Gabriel, however shyly and awkwardly, had been his constant companion throughout all the wedding preparation and a great many trips to seamstresses and dress-makers before the honeymoon.

And through all of it, astonishingly, absolutely nobody had died.

By the middle of July, Dan was beginning to suspect they were due for some discord. By the beginning of August, he was braced for it.

"Gwen, there's a package come for you," he called, having just closed the door on the postman.

"She's not in right now," Gav answered from the sitting room. "Who's it from?"

"Casimir."

"Oh! Bring it in, then, let's have it."

Dan came back in and handed the large, heavy parcel to Gav. He set the rest of the mail aside to watch the unwrapping, and was gratified when Gav's face lit up like Christmas had come early.

"Oh look, Dan, look at it!" he cooed, unfurling the dress and standing up to show off its full length.

"It's beautiful!"

And it was; green silk fell in ripples and waves, gold brocade cocooned the bodice, white lace trimmed every hem, and all of it with an intricacy that spoke of sleepless nights and blistered fingers.

"No wonder it took him so long," said Dan. "I think he must be terribly sorry about what happened to the last one."

"Good, he ought to be. Oh, but just look at it, it's tremendous. God, materials alone must've run him a thousand francs... . . ."

While Gav continued fawning over the dress, Dan dug about in the wrapping until he found Casimir's letter, which, at less than a page, was startlingly brief. Dan fought his way through the flowery cursive and the flowerier French to at last decipher it:
My sweetest Guinevere,

I hope this letter finds you well, and that the weeks since my last writing have been kind to you. I admit, I have not been corresponding as frequently as I ought, having been preoccupied with finishing your gift. I think it is of acceptable quality, though certainly inferior to what I had envisioned. I would have sent it to you sooner, but there was some difficulty procuring materials of acceptable quality. (Lucien, dear and doting though he is, is rapidly approaching the end of his patience with me, and therefore my leash has been rather shorter and my purse rather shallower. Regardless, I manage.)

If possible, however, I would like to see you in it, at least once, preferably at some point in the near future. I will not ask you to come to Paris—I would not ask you to come to Paris again if my life depended on it—but perhaps it could be arranged for me to call upon you in England, or at the very least for a photograph to be taken. Should the item require alterations, I promise I shan't be jealous if you take it to another tailor closer to home. I hope that it serves you well wherever you decide to wear it, although I admit that I dream, often and fondly, of a very important and glamorous party for its unveiling, preferably with royalty and debutantes and a dashing gallery of rogues. I don't suppose the Queen would invite you to dinner—I suppose it would rather be Gavin—but I do dream. If all you can manage is a night at the opera with Daniel, then that, too, would be an appropriately appreciative audience.

Please do tell Daniel that I'm taking my promise very seriously. I suspect that a lack of proper occupation has contributed heavily to my malaise, and am considering taking up tailoring in a professional context; it may become necessary, if Lucien's favour cannot be bought back (although I am confident it can; I simply have not found the proper currency yet). I hope, too, that Daniel is well, at least as well as you are, and that he understands that the greatest gift I can give to him is not writing him at all (it isn't that I don't care for him; it's that I care for him so dearly that I abhor the thought of burdening him with undue communications).

I suppose I hope that Gabriel is well, too, but don't tell her I said so, for she would never believe or forgive me.

All my love,

—Cassie

"What's the novel about?" Gav asked, craning to see the paper.

"Same as usual," said Dan, handing it to him. "At least we know he's still alive and kicking."

Gav's eyebrows raised steadily as he read the letter. Smiling, he shook his head.

"And as dramatic as ever. The Queen, for God's sake. Bless his cotton socks."

"Well, if we ever recover the crown jewels, at least you'll have something to wear."

"We can't very well recover them, since they've not been stolen."

"Ooh, don't tell Casimir that. He'd make a jolly jewel thief of himself just to give you a chance to wear that dress to meet the Queen."
"I wish I could say you're wrong."

"Shame he didn't finish it in time for the wedding. He might even have turned up in person."

"Don't be silly, Dan; it's not a wedding dress. Besides, I liked the one I had. This one will get its own special occasion, sooner or later."

"I'll keep a weather-eye open for one. Mean time, what're you going to write him back?"

"Oh, anything, so long as it's effusive. He loves it when I effuse at him. Why?"

"I thought I might slip something in, whenever you get round to sending it off."

"Really? What?"

Dan shrugged. "Dunno. Something about this letter reads a bit off. He doesn't quite sound himself, and I thought . . . well, maybe a bit of encouragement was in order. I don't know that he's got many friends, and after all, I'm the one who twisted his arm about not offing himself. The least I could do is be a bit involved."

"That's very noble of you, Dan."

"Is it?"

"Throwing yourself on the pikes of Cassie's correspondence? I think so."

"Come off it. I'm just trying to be a good friend."

"Grand! Then be a dear and see if we've got any cases come in, would you? I've got to go hang this up so it can start unwrinking. Oh, but if there's another letter from the Sûreté asking us to find those women who broke Jenzen out, you can just throw it straight in the bin."

Dan sighed, rolled his eyes, and picked up the rest of the stack of letters that had come in the morning post. Gav folded the dress over his arm and took it back to their room, singing under his breath. Once he'd gone, Dan rifled through the stack, looking for anything that might have been written by somebody very rich who liked to throw extravagant parties.

He found something very different, but no less exciting. By the time Gav returned to his seat, Dan had forgotten all about parties and dresses.

"You're not going to believe this, B," he said, reading the letter for the fourth time over.

"What is it?"

"It's only a letter from Mr Michael bloody Jones."

"Really? What's he want, what's it say?"

"Says he's got wind of a murderer who slipped the noose, and he's got reason to suspect the fellow's gone to Paris. Wants our help tracking him down."

"Good grief," said Gav. "Bit forward of him, isn't it."

"I reckon he did us enough of a favour with that Brotherhood business that we could at least hear him out. He is offering considerable remuneration."
"Oh?"

Dan showed him the letter. Gav made an approving face.

"In that case," he said. "I'm all for it."

"You're sure? It sounds like it could get a bit nasty."

"I don't see why not. If nothing else, it ought to be good for a laugh."

Absolute silence clapped down over them. They locked eyes. Dan set the letter down and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You just had to say it, didn't you," he moaned.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Chapter End Notes

We shall not spend a large expense of time
Before we reckon with your several loves,
And make us even with you.

And here we are again.

I don't really know what to say. It's been one hell of a trip (haha), and a welcome diversion from all that came before, and oh-so-lovely to have something like a happy ending for once. I'm incredibly grateful to all of you who stuck with this story, even when it was so far removed from its predecessor. I'm especially grateful to Noh, Mer, Melody, Cas, achievementblunder, and everyone else who supplied their time and effort to help me not sound like an idiot when I tried to write in French.

If you'd like to drop by the discord server to Yell with like-minded readers of Wrathfic™, you can join us [here] - or, if Discord be not to your liking, come Yell at me on tumblr @MindfulWrath.

But really, there isn't that much else. Effusive thanks, all round, of course, but somehow I've lost the gift of dear Cassie Dubois' silver tongue. I imagine this isn't the last we'll hear of him, but for now, well, there's really only one thing left to say.

The story will conclude in Part 3: The Gentleman's Guide to Killing Time, coming October 26th to an AO3 near you.

So, thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!